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PRIMITIVE MESSIANISM AND AN ETHNOLOGICAL PROBLEM

One of the perennial problems of theoretical ethnology has been the interpretation of cultural similarities between remote peoples. In fact, the question troubled observers long before the rise of anthropology as a distinct branch of learning. When the painter George Catlin saw Mandan Indians crossing the Missouri in hide-covered craft resembling an inverted open umbrella, he recalled the Welsh coracle and concocted the amazing theory that the Mandan were the descendants of Welsh immigrants to America. Equally flimsy was the view that the natives of America represented the Ten Lost Tribes of Irsael because redskin and Jew shared such observances as menstrual taboos—customs by no means peculiar to them.

How significant the relevant problem appeared to a strictly scientific founder of modern anthropology is clear from Edward B. Tylor's *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* (New York: Holt, 1865), for virtually the whole book revolves about this theme. It has continued to intrigue later scholars, who were grouped into two opposing camps. Some, following Adolf Bastian, inclined to explain resemblances as due to the psychic unity of mankind, which would everywhere produce

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similar responses unless the geographical setting was inhibitory. An extreme upholder of this doctrine was the American Daniel G. Brinton, who maintained that even neighboring peoples did not borrow each other's myths but evolved them in complete mutual independence. This particular application of the general principle was convincingly refuted by Franz Boas's investigations of Northwest American mythology (1895). He was able to prove that, broadly speaking, the similarity between the total stock of mythological tales known to two tribes on the coast of British Columbia varied with the distance between the populations in question. To phrase the conclusion differently, without challenging the possibility of independent developments as a consequence of a like mentality dealing with like conditions, Boas demonstrated the need for a historical outlook: the origin of tales could not be profitably discussed unless attention were paid to the historical relations of the tribes which narrated the stories compared.

Whereas Boas adhered to an intermediate position, which involved settling every individual case on its merits, other scholars assumed an intransigent attitude. For example, Friedrich Ratzel in his *Völkerkunde* (Leipzig, 1885-88) insisted on the uninventiveness of mankind and on the constant migrations of early peoples. Thus, whatever ideas had been developed here and there were sure to be picked up by the ever wandering hordes of savages and would be carried to the four corners of the globe. In the early part of the twentieth century Friedrich Graebner, elaborating this general position, published his *Methode der Ethnologie* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1911), which codified the principles to be followed in reconstructing the history of cultural achievements. He soon gained a powerful coadjutor in Father Wilhelm Schmidt, whose influence then eclipsed that of his predecessor. In England, G. Elliot Smith, supported by W. J. Perry (*The Children of the Sun* [London: Methuen, 1923]) and in some measure by W. H. R. Rivers, derived practically all cultural developments from ancient Egypt, where alone, as he contended, there existed the physical conditions that would favor cultural advancement. For present purposes it is not necessary to enter into the specific features of these several schools but only into what is common to all of them. This is the deep-rooted conviction that humanity suffers from a great poverty of creative ideas; that, accordingly, it is extremely unlikely that any invention would have arisen twice, let alone an indefinite number of times; that as a corollary the parallels noted in custom, crafts, beliefs, and social structure must be due to dissemination from a single center.

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Champions of this position lay claim to a logical superiority over their adversaries; they argue that, whereas *they* have criteria for determining the occurrence of diffusion, their opponents have none for ascertaining independent development. Without entering this particular argument, which is bound to remain on an abstract level, we may ask a question that admits of an empirical decision: Are there any indubitable instances of the independent duplication of cultural phenomena? In my opinion, the messianic cults of primitive peoples not only are of great intrinsic interest but also provide inexpugnable proof that cultural traits *may* originate independently in distinct major areas. This thesis naturally does not contravene the fact that within these territories there is an indefinite amount of provable transmission of ideas from tribe to tribe. The areas I shall mainly touch upon from this point of view are America, Africa, and Oceania, because the sources for these regions are especially abundant.[1]

