

Facts about the field of study

- Christianity has been influencing Sepik lives since the first half of the last century.
- In 1957 a Catholic mission station was built in one of Timbunmeli's neighbouring communities.
- Most Timbunmeli villagers converted to Catholicism during the 1980s/1990s.
- In 2010 Timbunmeli village received access to the mobile phone network and some villagers started to experiment with the new technology as a means to reveal the hidden presence and power of the dead.



About Christiane Falck

Christiane Falck is an anthropologist. She undertook her PhD studies under a co-tutelle agreement at the College of Arts, Society and Education, James Cook University (Australia), and at the School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University. Her research focus is on religious change in a rural Sepik River community.

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CALLING THE DEAD SPIRITS, MOBILE PHONES, AND THE TALK OF GOD IN A SEPIK COMMUNITY (PAPUA NEW GUINEA)

PhD Dissertation by Christiane Falck



AARHUS UNIVERSITET

CALLING THE DEAD – SPIRITS, MOBILE PHONES, AND THE TALK OF GOD IN A SEPIK COMMUNITY (PAPUA NEW GUINEA)

Summary of the main points of PhD dissertation 'Calling the Dead – Spirits, Mobile Phones, and the Talk of God in a Sepik Community (Papua New Guinea) by Christiane Falck, College of Arts, Society and Education, James Cook University (Australia), and School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University.

The thesis explores lines of cultural continuity and change in the Nyaura (West Iatmul) village Timbunmeli in Papua New Guinea. It examines how people appropriated Christianity, and especially charismatic Catholicism, as well as mobile phones.

Calling the dead

The thesis argues that persisting cultural premises have influenced the way people made Christianity their own. With that it can be read as stressing continuity within change. Via prayers, spirit possessions, and phones villagers currently call on spiritual others who are an intimate part of their lifeworld and crucial for people's well-being and strength. This development is connected to the influence a charismatic movement had on local religious practices since the 1990s. Charismatic prayer groups started in which people, guided by spirits possessing them, receive the talk of God.

The visible and the invisible

People's understanding of their lifeworld and themselves is characterised by a close connection between the visible and invisible that is also reflected in the local concept of person. Persons in Timbunmeli are composite beings, embodying different entities and identities. They are composed of maternal and paternal matter, names, and a life-spirit that intimately connect

them with past and present beings, their cosmos, and its creator. If the connection with the invisible gets disturbed or lost, sickness, death, and destruction of people's environment may be the consequence.

The (re-)appropriation of spirit beings

After converting to Catholicism people came to perceive their own spirits as evil. However, currently a re-interpretation process is taking place that re-legitimizes their spirit beings as spirits of God, and in fact understands God as an ancestral being. Also, a persons' life-spirit has been reinterpreted as coming from God. With that the spiritual other is not only part of people's lifeworld. It is also perceived as being part of each person, which enables people to be active participants in what they call God's work, an ongoing process shaping their world.

A struggle with spirits and leadership

While in the past only initiated men were entitled to handle powerful spirits, nowadays mainly women are possessed by spirits of the dead that are reinterpreted as God's souls and saints. Women deliver the talk of God, who works through His spirits in their bodies to heal, preach, and talk prophecy. Currently an egalitarian process is taking place, concerning the access to and representation of the spiritual sphere, that has engendered intensified struggles for male leaders who formerly were in charge of spirits and leadership.

Continuity within change

The way people in Timbunmeli have appropriated Christianity and mobile phones relates to and interacts with cultural premises that characterize people's lifeworld. While much is framed in Christian terms in Timbunmeli today, we cannot assume radical change. Rather local ontology and Christian theology have influenced each other when the Timbunmeli made charismatic Catholicism their own.

Facts about the empirical basis of the dissertation

Data for this thesis were collected during a 14 months long fieldwork in Timbunmeli, situated at the Chambri Lake, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. The thesis includes personal and methodological reflections about experiences the anthropologist had with her interlocutors that have strongly been influenced by her being perceived as a dead person from the village who had returned in a white body. The thesis' theoretical approach is inspired by existential phenomenology and practice theory, stressing a dialectic relationship between culture and human agency.