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The Paliau Movement

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Introduction

Paliau Maloat, usually called simply 'Paliau,' was born at the beginning of the twentieth century in Lipan Village on Baluan Island in what was then the Manus District of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, governed by Australia under a United Nations mandate following World War II. The Paliau Movement (which I will also refer to as 'the Movement') he created never spread beyond the Manus District (Manus Province since Papua New Guinea's independence in 1975), but it left a significant social and political legacy there. Paliau also left Wind Nation, which he founded in the 1980s. Unlike the Movement, Wind Nation has a fully millenarian ideology.

Paliau called for radical changes in Manus life. To understand how radical these changes were, I begin below by describing the indigenous Manus world. I draw largely on the 1928 research of anthropologists Reo Fortune and Margaret Mead, who studied Manus life when central indigenous institutions were still relatively intact or clear in living memory. I then describe the founding of the Movement. In mid-1953, Mead returned to Manus, now greatly changed by World War II and the subsequent Paliau Movement, with Theodore Schwartz and Lenora Shargo as research assistants. Schwartz obtained detailed accounts of the Movement's founding and its early years (1946–1953) from people who had lived these events, including Paliau himself. Paliau strove to create new social institutions, but he claimed divine inspiration, and many of his followers hoped his social reforms would bring the sudden miraculous advent of lives of effortless plenty like those of Australians and Americans *as indigenous Manus people perceived them.* Such a perception was common among indigenous people throughout the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, but during World War II Manus islanders had also been awed by the material prowess of the Allied military forces and their vast base at the eastern tip of the island. As I discuss next, in February 1947, millenarian fervour interrupted Paliau's step-by-step programme. Ignited by a prophecy that a miraculous transformation would occur within days, village after village put everything aside to wait for the Christian God and the spirits of their own ancestors to deliver a world without hard work, illness, pain, and death. In her 1953 account of the Paliau Movement, *New Lives for Old*, Mead treated this episode of millenarian fervour as an anomaly. But Schwartz's research, which continued into 1995, shows the millenarian hopes embedded in the Movement and how they were probably essential to Paliau's success as a leader. As I discuss next, Paliau's response to the 1947 events was ambiguous, even evasive, and Manus people were unsure whether he supported or opposed the millenarian outburst. He may have been biding his time to

see what happened. But ‘the Noise’—the name Manus people gave this dramatic episode—came to nothing.

Mead returned to New York City at the end of 1953, but Schwartz and Shargo stayed on and stumbled on a renewed effort to implore God and the ancestors to transform the Manus world. Paliau, preoccupied with the political developments leading to the founding of independent Papua New Guinea, largely ignored this effort until it threatened his efforts in the new political sphere. The Movement was the foundation of Paliau’s political success, but it languished as he focused on the new politics. And, as younger, better-educated indigenous leaders also sought political leadership, Paliau’s star dimmed.

Finally, I describe how Paliau refashioned himself as the prophet of a fully millenarian creed and collaborated with a new generation of adherents to establish Wind Nation. Manus people still admire Paliau but many see Wind Nation as a departure from the true Movement. Some Wind Nation adherents say that Paliau, who died in 1991, will return to institute a new world. Others, however, are not banking on this happening soon. As of 2015, when I last visited Manus, the latter appear to be building for the long term.

Indigenous Life in Manus

Today, the geographical island of New Guinea and its myriad adjacent islands are divided between the Indonesian province of Papua, in the west, and Papua New Guinea, in the east. In the late 1800s, what is now Papua New Guinea was divided between the British colony of Papua, in the south, and the German New Guinea colony in the north. Australian forces ousted Germany from New Guinea when World War I broke out. After the war, the League of Nations created the Mandated Territory of Papua and New Guinea (TPNG) under Australian administration. Following World War II, the recently formed United Nations gave Australia a mandate to govern TPNG and prepare it for independence.