First of all, we must define a number of related and easily confused concepts. A messiah is necessarily a deliverer from present tribulations or impending calamities; the prescriptions and prohibitions which he promulgates in order to compass his ends constitute the savior's cult. But he need not be a revivalist; in fact, he may appear as an iconoclastic innovator. It is true that in many situations the messiah inveighs against apostates from ancient usage, which he tries to restore; but contrary instances, if perhaps on the whole less numerous, are certainly not less striking. Finally, we must beware of the frequently used term "nativism." It is only when a movement deliberately aims at the neutralization, expulsion, or annihilation of outsiders that we can properly call it "nativistic." By no means have all messiahs exhibited such xenophobia; Wovoka, the fountainhead of the greatest emotional upheaveal known from among the Plains Indians, will be dealt with presently; for the moment suffice it to say that his original gospel was all in favor of the universal brotherhood of mankind. Furthermore, "nativism" need not be exclusive of foreign *culture*, as will become apparent from Oceanian phenomena of the postwar period. For that reason we cannot quite accept the definition proposed by the late Professor Linton,[2] which puts all the emphasis on a conscious organized attempt to revive or perpetuate the traditional way of life in some of its aspects. Certainly, such aspirations have often made themselves felt, but, in addition, there is also a type of nativism that enthusiastically embraces

1. For a general summary of relevant data see Wilson D. Wallis, *Messiahs: Their Role in Civilization* (Washington, D.C., American Council on Public Affairs, 1943).

2. Ralph Linton, "Nativist Movements," *American Anthropologist*, XLV (1943), 230–40.

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the foreign culture in order to further indigenous interests. Nativism is thus consistent with cultural iconoclasm.

Having defined our concepts, let us turn to the phenomena. By a historical accident our material on messianism is most abundant for movements stimulated by the clash of peoples, one of whom has been in possession of a vastly superior technology. The resulting superiority in weapons has led to domination and colonialism, from which the native messiah promises to relieve his compatriots. Let us recognize that manifestations of this order form merely a special case. Theoretically, quite as significant is messianism that springs from internal causes.

However, we may begin our survey with the more amply described type. A characteristic sequence is: real or imagined wrongs suffered by an aboriginal population; imperfect assimilation of the intruders' religion; a resulting mixture of native and extraneous theological notions; a gospel of deliverance resting on this synthesis. A curious feature of these cults is the propagandist fervor of the votaries, for in many of the societies in question proselytizing is quite antagonistic to the spirit of the native faith.

To start with South American instances, between 1850 and 1900 a fairly steady succession of prophets arose in the Rio Negro country in southwestern Brazil, each representing himself as a second Christ. One of them called himself "the father of missionaries," communed with the spirits of the dead, and made his followers dance around a cross. Another created a great stir as a healer who cured his patients by stroking their bodies and blowing his breath on them. He, too, made his flock dance day and night, to the utter neglect of their plantations, for the messiah could make the crops prosper by simply blessing them. Such lofty disdain for the commonsense operations of economic routine is a constantly recurring motif in aboriginal messianism.

To Dr. A. Métraux we owe the discovery of corresponding data from sections of the continent much farther to the south. As early as 1579, we learn, a Guarani appearing on the Paraná River, pretended to be the divine son of a virgin. Like the Rio Negro prophets, he prescribed continuous dancing and chanting, with the inevitable concomitant that the farms were abandoned. Two centuries later an itinerant messiah of the Chiriguano tribe (Gran Chaco) claimed the power of destroying towns, producing a shower of fire, and transforming human beings into rocks. On his travels he was accompanied by a woman who was allegedly the Holy Virgin.[3]

3. A. Métraux, "Les Hommes-dieux chez les chiriguano et dans l'Amerique du Sud," *Revista del Instituto de Etnología de la Universidad Nacional de Tucuan*, II (1931), 66–91.

