

Natives of the Solomon Islands

After World War II, anthropologists discovered that an unusual religion had developed among the islanders of the South Pacific. It was oriented around the concept of cargo, which the islanders perceived as the source of the wealth and power of the Europeans and Americans. This religion, known as the Cargo Cult, held that if the proper ceremonies were performed, shipments of riches would be sent from some heavenly place. The islanders saw that they worked hard but were poor, whereas the Europeans and Americans did not work but instead wrote things down on paper. In due time, a shipment of wonderful things would arrive.

These islands were used as staging areas to fight active and bloody battles, such as in Guadalcanal, which is within the Solomon Islands. Hence, Melanesia suddenly became an area of key tactical significance in WWII, providing a very dynamic example of "enculturation" in 20th century history.

CARGO CULTS

One day in the early 1940s, the relatively isolated group of islands was descended upon by hundreds of thousands of American soldiers who arrived by sea and by air. The world was at war, and America had plans to build bases on the Pacific islands. The newcomers recruited the locals' assistance in constructing hospitals, airstrips, jetties, roads, bridges, and corrugated-steel Quonset huts, all of which were strange and wondrous to the natives. But it was the prodigious amounts of war material that were airdropped for the US bases that drastically changed the lifestyle of the islanders. They observed as aircraft descended from the sky and delivered crates full of clothing, tents, weapons, tools, canned foods, and other goods to the island's new residents, a diversity of riches the likes of which the islanders had never seen. The natives learned that this bounty from the sky was known to the American servicemen as "cargo."

A Cargo Cult is a religious movement. A Cargo Cult is usually emerging in tribal or isolated societies after they have had an encounter with an external and technologically advanced society. Usually Cargo Cults focus on magical thinking and a variety of intricate rituals designed to obtain the material wealth of the advanced culture they encountered.

The natives interpreted the US military drill as religious rituals, leading them to conclude that these behaviors brought cargo to the islands. Hoping that the cargo would return by duplicating these behaviors, they continued to maintain airstrips and replaced their facilities using native

materials. These included remarkably detailed full-size replicas of airplanes made of wood, bark, and vines, a hut-like radio shack complete with headphones made of coconut halves and attempts at recreating military uniforms and flags.

THE CARGO CULTS OF MELANESIA

In the Solomons, the Fijis, and New Guinea, were the dark-skinned Melanesians, fierce fighters who carved intricate and grotesque patterns in wood, ate human flesh, and were as addicted to exclusive men's clubs and secret societies as the American of today; and in the lush, beautiful islands of the eastern Pacific, where the Europeans came first, dwelt the tall, gold-skinned Polynesian who, with more time for leisure in a land where food abounded, created complex mythological and religious rites, and developed intricate social patterns.

Among the movements best known to students of Melanesia are the "Taro Cult" of New Guinea, the "Vailala Madness" of Papua, the "Naked Cult" of Espiritu Santo, the "John Frum Movement" of the New Hebrides and the "Tuka Cult" of the Fiji Islands. The Cargo Cult had a name for the deity in heaven. He was called John Fromm. It is not certain how this name arose but quite possibly it was from American soldiers identifying themselves by their place of origin: i.e., I am "John from Indiana" or I am "John from Minneapolis". Some clever business began marketing products under the name John Fromm. For example, soap bars were labeled John Fromm Soap.

"Tuka Cult of Fiji Islands"

In the 1880s an oracle priest, Navosavakadua, mobilized Fijians of the hinterlands against the encroachment of both Fijian chiefs and British colonizers. British officials called the movement the Tuka cult, imagining it as a contagious superstition that had to be stopped. Navosavakadua and many of his followers, deemed "dangerous and disaffected natives," were exiled. Scholars have since made Tuka the standard

example of the Pacific cargo cult, describing it as a millenarian movement in which dispossessed islanders sought Western goods by magical means.

"John Frum movement of New Hebrides"

The movement gained popularity in the early 1940s, when 300,000 American Troops were stationed in New Hebrides during World War II, bringing with them an enormous amount of

supplies (or "cargo"). After the war and the departure of the Americans, followers of John Frum built symbolic landing strips to encourage American airplanes to land and bring them "cargo". Several different Melanesian islands that had lived in almost complete isolation were suddenly contacted by mysterious-looking people with white skin during the war.



“John Frum Day” parade. Inhabitants of the remote Pacific Island of Tanna built an entire religion on trash left behind by American occupiers during World War II. To this day, every February 15, the local faithful perform elaborate military-inspired rituals in which worshipper’s wave flags and march like GIs in hopes their god will deliver them more trade goods and supplies.

The natives were exposed to a level of sophistication, civilization and technology unlike anything they could possibly have expected before then. The people of Melanesia were unaware of the greater world around them. The idea that their population was very small, and there were far greater places to live than where they were, never even occurred to them.

The WWII soldiers who visited and assisted these islands also shared their own Christian teachings, including the idea of end times and Ascension. The war ended. The enemy of the U.S.A. never tried to invade the islands or use them as a staging area. The tactical significance of the islands disappeared. The promises of the "gods" were not kept. No one went back to give them more Cargo.