WORKING SESSION 2

‘Rot bilong kago, rot bilong independans?’ The Colonial Press and Early Cargo Cults in Melanesia

In the aftermath of the Second World War, numerous cargo cults emerged in Melanesia. These fell into two groups: Those with a purely local appeal, such as the Hahalis Baby Farm and others, like the Masina Rule and John Frum, which exerted an influence throughout a particular colony. The reaction to these movements in the contemporary colonial press can, at first glance, be divided into two types: Amusement at the foolishness of Islanders who built bamboo aeroplanes to attract cargo and opposition to those whom they thought were attempting to establish an authority distinct from the metropolitan administration. This paper will attempt to answer a number of questions: Given the general situation and level of understanding of sympathy for indigenous aspirations at that time, could we expect the colonial press to have reacted in any other way? With the benefit of hindsight, can we read a more sympathetic tone in the reporting of the time? Or – and here we must consider the fashion of seeing any indigenous movement of practice as inherently anti-colonial or proto-nationalist – was the contemporary reporting actually more accurate than it might usually be given credit for?

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