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Because of the range of its sway and the military uprising in its wake, none of the preaching cults has attracted as much attention as "the Ghost Dance of 1890," which started in Nevada and rapidly swept across the Plains, affecting tribes a thousand miles to the east. It began with the preaching of Wovoka, the Paviotso Indian, briefly mentioned earlier in this essay. Working for and among whites, he had gained some acquaintance with Christian ideas, and, after visions experienced in 1888 or thereabouts, he occasionally professed to be Christ. The world, he taught, was old and required rejuvenation; with that end in view, he had come with a message from God, exhorting the Indians to live in peace with one another and the white people. This part of his doctrines came to be automatically altered by the warlike Dakota, who turned Wovoka's message of universal brotherhood into a politically nativistic cult and rose in armed rebellion against the government of the United States. Wovoka himself was not responsible for this outbreak; apart from his moralistic injunctions, he stressed the possibility of a reunion with one's deceased relatives. With that view in mind the Indians were to dance in the manner revealed to the messiah in his vision. The constantly recurring emphasis on dancing by both North and South American prophets must be connected with a quite general association in aboriginal America of the most sacred ceremonials with songs and dances.

To apply to the phenomena cited the two rival theories of diffusion and independent parallelism, it must first be noted that no scholar denies that a great many of the messianic manifestations are due to transmission from a common center. This is a matter not of speculative interpretation but of authentic record. Scholars have devoted much work precisely to demonstrating step by step how one tribe transmitted its newly acquired creed to another and what metamorphoses accompanied the process. For instance, we definitely know the messengers sent by the Cheyenne and Kiowa to Wovoka as well as the nature of their reports on returning to their tribesmen. Among the striking results of these researches was the discovery that Wovoka was not the creator of the essential doctrines he preached but had had a predecessor, Wodziwob, among his own people as early as 1870. This earlier dispensation had also spread widely, though in the opposite direction, not to the high Plains, but to northern California, where the details of the movement have been painstakingly worked out by Professors A. L. Kroeber, Anna H. Gayton, and Cora DuBois.

But even Wodziwob cannot figure as the initiator of the Ghost Dance. As Professor Leslie Spier has shown, the core of its creed can be traced to

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the plateau of Washington and to interior British Columbia. What is more, these northern occurrences are datable considerably earlier than the equivalent phenomenon in Nevada, in part even antedating any Christian influences.[4]

But though diffusion is an unchallengeable fact, as soon as we envisage the totality of pertinent data in the New World, independent parallelism is no less certain. In early post-Columbian times communications within the Western Hemisphere were such as to preclude dissemination of beliefs and rites from, say, the Guarani of 1579 to the Plateau tribes of 1800. The peculiar fusion of autochthonous pagan and imported Christian notions must have been accomplished in mutual independence. How often this happened is an interesting ethnographical question but does not affect our thesis, which is established by a single instance of duplication without historical connection.

However, the argument derives further support from extra-American evidence. In 1818 one Makanna appeared among his South African tribesmen, arrogating to himself the distinction of being Christ's brother. He synthesized this conception with the traditional reliance on ancestral spirits. With their aid he would drive the English into the sea, thus avenging his people's grievances. In an attack on the British forces he reassured his own troops with the promise that the enemy's fire would turn into water. Another Bantu leader, during a later revolt, ordered a wholesale destruction of his followers' grain and livestock; by his wonder-working he would resuscitate the cattle at a fixed date. In 1921 a messiah on the lower Congo continued the gospel of political nativism "in the name of Jesus Christ," predicting the expulsion of the whites by divine agency.[5]

Parallels have been found in various other disconnected areas. On the island of Biak, off the coast of Dutch New Guinea, a missionary noted five cult manifestations during his years of service. One of the leaders, who identified his wife with the Mother of God, declared that he had stood with her before God's throne in heaven. Manna was going to fall from the skies, so that the Papuans could afford to destroy their gardens and to

4. James Mooney, "The Ghost Dance Religion," *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, Part II (Washington, D.C., 1896); A. L. Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California* (Washington, D.C., 1925), pp. 868-73; Cora DuBois, *The 1870 Ghost Dance* ("Anthropological Records," Vol. III, No. 1 [Berkeley, 1939]); Leslie Spier, *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest and Its Derivatives: The Source of the Ghost Dance* ("General Series in Anthropology," No. 1 [Menasha, Wis., 1935]).

