

# ‘You have to call the right name’ – Operation Joshua meets Cosmology and Catholicism at Lake Chambri in Papua New Guinea

Christiane Falck<sup>1,2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Göttingen, Göttingen, Germany

<sup>2</sup>College of Arts, Society and Education, James Cook University, Cairns, Qld, Australia

## Correspondence

Christiane Falck, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Georg-August Universität Göttingen, Theaterstrasse 14, 37073 Göttingen, Germany.  
Email: [christiane.falck@uni-goettingen.de](mailto:christiane.falck@uni-goettingen.de)

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## Abstract

In the Sepik, names feature centrally in political and religious contexts. Esoteric knowledge about totemic names enables Nyaura men to achieve status and power and can set them in contact with spirits. A recently arrived Pentecostal/evangelical movement—Operation Joshua—claims to have found the true name of God, whom it presents as being radically different to the beings people's ancestors have known. At Lake Chambri, however, the Nyaura (West Iatmul) community Timbunmeli had accommodated Catholicism to their culture long before Operation Joshua came to their village. While Operation Joshua demonizes Nyaura spirits, the Catholic community understands God to be an ancestral being for whom different clans know different names. Taking a political ontology perspective, I analyze the encounter of Operation Joshua and Nyaura Catholicism in Timbunmeli in relation to cosmo-ontological politics pursued by ambitious Nyaura men and different denominations. I suggest that denominational pluralism creates ontological pluralism in Timbunmeli, where different actors engage different truth claims concerning the being and reality of central Christian figures in their world-making practices.

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## KEYWORDS

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

‘You have to call the right name!’ my Nyaura (West Iatmul) aunt, Erika, exclaimed angrily while we were walking back from a Sunday Catholic church service in Timbunmeli, East Sepik Province (ESP), on 5 August 2018. In his prayer, Nikki, the *Kommuniti*<sup>1</sup> (Community) Steering Team (KST) chairman of the Catholic Church, had substituted the name ‘Jesus’ with the name ‘Yeshua’. Thereby, he had adopted an innovation recently brought to Timbunmeli by the Pentecostal/evangelical (P/e) movement Operation Joshua (OJ). But the church attendees had uttered disapproving sounds and uneasily shifted back and forth on the wooden benches. Noticing his parishioners’ disapproval, Nikki had explained that it was not wrong to use the name Yeshua; it was the Hebrew name for God. A woman whose video he had watched on a mobile phone had healed a lot of people in the name of Yeshua.

Erika and other villagers did not like what Nikki had said—why would the Catholic church leader take up the name of another congregation? It would only cause confusion. Erika said: ‘Our children will start to use that name now. That was stupid. We can use our names. Nyaugunduma, or Mangensaun, or what else we call Him. Other places use their local vernacular terms for their God. We can do that too. Don’t introduce a completely different name’.

Sepik societies are well known for the importance names have in their lifeworld. They reflect an intimate bond between being, place and cosmology (Telban, 2013, 2017) and feature prominently in local politics pursued by men (Bateson, 1958 [1936]; Harrison, 1990; Wassmann, 2001; Moutu, 2013). Names are crucial for communicating with spirits, whom the Nyaura consider to be the source of power and prosperity. In the Nyaura lifeworld, every ancestral being is typically known by a number of names, each referring to the different forms and phenomena with which it is identified. Some names are publicly known, while some are kept secret by esoteric experts as they are vital for rendering attempts to communicate with spirits efficacious and thus give power and standing to those who know them. Only by calling the correct names in ritual incantations can spirits be evoked and employed for human intentions.

Under the influence of Christianity, much has changed in Timbunmeli and much esoteric knowledge has been lost. People have learned new ways to communicate with the invisible and recite Christian prayers that call the name of God and His spirits. Today, men compete with each other for influence and power in the religious domain now dominated by Christianity, as well as in the political domain in what is called the Ward Development Committee (WDC). However, some things have not changed: names still carry meaning and are necessary to communicate with spirits and spiritual support is crucial for worldly success. Political life and religious life are not separate domains in Timbunmeli but infuse each other. ‘Cosmology’, as Telban (2013, p. 82) states, ‘pertains to all domains of people’s lives [...], and not only to a particular domain that we call “religion”.’

