CARGO CULT, name applied to a variety of nativistic movements that have appeared in various parts of Melanesia in the 20th century. While each cult has had individual characteristics, the central feature is a belief in the coming of steamers laden with rich cargo for the natives. Often it is thought that the dead will return, that the Europeans will disappear, and that their powers will be possessed by the natives. In order to hasten these events, many of the apparently mystical activities of the Europeans are engaged in, such as drilling men, building flagpoles, often building wharves for the steamers or even landing strips for airplanes. In some cults, a return to older, abandoned tribal practices is encouraged, while in others these are to be given up as are gardening, working for foreigners, and other pursuits.

While varied in specific content, the cargo cults constitute a similar response to the conditions in which the Melanesians have found themselves in this century. They are faced with a powerful group, whose might is based on means that cannot be duplicated or comprehended by the natives—guns, telephones, overseas supplies, and the like. Traditional beliefs, practices, and technology have not provided the native with these means of power. A revision in beliefs and practices is therefore in order. Yet there is also a resistance to the power of the Europeans and an inability to acquire it through schooling and political means. The cargo cults are thus an effort to summon spiritual resources to meet the crisis of a transitional society.


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