

Where Americans Are Gods:

The Strange Story of the

IN THE INTERIOR jungles of New Guinea, a native who never has seen the sea or built a structure more than 30 feet high looks upward. In the sky he sees a strange bird.

The bird circles. It is immense and makes a roaring noise. It lands in the valley, and from it steps a man—a man with white skin. He brings with him miracles: boxes that speak, sticks that fire deadly pellets, tools that do in hours the work that used to take months.

The simple primitive is understandably astounded. But, in turn, his reaction to this airplane, its pilot, and his riches is astounding to the civilized man. For from this beginning sometimes arises a so-called "cargo cult" based on Pacific people's admiration of the material things we in the Western world take as part of everyday life.

The phenomenon is not new. Ever since men traveled great distances over the sea, there have been abrupt and unexpected encounters with isolated savages. In old days, great vessels with huge white sails would come, bringing bearded men, beasts called horses, and clothes of woven cloth. Today they come by air, bringing bulldozers and tractors, seemingly inanimate things that spring to life at the push of a button. Samoans called the strangers "sky bursters." The aborigines of Australia, seeing their light skins, took them for ghosts of their ancestors.

But the strange people not only brought incredible possessions. Missionaries also came and spoke of heaven, God, and angels. The natives coveted the strangers' tools and weapons, and the missionaries promised them a beautiful new life. Heaven and cargo merged in their minds. An islander would dream that his ancestors, spirits of the dead, were about to return (sometimes under the direct command of Christ) to turn things upside down. The spirits would drive the Europeans away (but not their possessions) or would make them fill the shower baths, cook the food, do the manual labor. The natives, free of the necessity of scratching for a living, would feast on inexhaustible supplies of things that came from the sailing ships or great birds. So, one after another, cargo cults were born.

Before World War II, the cults' ideas were much simpler. The cargo would consist of cloth, kerosene, lanterns, soap, and unlimited cans of corned beef. Then came World War II and the Americans, hundreds of thousands of Americans with great ships, planes, machines; hospitals full of gleaming machinery and brilliant lights under which concerned doctors worked over individual sick men; airstrips built almost over-