The research of Fortune and Mead in 1928 focused on speakers of the Titan (pronounced tee-tun) language, one of three major ethnic groups in Manus. Titan speakers were seafaring people. Landless, they built their houses of timber and palm-leaf thatch perched on stilts over lagoons. The people of the mountainous interior of Manus Island were known as Usiai. The Matankor lived on land but also took to the sea to fish and trade. The Titan, however, dominated the waters around Manus. These groups were often at odds with one another, but there was no unity within the specific groups either. There were no overarching political institutions, and even within villages there was little or no central authority. Solidarity within clans was limited, and loyalties among people related through marriage (which was always across clan lines) were often more important than loyalty to a village. Even after colonial governments suppressed warfare, circles of trust were restricted and their boundaries uncertain.

Paliau criticised Manus indigenous life harshly. He blasted with special fervour the tradition of validating marriages at several points over their course with large-scale ceremonial exchanges between the family of the bride, who gave food, and the family of the groom, who gave durable goods, such as the dog tooth and shell ornaments with which the bride was heavily adorned. In the colonial era, bags of rice, canned goods, and colonial currency and coins entered the equation.

No individual or nuclear family could mount an exchange without help. The immediate parties to the marriage relied on contributions, construed as loans, from networks of kin. Consequently, they became indebted to those who, as Mead put it, financed their marriages. Husbands and wives often spent the early years of their union working to repay debts to those who had financed their union, success at which could make or break their social standing. In later life, status lay not in accumulating wealth but in amassing and distributing it through marriage exchanges. There was a hereditary division of rank among clans, but even a hereditary claim to status meant little if not accompanied by prowess in exchange.

One could not marry or enjoy full adulthood without participating in this system. Within it, reneging on debts not only undermined social status; it was also a severe moral lapse. People judged sexual peccadillos harshly in part because they endangered the delicate structure of marriage arrangements. The principal guardians of morality were the omnipresent household ghosts. A household included the skull of a recently deceased male kinsman, whose ghost was expected to protect household members against malicious ghosts from outside. But a household ghost also punished moral infractions. When illness struck, people sought the cause by asking questions of the ghost in a séance. A household ghost, however, only held sway as long as it protected household members from misfortune. If a ghost performed poorly, a successor ghost was chosen.

People attributed most serious misfortune to ghostly punishment or attack. In contrast, avoiding misfortune, producing food prolifically, succeeding in trade, avoiding accidents and illness, and living a long life—that is, enjoying material good fortune—showed that one was morally upright. Even so, both Fortune and Mead spoke of the Titan as pragmatic. They could not have flourished without deep knowledge of their rugged environment, and Fortune and Mead observed that the Titan sometimes demanded empirical proof when settling disputes and ignored the results of seances if they found them implausible. This everyday pragmatism highlights the magnitude of departures from normal life during millenarian episodes, when Manus people undermined their material welfare to petition supernatural entities for miraculous events.

The Movement Begins (October 1946)

Paliau was born and raised on Baluan, but early in life he left to work for colonial merchants and settlers. He had no formal schooling, but he became literate in Tok Pisin and mastered basic arithmetic. In 1928, he joined the colonial police force, eventually becoming the highest-ranking indigenous member. When World War II broke out, he was stationed in the town of Rabaul on the island of New Britain and was in charge of about 300 indigenous police. Most Australians in Rabaul were evacuated before Japanese forces seized the town in 1942. Paliau and most indigenous police were not evacuated, but Paliau was among those who escaped into the jungle. Weary of living as fugitives, many eventually surrendered to the Japanese. In August 1943, Paliau also surrendered. The Japanese gave him charge of the indigenous people whom they had detained, many as forced labourers. He escaped from Rabaul in 1944, but when the war ended, Australian officials accused him of collaborating with the Japanese. He was, however, cleared of these charges and in October 1946 he returned to Lorengau, which was then (and remains) the only town in Manus. From there, in the same month, he made the short trip by sea to Baluan to initiate the Movement.