When OJ arrived in Timbunmeli in June 2018, the community was curious about what its preachers from Sibilanga (Sandaun Province) had to tell them. Villagers attracted to the movement suspected that OJ might have revealed the hidden name (*hait nem*) of God. The Catholic Church, so they were told, had introduced the name ‘Jesus’ for the being that its original custodians called ‘Yeshua’. Only if one called the right name could one’s prayers be answered quickly. OJ’s claim that the Catholic Church had not revealed God’s true name matched people’s experience of cosmo-ontological politics pursued by influential men. The idea that the Catholic Church had hidden something meaningful from them



corresponded with people's suspicion that the first missionaries who came to the Sepik had recorded ancestral stories, twisted them, and returned them with new names in the Bible, tricking people into believing that the Church had revealed the truth about a God of whose existence they had been ignorant. It was not long, however, until the majority of the village—adherents of the Catholic faith—were repelled by OJ's preaching and understood its claims as an attack on their *kastom*.<sup>2</sup>

The Iatmul cosmos started with an aquatic landscape from which a primordial being—called Kavakmeli among the Nyaura—arose. This being split into sky and ground, which is reflected in the social division of Iatmul societies into *nyoui* and *nyame* moieties, identified with sky and ground respectively. A hole, from which ancestral creatures emerged, appeared in the newly formed ground. These beings left the place of origin and wandered into the world, founding villages and producing descendants. While clans hold different names for the primordial personae, they agree that at the beginning everything was really one (Bateson, 1958 [1936], pp. 235–236; Stanek, 1983, p. 174; Wassmann, 1988, pp. 18–23). This idea is also expressed in Timbunmeli's Catholic community's understanding of God, who today has many names: not only is He called Kavak in reference to Kavakmeli, some clans call Him Mangensaun, some Nyaugunduma or Sigundemi. He is one, and at the same time He is many. Today, most villagers have merged Christian theology with Nyaura cosmology and ontology, and it is this fact together with local power hierarchies that complicates OJ's mission in Timbunmeli.

In this article, I argue that the discord created by Nikki's usage of the name Yeshua must be understood not only in the context of cosmo-ontological politics played out between ambitious male leaders, but also in the context of the politics of ontology fought between the world-making practices of Nyaura Catholicism and OJ. While the Catholic community builds on continuity with the past in their religious practices, OJ calls for rupture with local practices and beliefs by replicating patterns initiated by P/e Christianities worldwide (e.g., Casanova, 2001; Robbins, 2003; 2004): it accepts the reality of Nyaura spirits, but treats them as demons that have to be fought. The Catholic community, however, has identified Nyaura spirits with God and His spirits, and many Catholics question the existence of Satan.

I suggest that the introduction of the name Yeshua to the Catholic church service caused so much discomfort because OJ—by proclaiming Yeshua to be the only true name of the Christian God,<sup>3</sup> who was radically different to the beings their ancestors had known—threatened not only the legitimacy of how most villagers had made Christianity their own but also the validity of their lived reality. Different ontological assumptions clash in OJ's encounter with Nyaura Catholicism, creating frictions in the Timbunmeli community.

Ontology, as I understand it, refers to shared assumptions about what kinds of entities exist, how they relate to each other, and how this informs the way people interact with each other and the world. Yet, ontology not only informs people's understandings and practices but is also changed by them (see also Scott, 2007, pp. 18–24). This implies a political dimension: if ontology is connected to practices, those in power can impose their truth claims on others. Taking a political ontology perspective, I analyse religious change with a view to 'the notion that there exist multiple ontologies-worlds and the idea that these ontologies-worlds are not pre-given entities but rather the product of historically situated practices, including their mutual interactions' (Blaser, 2009, p. 11). I take it as axiomatic that there are 'power-laden negotiations involved into bringing into being the entities that make up a particular world or ontology' (Blaser, 2009, p. 11). These can lead to 'conflicts that ensue as different worlds or ontologies strive to sustain their own existence as they interact and mingle with each other' (Blaser, 2009, p. 11). This was the case when Christian ontology arrived in Timbunmeli in the form of the Catholic mission, and it is currently reoccurring with the encounter between Nyaura Catholicism and OJ.