5. Joseph Shooter, *The Kafirs of Natal and the Zulu Country* (London, 1857), pp. 195-212. Cf. S. C. Willoughby, *The Soul of the Bantu* (New York, 1928), pp. 123-26.

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slaughter their pigs. The several messiahs assumed such titles as "Prince of Peace" or "Lord of Baptism." They presaged the approach of a celestial boat which they identified with Noah's ark.[6]

The amalgamation of biblical with aboriginal notions has thus taken place again and again without transmission from one major area to another. Irrespective of Christian influence and the generic resemblances it precipitates, one cannot help being impressed with certain extremely specific correspondences. As the Bantu messiah of 1818 promised to turn the fire from British guns into water, so in 1912 the leader of the last Chiriguano uprising told his men that the enemy's firearms would spout nothing but water (*allaient cracher de l'eau*), so that it would be easy to overcome them with bows and arrows. Astonishingly frequent is the injunction to neglect normal economic activities on the theory that the messiah or his divine patrons would provide. Very old, because utterly at variance with the social standards of the American and Oceanian tribes in question, is the cropping-up, even though only temporarily, of a stringent asceticism. Men are to abstain from liquor, limit themselves to monogamous unions, and eschew sexual dissipation. This inconoclastic trend will be treated presently with reference to even more astonishing manifestations.

The xenophobia often precipitated by the collision of distinct races has taken two radically contrasting forms. The difference hinges on whether the leaders dictate an uncompromising restoration of the good old ways or an espousal of alien culture for the purpose of hoisting the enemy with his own petard. Linton insisted that nativists only selected particular segments of the traditional culture for revival, but as a universal proposition the statement will not hold. The anonymous Delaware Indian messiah of 1762 expressly urged his fellows to renounce *all* the white man's gifts. God had told him that the Indian needed "neither gun, powder nor any other object" imported by the traders and "to live entirely in the original state that they were in"; even the strike-a-light was banned in favor of the firedrill.[7] It may be true that alien ideas may sometimes unwittingly have crept into the attempted carrying-out of such injunctions, but the intent was manifestly to establish an ideological *ancien régime*.

Diametrically opposed to this archaizing tendency is the wholesale rejection of traditional values and enthusiastic adoption of Western technol-

6. Andreas Lommel, "Der Cargo Kult in Melanesien," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, LXXVIII (1953), 17–63.

7. Mooney, *op. cit.*, pp. 663–68.

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ogy. This attitude may be combined with the most rabid xenophobia, as is proved by Oceanian occurrences in the last decades. The so-called cargo cult centers in the dogma that boats amply laden with all the white man's goods and contrivances are about to deliver their freight for the benefit of the natives, who in some islands have eagerly constructed sheds to store the wares on arrival. But this is not tantamount to welcoming the whites; it is solely appreciation of their civilizational equipment. As Lommel pithily puts it in his compendious survey: "The natives henceforth wish to live like the whites—even though without them."[8]