Paliau told Schwartz that he had always felt himself at the margins of indigenous society. His parents died

when he was very young. Kinsmen raised him but his relationships with them were poor. He observed the marriage exchanges as an outsider might and found them troubling. At the marriage events, people expended vast amounts of energy, consumed vast quantities of food, and became exhausted. Food became short, and illness became rampant. Others blamed malicious ghosts, but Paliau reasoned that fatigue and hunger were at fault. He came to regard these indigenous practices as unfair as well as unwise. When migrant workers returned to their villages, their elders took their earnings to use in marriage exchanges. But Paliau had seen that in the world of the white colonists, people increased prosperity by accumulating wealth and using it to generate more wealth. Paliau judged that renouncing the authority of the elders was necessary to increase Manus prosperity, and many of his peers agreed.

Stopping in Lorengau on his return from Rabaul, Paliau sent word ahead that he was bringing an important message. On arriving in Lipan in October 1946, he drew a large audience. People were eager for change, and the TPNG administration and the Christian missions had disappointed them. Paliau was now an experienced leader and a skilled orator. All the people of Manus, he said, should unite their villages in larger communities in which Titan, Matankor, and Usiai lived together amicably. Status distinctions between hereditary ranks should be abolished, and men and women should live as equals. The marriage exchange system should be abolished, freeing people to work for collective prosperity. Paliau called all this the *Nupela Fasin* (in English, the New Way), speaking in Tok Pisin, the *lingua franca* used among speakers of the hundreds of distinct indigenous languages in the Territory and the many languages spoken within Manus District alone. Many elders of high status opposed his programme but he swayed most others who heard him.

Paliau said that in Rabaul during the war, Jesus had come to him in a dream and told him that the Christian missionaries and the successive colonial governments had withheld from the indigenous people of TPNG the full truth of Christianity, which was also the secret of white material prowess. But Jesus had shown Paliau a path toward this truth, and this was the New Way. This, however, was not the key to an immediate miracle; rather, it was a path toward greater accord with God's wishes. God, Paliau said, was like thought and was in all people if their thought was pure. It was impure thought that brought illness, even death, but through the New Way, people could purify the God within and thus master the material world.

Alongside his social reform programme, Paliau purveyed an adaptation of the biblical story of creation that he called the Long Story of God. The adaptation reimagines the biblical stories of the creation, Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise, the flood, the coming of Jesus, his crucifixion, and his resurrection. It calls the prelapsarian state of Adam and Eve the First Order of God. In the First Order, Adam and Eve could create everything they wanted—even offspring—through thought, just like God. But when they disobeyed God by having sexual intercourse, they ruptured the First Order and plunged all people to come into lives of hard work, pain, illness, and death. Jesus came to show people how to return to the First Order through a proper relationship with God. But white missionaries and colonial governments conspired to hide the full truth of how to regain the First Order, leaving the people of TPNG to seek it on their own.

The Noise: A Millenarian Explosion (February 1947)

Given the indigenous Manus assumption that material prosperity and good health depended on supernatural powers—that is, the household ghosts—and Paliau's invocation of divine inspiration, it is not

surprising that many who undertook the step-by-step New Way programme could also envision a sudden, supernaturally mediated transformation. Within a few months of Paliau's return, a man named Wapei, in the village of Ndriol on a small island almost 70 kilometres (40 miles) from Baluan, declared that Jesus had told him in a dream that Manus people did not have to wait to return to the First Order of God. The dead would return within days and bring vast quantities of every kind of wealth that the white people enjoyed and the ability to live thereafter without hardship or death. But they had to prepare by purifying themselves. They were to think only good thoughts, to stop washing, fishing, and gardening, to sleep outdoors, and to fast, although Wapei promised they would not go hungry. As excitement built, many people said that they felt the nearness of God, and they began to shake violently. This happened wherever the prophecy found an audience, and in Ndriol and beyond, people began to call the entire episode the *Nois* (in English, Noise), a Tok Pisin term that refers to violent shaking of many kinds. Wapei also told people to burn or throw all their possessions into the sea. They should even destroy their canoes, an almost unbelievable demand from the seagoing Titan. Yet some did so. The news of Wapei's prophecy spread rapidly throughout the coastal and island villages already touched by the Movement and beyond, and so did frantic efforts to follow his directions for purification.