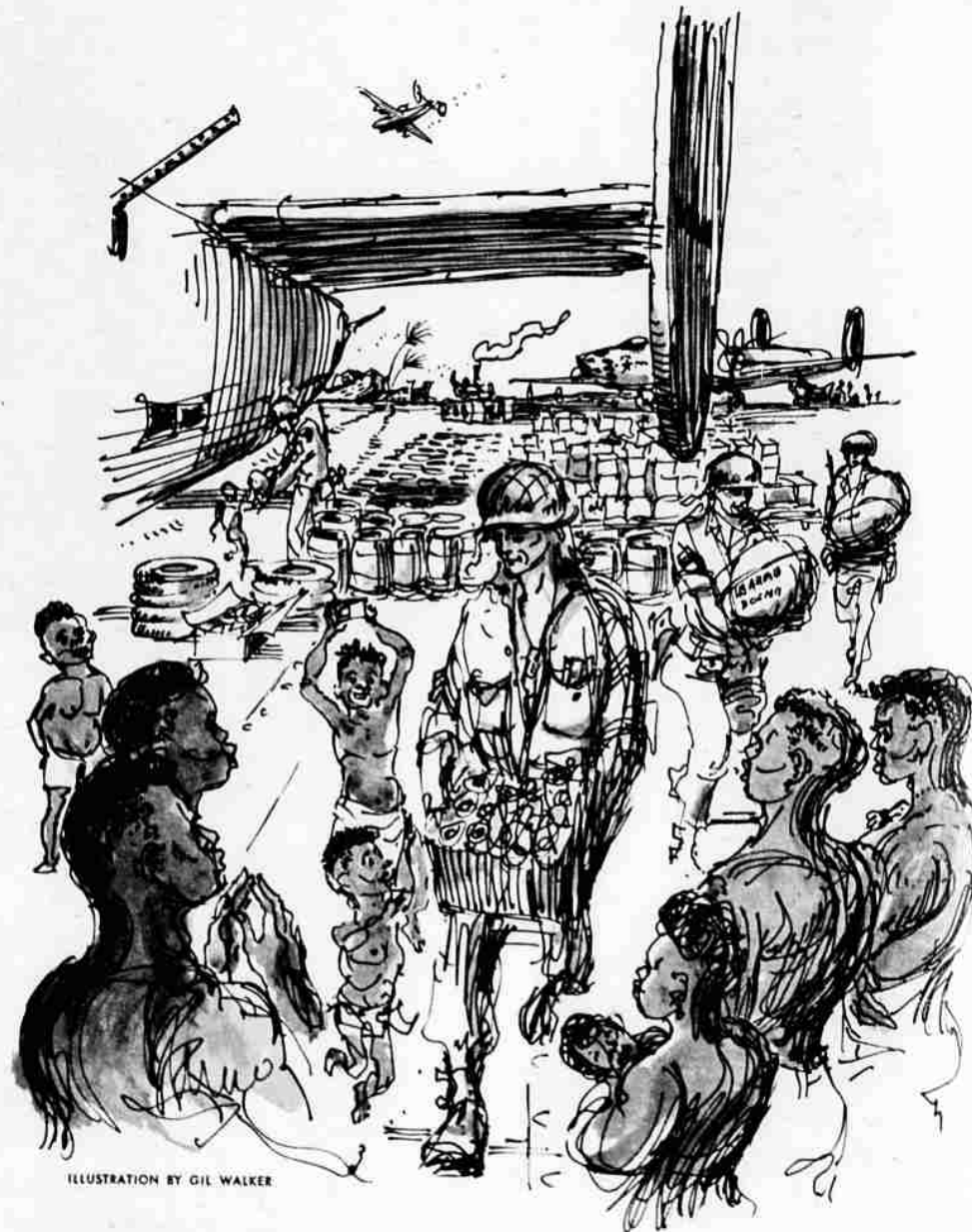


ILLUSTRATION BY GIL WALKER

GIs dropped from the skies with miraculous tools and weapons; from this arose a worship of material possessions—but also a worthwhile lesson of life



On the Admiralty Islands, huts once were built on the sea (far left). Borrowing GI know-how and imitating Army-camp style, natives built homes faster on land.



The same islanders quickly adopted Western customs. They dressed for dinner—but often ate with their fingers. Cult leader Paliau (right) bids for support.



Cargo Cults

By MARGARET MEAD

Associate Curator of Ethnology, American Museum of Natural History; Author of "Coming of Age in Samoa," "New Lives for Old," and "Male and Female"

night by giant bulldozers; whole camps constructed out of wood cut and finished in saw-mills set up in the bush; mechanized laundries to wash thousands of shirts and trousers.

The Americans pouring into the Pacific were intent on defeating the Japanese and getting home again; they had no time to stop and explain. But what surprised the islanders was that they had not come to exploit. They had come neither to set up plantations, recruit labor, nor hunt for oil or gold.

Other things about the Americans also appealed to them. In the American army, they saw men with dark skin like their own, who were dressed in full uniform, spoke English, and ran the big machines. They felt that the Americans had made the "men of Africa all right."

The Bountiful Americans

And the Americans were lavish. They gave away Uncle Sam's property with a generosity which appealed mightily to a people who in the past had quarreled for days because a small clay pot had been broken.

And there were so many Americans. The island tribes were numbered in the hundreds; the Europeans they had seen were only a handful. In contrast, the Americans seemed innumerable—so many kind, generous people, all alike, with such magnificent cargoes! The American servicemen, in turn, enjoyed and indulged the islanders. They let them come up to the bridges of ships and down the ladders into the engine rooms.

Then the Americans went away. Camps were pulled down, airfields stripped. Great ships carried the Americans back to a heavenly land from which the islanders were forever barred.

But in the wake of the Americans' departure came renewed fantastic hope for more cargo—all the heart could desire. Inevitably, a new rash of cargo cults erupted.

On the island of Tanna in the New Hebrides, a cult sprang up around the name of John Frum, who at first was just a spirit who appeared at night to a local prophet and promised to take control over the people's lives. He was said to command a fleet of planes. He would pay the salaries of local officials, his school would replace the local mission school, and by his power he would flatten out the mountainous volcanic island and join it to neighboring islands. As the cult grew, another islander claimed that he was John Frum, "King of America and Tanna."