My article thus contributes to the growing literature on denominational pluralism and conflicts (e.g., Jebens, 2005; 2011; Handman, 2015; Handman and Opas, 2019) and adds a political ontology perspective to the discussion. Paying attention to ‘power differences (politics) and the powers of difference (ontology)’ (Holbraad, et al., 2014)—enacted in and created through practices of individual actors, but also emanating from different denominations that have become part of local power dynamics—I propose that the different truth claims and related practices of Nyaura Catholicism and OJ’s P/e Christianity create a ‘pluriverse’ in the Sepik.

The concept of the ‘pluriverse’ has been employed by anthropologists (e.g., Escobar, 2011; Blaser and de la Cadena, 2018) working on issues of power and resource conflicts to give expression to the co-existence of heterogenous worlds or ontologies connected via unequal power relationships. It is intended as a critique of, and an alternative to, the mono-ontological idea of the ‘universe’ that, due to its relationship with science, global politics and economics, dominates intercultural encounters. However, what the concept of the ‘pluriverse’ in this sense fails to acknowledge is that multiple truth claims about what reality is also exist in local communities where hierarchy and power relationships decide whose world-making practices become influential. Furthermore, Christianity and its institutions are powerful promoters of a mono-ontology that influences the lifeworld of many people. Yet, while Christian denominations officially promote a Christian version of the universe idea, I suggest that their world-making practices can differ significantly, and that they in fact may be understood as creating ontological plurality. I adopt the concept of the pluriverse in my analysis of religious change to give expression to the coming into being of ontological difference through the world-making practices of individual actors and different denominations and their truth-claims, which have become part of power dynamics in Timbunmeli village.

## 2 | COSMO-ONTOLOGICAL POLITICS AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN TIMBUNMELI

Timbunmeli village is situated on an island at the southern end of Malimbe (Lake Chambri). Its inhabitants moved to the island from Kandingei, the oldest Nyaura settlement, located at a lagoon that connects the lake with the Sepik River (see Wassmann, 1991).

In pre-Christian times, the religious-political domain of Sepik societies was controlled and decisively shaped by senior initiated men and their cosmo-ontological negotiations and enactments. The men’s house and its rites were important institutions where pre-Christian world-making practices took place. There, senior initiated men were in charge of channelling spiritual power (Harrison, 1985), of correcting imbalances that negatively affected the village (Wassmann, 1991, pp. 40–42), and of reproducing the cosmos through their rituals and imprinting its principles onto male bodies (Bateson, 1958 [1936]; Wassmann, 1987; Telban, 1998). But, the specificities of the esoteric repertoire and entities involved have always been subject to negotiation (Wassmann, 1991, pp. 45, 60–63; 2001). Those who won debates were not only able to rise in status and power but also to impose their truth claims on others. Cosmo-ontological politics refers to this process: the negotiation and enactment of what reality is, which takes place within the context of power relationships. With missionisation, new powerful actors, asserting different truth claims, appeared on the scene.

Catholicism was the first Christian denomination that Timbunmeli villagers encountered, and it remains the most influential in Timbunmeli.<sup>4</sup> The Catholic Church started to proselytise in the Sepik at the beginning of the 20th century, and in 1957 a mission station was built on Chambri Island (Gewertz, 1983, p. 141). On Timbunmeli a building was erected that functioned both as a church and a classroom. Children were trained by a local catechist, who prepared them to attend Chambri



Island's Catholic mission school. But the mission work was interrupted repeatedly due to a lack of men interested in it. Church buildings were constructed and fell apart; men who had become involved in the mission work abandoned it again. The Catholic pastoral worker Ivan remembers that until 1988—when a new church building was inaugurated with a big celebration, during which villagers received the sacraments of the Catholic Church—only three villagers had been baptised.