Wapei prophesied that the dead would return on the Sunday following his dream. Ndriol villagers dropped everything to destroy possessions and pray in the village church. When Sunday came and nothing happened, Wapei said Jesus must have meant the next Sunday. But the next Sunday, people were again disappointed. Wapei had said that if this prophecy failed, he wanted his brothers to kill him. One took this seriously and, without warning, cut Wapei's head off with a bush knife while Wapei was giving a speech. But after Wapei's funeral, many villagers began to shake again; some destroyed even more possessions, and others claimed to hear cargo planes approaching and to see the lights of cargo ships piloted by their ancestors. Within a few days, however, all had abandoned their wait for the cargo and returned to normal life, hungry and exhausted. Meanwhile, word of Wapei's prophecy had spread among other villages on the south coast of Manus and several small nearby islands, and their people began to shake, receive their own messages from the dead, and perceive their own omens and portents. But no cargo (a term used by many to refer to the wealth of the whites they hoped to receive) appeared and the Noise sputtered to an end throughout the region within less than three months.

The Cemetery Cult: A Millenarian Resurgence (1952–1954) and Paliau's Response

The demise of the Noise left people adrift, and Paliau quickly reasserted his leadership, expanded the Movement's geographic reach, and turned to seeking opportunities for Manus in the new political institutions Australia was creating to prepare the Territory for independence, which he felt were compatible with the New Way. But even as Paliau aligned the Movement with the administration programme, people in several south coast Manus villages were listening to a different drummer.

In May 1953, Mead settled in the south coast village of Pere, where she had lived with Reo Fortune in 1928 when the houses were still built on stilts over a lagoon. By 1953, Pere had moved to the land and combined with several other villages in accord with the New Way. Schwartz and Shargo settled in nearby Bunai, also a composite New Way village. In December of the same year, Mead returned to New York City. It appeared that the New Way was firmly installed in both Pere and Bunai, and the millenarianism of the

Noise was over. In March 1954, however, Shargo heard talk of the séances supposedly banished by the New Way. In these, she and Schwartz learned that villagers were communicating with the dead, who promised a millenarian transformation like that which the Noise had promised. Many people in Bunai and Pere disapproved of this, so the participants kept their activities out of public view. They also kept them completely secret from Mead, perhaps because they knew she would also disapprove. Soon after Shargo's discovery, however, they began to allow Schwartz to attend their meetings.

An event in December 1952 had ignited this new millenarian project. On tiny Johnston Island, someone announced that the ghost of a man named Thomas had brought him a message from Jesus in a dream. Jesus said that the spirits of the ancestors were ready to return and join the living in a new world resembling the First Order of God. But they could not return until the living gathered their remains from scattered and poorly kept graves and interred them in new cemeteries built to specifications conveyed through Thomas.

Unlike the Noise, the spreading of what Schwartz called the Cemetery Cult – the adherents of which Schwartz and I call Cemeterians – was slow. But over several months, it reached many islands, beaches, and inland villages on or near the Manus south coast where local ghostly messengers brought similar instructions. In most villages, the prescribed work proceeded slowly. Old graves were often hard to find; people doubted some alleged ghostly revelations; there were controversies about locating the new cemeteries; and Cemeterians competed among themselves for leadership. But, again, in sharp contrast to the Noise, in all but one communication did the dead divulge just when, once the living were ready, the ancestors would return. The string of demoralising false prophecies during the Noise may well have made the Cemeterians more cautious.

As people retrieved the bones, they anointed them with sweet-smelling soap, Vaseline, and talcum powder—things of the whites—to store until the cemeteries were ready. Johnston Islanders completed their cemetery first, but on the south coast of Manus only the Cemeterians of Bunai finished the work. In December 1953, however, Cemeterians in Bunai decided to inter the bones they had gathered in an old cemetery, to be recovered and buried again when the new one was ready, and they marched in formation to the old cemetery, carrying wooden crosses and the boxes of bones. Although Schwartz photographed this, he did not yet grasp its significance.