Striking as this craving is, it seems a local, distinctly Oceanian development in this form; hence it is of lesser theoretical significance than the iconoclastic repudiation of precisely the holiest part of aboriginal ideology. Under the influence of an innovating messiah this phenomenon, with or without *political* nativism, has been noted in Asia, Melanesia, and North America. In 1904 a prophet arose in Tanna Tuwa (Outer Mongolia) who harangued against both the ancient beliefs and the Russian intruders; his adherents were to throw all shamanistic drums into the fire and put a stop to their sacrifices of beasts. In Melanesia bullroarers—slats swung through the air from a thong so as to produce a terrific noise—rank as sacrosanct; and no social law is more rigidly observed than the exclusion of women from esoteric rites in which bullroarers and masks are employed. Yet these inveterate notions and practices are precisely those flouted by some of the prophets. In Bougainville, for instance, the men demonstatively showed the women the masks used at masculine initiation ceremonies. For a counterpart among the Ojibwa (Lake Superior), Mooney quotes sources dating back to the early nineteenth century.[9] At that time both violently revivalist and iconoclastic tendencies came to the fore in that region. On the one hand, a prophet's messengers heralded the restoration of the old ways, as already described for the Delaware. On the other hand, the Indians were ordered "to throw away their medicine bags. . . . It is said that the shores of Lake Superior . . . were strewn with these medicine bags." Anyone who even within the last forty years has watched the reverent handling of these sacred bundles by their owners must stand amazed at the possibility that any messiahs could arbitrarily effect what in 1810 must have been for many an excruciating spiritual sacrifice.

It is perhaps more startling for us, though not from the aboriginal point

8. *Op. cit.*

9. Otto Mänchen-Helfen, *Reise ins asiatische Tuwa* (Berlin, 1931), p. 96; Lommel, *op. cit.*, p. 35; Mooney, *op. cit.*, pp. 677 ff.

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of view, that native leaders were again and again able to exact the senseless destruction of material values. Thus, in 1932 the fiat of a messiah put a stop to pottery-making in the only settlement on the island of Buka where the craft was practiced. With equal arbitrariness the same leader decreed a massacre of pigs; we have already encountered the parallel destruction of South African herds of cattle, idolatrously beloved as they were by their owners. Correspondingly, the Ojibwa had to put to death every one of their dogs.

These instances of iconoclasm are again obviously independent of one another. We cannot suppose that apostles of the Ojibwa prophet who had bidden the destruction of medicine bags in 1808 caused the Tanna Tuwans to burn their drums in 1904 or that the killing of Ojibwa dogs served as a pattern for the wholesale slaughter of Bantu livestock. The only possible interpretation is that in conditions of mass hysteria a man of strong personality can impose his arbitrary will on fervent believers in his mission. Conscious of his power, he will test his influence in given circumstances by substituting for the role of revivalist that of a deliberate spurner of the ancient ideology. The resulting inversion may then lead to striking resemblances in detail between remote peoples. Although I lack evidence on the other areas in question, it is worth noting that the implied topsy-turvydom is in a measure prefigured in the buffoonery of many North American tribes. Saying the opposite of what one means has been described as the most usual form of Pueblo humor. On another level, Plains Indian clowns will act "by contraries," ignoring the dictates of common sense. Members of the Heyoka society of the Dakota Indians used to express joy by groans and pretend to perspire from cold and to shiver in the heat.

In an earlier part of this essay I have insisted that the clash of diverse cultures is not the sole antecedent stimulus of messianism. This proposition is in fact a direct corollary of the inference drawn both by Americanists and by Oceanian specialists that movements of the same general order had preceded contacts of indigenes with peoples of higher technological equipment. What, then, were the conditions to be remedied by a pre-Caucasian savior? The answer is furnished by the prophet cults of the Apapocuva-Guarani (Paraguay and southeastern Brazil).

The Apapocuva band of Guarani had a deep-rooted belief that the world was to be annihilated. From a gloomy but impressive myth we learn that fire and flood will at some time overwhelm the worn-out earth. Darkness will descend, and the Blue Tiger will devour mankind. It is in order to save their people from this *Götterdämmerung* that through-

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out the nineteenth century and as late as 1912 one shaman after another has appeared, professing ability to lead the Guarani to a secure haven, an earthly paradise, which was usually located beyond the ocean. Hence originated many migrations of the same band over long distances to the sea. "The dead we shall all see again," says the myth. Failure in one enterprise could always be explained by a ritualistic error committed by some tribesman, so that a new leader would find a receptive audience. Singing and dancing were the means for bringing about the desired end; as usual, skeptics were to be transformed in this case into vultures.[10]

