



# Cargo Culting: Happy Return Of The Technologically Advanced Aliens Day!

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Big gods have lil gods upon their backs to bite 'em. Lil gods have lesser gods. And so ad infinitum.

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So here's the deal: you probably think of 15 February as just That Day After Valentines Day, right? Well, yeah, it is that...but it's also so much more, a fun day in its own right, celebrated by hundreds

and snickered at by thousands. It's John Frum Day!

John Who Day? So today we commemorate the occasion, many years ago, when beings from another realm visited the tiny island of Vanuatu in the South Pacific, bringing with them advanced technology and vast material wealth. The aliens spoke with the natives, imparting well-nigh incomprehensible wisdom, and then left, promising to return one day and usher in paradise. The islanders shared tales of these alien gods over the years, and especially of their leader, John Frum, and the tales grew in the telling...but when he failed to reappear despite all their prayers, they decided to lure him back, building machines out of wood in the shape of the technology he had wielded. And still, John Frum did not return...but one day...

This is a true(ish) story.

So you probably know the twist: the aliens in this story were American troops, who'd come to the islands during World War II via sea and sky (not to conquer anything, really, just chilling). They had jeeps, radios, guns, tinned food and rations, and plenty other things the essentially Stone Age-technology-using islanders in the South Pacific hadn't come across yet. They also had some good chats, and eventually were seen as incomprehensible deities. Then they left, because island life is fun and all, but there was a war on, you know. Tales of the strange visitors grew and grew, and eventually the many visitors coalesced into a single god, John Frum (as in "John from New York" and "John from Boston")\*.

And then a priesthood got going, and the islanders tried to lure John Frum back with piers and airstrips and life-size bamboo planes, hoping for more sweet, sweet cargo (hence the term "cargo cults"). And John Frum became more magical and mythical with every passing year. And every year on 15 February, they perform the rituals, present the goods, and talk about how good life will be when John returns to free them from Western imperialism and also free them from material want (by giving them lots of material goods, basically) and just generally make everything awesome.

Wait, what? John Frumism is what anthropologists call a cargo cult - something sci-fi writers have been going on about in one form or another for ages, where weird beings with advanced technology get worshiped as gods by more primitive cultures because (to quote Arthur C. Clarke, as is done pretty much every second second somewhere on the net) "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic". In this case, the advanced beings were American soldiers. And the primitive culture was a whole bunch of essentially Stone Age tech-using islanders in the South Pacific. And this all happened during World War II (and possibly a little before as well).

Naturally, most cargo cults have died out over the years, because...well, because it's hard to hold to beliefs like that when tourists come around and prove that material wealth and iPads can still be wielded by clueless idiots. But increasing globalisation has just motivated the followers of John Frum even more. Which is why a religion that's anti-West - one of the beliefs of most John Frumists is that John will kick the whites off the island when he returns - has a whole bunch of folks dressing up as American GIs, painting "USA" on their chests, building symbolic landing strips (and even planes sometimes) and carrying bamboo bayonets, without even a trace of irony.

Luckily nobody could be so silly nowadays, right?

We globalized modern-day smartphone-wielding folks aren't going to be joining any cargo cults anytime soon - we're way too smart for that.

After all, we don't worship anybody - like successful entrepreneurs, or mighty mega-companies, or sportsfolk or celebrities. And nobody believes they can become successful just by doing what someone else did. And we always make sure we know exactly what we want to achieve, and then we make sure we know how to achieve it, before we do anything. We don't chase business fads and read listicles and think if we just imitate the successful, we'll be successful, too.

Oh, wait...

The moral of the story People are weird. Amazing, but weird.

See, the thing is this - we engage in magical thinking and useless rituals all the time, doing what we do because it worked for someone else at some point, or because it's tradition. But we don't always have any real idea why it's going to work.

And so we spend our days waiting for John Frum, keeping busy, living in hope, and never really getting what we want.

Looks like we may be cargo cultists after all.

Unless you really don't have any of those things in your life/office, in which case - hey, congratulations! You're the aliens in the story...now bring me some cargo, please.

Happy John Frum Day, folks!