Once he began attending meetings of Cemeterians, Schwartz saw that again, in contrast to the Noise, no villages or broader areas were solidly behind the Cemetery Cult. And over the months, some individuals even altered their stances. It was impossible to explain this spotty and shifting pattern of participation in terms of differing material circumstances or psychological and cultural differences. Rather, it appeared that participation followed prior social divisions, and the shifting allegiances reflected current social ruptures.

By May 1954, Paliau had been aware of the Cemeterians for some time. He had resisted their attempts to obtain his endorsement, but he had not pronounced against them either. He may have been hedging his bets, but his attention was also heavily engaged elsewhere. The Australian administration had begun creating Native Government Councils in TPNG, indigenous local governments encompassing numbers of villages, each with an elected leader, linked to the administration through presidents of the Councils. In 1950, the administration created a Native Government Council for Baluan. Paliau had pushed for this, and he was elected the Baluan Council's first president. But he continued to push for a Native Government

Council encompassing the entire Movement area. By 1954, the administration was on the brink of doing this.

On 2 May 1954, Paliau came to Bunai to meet with leaders from several villages. For the first time, he openly condemned the Cemetery Cult. It was simply repeating the Noise of 1946, he said, which had come to nothing and had almost ruined the Movement. Paliau also feared that a millenarian movement would displease the administration and diminish the prospects for a larger Native Government Council. But many Cemeterians remained defiant. Paliau reconvened the meeting the next night. He allowed the men to orate for several hours. But as dawn approached, he commanded their attention, condemning the cult for sowing disunity, lecturing the gathering for neglecting the New Way, firmly—sometimes sarcastically—rebutting defences of the cult, and warning of the danger of losing the Native Government Council. He was an arresting speaker and he did not have to tell again of his divine inspiration. Finally, he asked all who agreed with him to raise their hands. All present did so. Paliau concluded: “This talk about cargo, about ghosts. I banish it now. It is finished.”

Paliau’s Political Rise and Fall

Paliau was at the height of his powers when he shut down the Cemetery Cult. Subsequently, the administration expanded the Native Government Council and Paliau was elected its president. In 1962, the Manus Council was further enlarged and once again Paliau was elected president. The administration created a Territory-wide House of Assembly in 1964 and Paliau was elected as representative from Manus. Transcripts of the proceedings of this body show that Paliau took an active and articulate part in debates, not shying away from sparring with white Australian members. In 1968, Paliau won a second term in the House of Assembly.

He lost his second bid to be president of the Manus Native Government Council. The position went to a younger man with considerable formal schooling and experience in the administration’s bureaucracy. Yet Paliau’s reputation was intact. In 1970, he was made an Officer of the British Empire. (As a citizen of the British Commonwealth, he was eligible for the Queen’s Honours list.) He also spoke at conferences at both the new University of Papua New Guinea in Port Moresby and the University of California, Santa Cruz. But in 1972, he lost his bid for a third term in the House of Assembly. Although he could take much of the credit for securing the Manus Council, that institution was not meeting grass-roots expectations for change, and neither was the House of Assembly. Also in 1972, the administration established Area Authorities which were intended to coordinate the activities of the Native Government Councils. Paliau secured an appointment to the Manus Area Authority and its members selected him as the chairperson. But in June 1973, they ousted him from the chair and from membership. He was left with only one office: the elected leader of his home village on Baluan.

Wind Nation

Schwartz returned to Manus in 1973 to find Paliau despondent. The Mandated Territory of Papua and New Guinea was to become the independent nation of Papua New Guinea in 1975, with a parliamentary government. Nevertheless, Paliau mused that Manus should aspire to a Government of the Holy Spirit so

that eventually “the kingdom will come.” Questioned by Schwartz, he was uncharacteristically vague on what that would entail. In the late 1970s, several young Manus men with university degrees and experience in national institutions formed what they called the ‘Study Group,’ dedicated to creating an indigenous theology under Paliau’s tutelage. Like the Long Story of God, what emerged borrows much from Christianity, but unlike the Story it does not hold that whites have attained the First Order of God and are withholding the secret of their success. Rather, it holds that no peoples have attained that state and calls for harmony among all peoples in a quest for universal salvation.