To these Apapocuva data those unearthed by Spier from early records about North American Plateau Indians form an obvious parallel. The senescent earth, menaced by a deluge, requires renewal; there is to be a reunion with the dead; skeptics will be annihilated or transformed; salvation is to be achieved by dancing. The messiahs of this region were possibly of humbler stature than their counterparts elsewhere, but the underlying principle remained; the several deliverers had each a revelation, and it was through the special dances and songs taught them by their supernatural mentors that they hoped to save their people. A suggestive detail is once more the total neglect of everyday chores by the votaries of the cults during the periods of mass hysteria: "no one hunted, fished or gathered. They simply danced, all day and every day."[11]

Once more we find parallels that cannot be accounted for on the theory of diffusion.

The phenomena of aboriginal messianism furnish rewarding material for discussions of a different order. As previously hinted, the migration of the cults involves more than a mechanical borrowing of this or that doctrine and ritual. Quite spontaneously and unintentionally substitutions and eliminations occur because a people cannot but re-pattern a cultural loan in accordance with its traditional norms. To take a trivial example, the Paviotso have "five" for their sacred number instead of "four," which plays that role farther east. When the Plains Indians took over Wovoka's gospel, they automatically made the corresponding changes in ritualistic performances. Not for lack of interest but solely for the sake of clarity I have refrained from entering this field of "cultural dynamics" so as to concentrate on a single issue. On the present theme, however, a few additional remarks seem indicated.

10. Curt Nimuendajù, "Die Sagen von der Erschaffung und Vernichtung der Welt als Grundlagen der Religion der Apapocuva-Guarani," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, XLVI (1914), esp. pp. 287, 318–20, 327, 399.

11. Spier, *op. cit.*, pp. 7 ff.

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When balancing the odds for and against diffusion, many scholars have erred in dealing with the problem too abstractly, as though all traits could be regarded from the same point of view. Only a little reflection is needed to expose the fallacy. Culture comprises an enormous diversity of items. There are some technical achievements that cannot possibly have occurred over and over again. To take a metallurgical instance, men could not invent bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, unless they had access to tin, which has only a limited distribution in the world. Apart from that, there is the intricacy of the procedure involved in producing the alloy. Although we may not go so far as to assert that there could have been only a single center in human history for the dispersal of this metallurgical technique, we shall certainly reject the view that it has been hit upon independently in more than a very few spots. Even what the layman regards as a very simple craft, such as pottery, often has pitfalls for a practitioner that make its routine practice anything but easy; hence its earliest invention must have been tremendously difficult. In 1919 a young Swede tried to make earthenware vessels according to the ancient pattern and repeatedly failed. A successful potter has to get clay of the proper consistency, knead it, mix it, dry it, and apply uniform heat to a nascent vessel. It is not merely a matter of molding a lump of mud; unless properly fired, the material will relapse into a mere lump. It is for reasons of this sort that everyone now believes that much of the indigenous pottery made in North America stems from a single center in or near Central America.

But it is otherwise with a host of cultural elements that fall into a different category. A dice game, polygyny, a division of society into two units, are neither necessarily restricted to particular geographical environments nor the result of exceptional manual skill or of prodigious intellectual effort. Their occurrence may of course be linked with such oddities that the combination is best explained as going back to one origin, but in and of themselves they may easily spring up repeatedly in disconnected areas. The notion of a deliverer from alien tyranny evidently falls into the same category and with the same qualification. A pessimistic view of human destiny may be less obvious, but it seems abundantly warranted by the vicissitudes of life; and the urge to escape an evil fate is rooted in the general desire to survive. Thus, the occurrences of messianism are in part explicable as mutually independent phenomena. But, whether such interpretations by vulgar psychology seem adequate or not, the fact cited prove empirically that independent evolution has sometimes taken place.

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