Another version of the cult centered around the three sons of John Frum—Isaac, Jacob, and Last One, who were said to have arrived from America. The people were promised a new coinage, so they threw away whatever old money they had. They returned to their pagan dances

and ceremonies. They abandoned the modern villages and moved back into the bush. The new things from America were to bring back their old way of life.

In one village people saw a vision of Jack Navy (perhaps taken from a cigarette advertisement), who told them that a great fleet of ships belonging to John Frum and coming from the land of the dead was submerged at the bottom of the sea and soon would rise to the surface. Scouts, stationed on the hilltops to watch for the ships, reported lights at sea. But the ships never came.

On island after island, the story repeated itself, mixing together names and songs from America, tag-end accounts of American life, and dreams and visions of wonderful American machinery. In the Admiralty Islands, people marched and sang to the tune "John Brown's Body" and "King Bera" (a corruption of the name of the Australian capital, Canberra). Everywhere people threw away what they had to make way for the future. They wanted to make a clean sweep of the past so that the wonderful new possessions could come in.

Wondrous tales spread up into the mountains of New Guinea, far from the sea; people who never had seen a white man or his cargo set up "radio towers" to communicate with the spirits. And on faraway islands, people decided to become like the wonderful strangers: they spread sheets on the tables, set vases of flowers on them, and sat down to "read," holding papers which might—and might not—be right-side up.

Life in a Never-Never Land

Everywhere people were caught up in the same kind of excitement. The old, slow, hard-working past would disappear; all the possessions the Americans had brought with them—and had taken away again—would come back in ships and planes which would arrive suddenly, miraculously.

People organized new villages, modeled on army camps and filled with marching men, and sometimes set up "customs" and "passports." They got into trouble with the local authorities, too. The new prophets were jailed or deported. On one island the prophet was killed when people had grown hungrier and hungrier waiting for the cargo which never appeared.

At first sight, all this looks amusing and bizarre, a little like a comic opera, in which pathetic savages, thousands of years behind us in civilization, played at getting all the material blessings of America overnight. But there was more to it than that. Side by side with these naïve views of an earthly paradise came a vision of a world in which the islanders, who so re-

cently (or even then) were clad only in G-strings or nothing at all, would begin to share, not by magic but by hard work.

New villages were set up which resembled American army camps. Miniature governmental systems were established. But where the prophets of the cargo cults promised that all the wonders of the modern world would come overnight by supernatural means, the new leaders were more sober. American things could come, they said, only by work, education, persistence.

The most successful of these movements developed in the Admiralty Islands and was led by a man named Paliau. Here the cult had lasted only a few months. The money that had been thrown into the sea at the height of the excitement was rescued; the energy that had been aroused by the dream of the cargo was channeled into building new villages on land. Formerly these people had lived in houses built on stilts out in the sea. With this way of life, they had managed to construct only two or three houses a year. But in one new land village they constructed 60 new houses in three months.

How to Succeed—by Trying

The leader said, "We would like to have the things Americans have—the houses, clothes, food, machines, schools, and hospitals. We would like our babies to live, and we would like to save our grown people from dying in middle age. We think Americans have all these things because they live under law, without endless quarrels. So we must first set up a new society."

In this way there grew up in a few places, side by side with the irrational dream of an overnight paradise, an understanding that the islanders are the same kind of people Americans are. That what Americans have done, they also can do. In the Admiralty Islands, people were able to skip centuries and go directly from the world of the canoe and the handmade pot to the world of respect for medicine and law and the ability to think in modern terms.

The cargo cults are a kind of caricature of our own irrational hopes and dreams of some perpetual Santa Claus—or our ship that never comes in. But out of the same situation also comes a realization of how important it is to have new ways of life, new forms of organization, new methods of bringing up children.

Out of the same situation has come the realization that the cargo will not come in phantom boats manned by phantom ancestors—that its coming depends on hard work. Here we can see that no matter how remote or backward a people may be, under the right conditions they can skip centuries and join the on-going procession of men in the modern world.