Paliau’s new acolytes soon began issuing often lengthy typewritten documents in both English and Tok Pisin, usually signed by Paliau, expounding what Paliau called his “Last Knowledge” (in Tok Pisin, *Las Save*). This holds that there is no God but there is a supreme entity called Wing, which is incorporeal, like the wind or the breath. There is also Wang, sometimes called Wang Jesus, and Wong, sometimes compared to the Holy Spirit. Wing created Adam and Eve, who lived in a state of True Freedom in the First Order of God in which they could create whatever they needed, including offspring, simply by thinking. But when they succumbed to Lucifer’s temptation by having sexual intercourse, they lost this ability, and hard work, illness, pain, and death became the human lot. Wang Jesus came to help humanity, he was persecuted, crucified, rose again, and promised to return to rule when people are ready. There remains something of Wing, Wang, and Wong in all people, but there is also something of Lucifer. Getting ready for Wang Jesus requires ridding all people—“white men, white women, brown men, brown women, black men, black women”—of the touch of Lucifer within them and cultivating the touch of Wing, Wang, and Wong by living in harmony.

In 1978, the Study Group morphed into Manus Kastam Kansol. ‘Makasol,’ as it was abbreviated, actively opposed the government of independence in the legal and political arenas. The Makasol plan for government was theocratic, guided by Paliau’s new teachings. It called for a return to romanticised elements of the Manus past, even though Paliau had long inveighed against its central institutions. In the 1980s, this morphed into Wind Nation (in Tok Pisin, *Win Neisen*), invoking the creative power of wind or breath. Wind Nation promoted Paliau’s “Last Knowledge” but also sought a foothold in the secular political system. In the mid-1980s, Paliau began calling himself the Last Prophet of the World. Years later, Wind Nation adherents did not agree on whether Paliau, who died in November 1991, had prophesied his resurrection, but some claimed that he had. In his later years, Paliau identified himself with Jesus or Wang Jesus, usually stopping short of claiming full avatar status. Even so, many years after his death, some Wind Nation adherents spoke of how Paliau could walk on water, heal the sick, and command the elements.

Not long before his death, Paliau appeared again on the Commonwealth of Nations Honours list, becoming Sir Paliau. He was given a state funeral, attended by Papua New Guinea’s first Prime Minister, Sir Michael Somare, with whom he had served in the first House of Assembly. Paliau had long melded the roles of religious leader and mainstream politician, often refusing to suppress followers’ millenarian hopes, perhaps to maintain their allegiance. Yet he eventually turned fully to millenarianism. Did he cynically seek another chance to be a leader, or was he sincere? In Paliau’s final years, Schwartz noted that he not only declined physically, but he also showed signs of cognitive decline. But his apparent transformation is doubtless not that simply explained. Charismatic leaders often become their own followers—both makers and consumers of their own myths—and Paliau was nothing if not charismatic.

To the best of my knowledge, Wind Nation persists. Some adherents I met in 2015 thought that the desired millenarian transformation was imminent. But Wind Nation leaders I met on Baluan, where Paliau is

interred beneath a handsome granite gravestone, did not appear to be preparing for it. The name of Wind Nation was updated to Wind Nation International, and there were stirrings of outreach beyond Manus. Work was almost completed on Freedom House which is built of modern materials to an architect's specifications. There is space inside the building designated for a throne, presumably for Wang Jesus when he or his corporeal vessel, Paliau, should return. But Freedom House is built to last.

Paliau also leaves what may be a more lasting legacy. Manus people still hold him in high regard. Many have no time for Wind Nation, although some of these have joined evangelical Christian congregations with their own millenarian doctrines. But they also credit Paliau with helping bring about the independence of Papua New Guinea and helping Manus people emerge from the colonial era through teaching self-help, creating forms of social organisation reaching far beyond clan and village, and inspiring participation in a new political system.

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