Elsewhere (Falck, 2018b; 2019a), I argue that the Nyaura's interest in Christianity has to be understood in relation to changing power relationships in the Sepik. By the 1980s, when mission work gained momentum in Timbunmeli, the Iatmul had not only lost their military and economic hegemony (Gewertz, 1983) but also their religious superiority in the region. Because success is not only attributed to personal achievement but also to spiritual support, and with changes taking place on Chambri Island, whose inhabitants had embraced Christianity, the Nyaura became convinced that the Christian God was more powerful than the gods of their fathers. While changing power relationships in the Sepik region played an important role, intra-cultural dynamics triggered by the political ambitions of young men were also central to the success of Catholicism in Timbunmeli.

The Catholic politics of ontology introduced a new being and His law, which claimed to be superior to everything the Nyaura had known. The Church also established leadership positions that—due to the connectedness that the religious and political domain has in the Nyaura lifeworld—enabled young men, who traditionally have been without influence and power, to establish themselves as important community figures. Similar to what Stephenson (2001, p. 219) describes for Warengeme (ESP), church leaders were ambitious younger men 'in quest of seeking niches higher up in the political ranking order of the village'. The Church 'provided convenient stepping stones in their political career' (Stephenson, 2001, p. 219). While the younger men's interest in the Christian God and His powers was sincere, their interest should also be understood as an engagement in cosmo-ontological politics. Christianity offered a means to devalue the base of their elders' power through a critique of the spiritual entities upon which it was predicated. One of today's pastoral workers, Steven, told me how he went into his clan's men's house and burned a carving of one of his clan spirits to prove that the Christian God was superior to the 'false God' (*god giaman*) his elders worshipped.

While the elders of Timbunmeli community remained reluctant to embrace the idea that the spirits they worshipped were evil and radically different to the beings that the Catholic mission promoted, their sons, eager to establish themselves as leaders in times of change, took on the Christian ontological division between good and evil and came to identify their traditional spiritual repertoire with the latter. The next generation of male leaders turned their backs on their fathers' spirits, who were said to be Satan's minions, and embraced Christianity. Central institutions of pre-Christian world-making practices were dismantled: the last male initiation took place in the 1980s, and the last men's house fell apart during the 1990s. By the end of the 1990s, most elders had died without passing on their knowledge.

Today, the same men who had been reluctant to learn from their fathers lament that they are no longer in full command of the totemic names their ancestors had used to communicate with the spirits that they now equate with the spirits of God and God himself. This positive re-evaluation of their past must be understood in relation to the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) movement (see Macdonald and Falck this issue; Hermkens this issue) that reached the lake in the 1990s. Unlike the mass delivered by an expatriate priest or the church services organised by local pastoral workers, the worship organised by Papua New Guinean CCR leaders offered villagers an unmediated and personal experience of the divine other. This movement reinforced both the ontological premises of the Timbunmeli lifeworld—such as the immanence of the spirit sphere, or the ability of spiritual entities to slip into material forms—as well as traditional religious practices involving spirit possessions. People were assigned patron saints that they came to associate with their *bangewagen* (spirit of the skin; *bange* = skin,





*wagen* = ancestral clan spirit). Similar to a *bangewagen*, which can warn against danger by giving a bodily sensation or talking through the mouth of a shaman, saints could warn people and deliver messages to them. While formerly only shamans could interpret the signs and cryptic words of their ancestral clan spirits, now charismatic group members had received 'gifts' from God, enabling them to speak and interpret the tongues in which God's spirits were conversing.

The movement quickly became local. Villagers started prayer groups to pursue the work of God themselves. In these meetings, spirits of God not only touched (*touchim*) or floated (*flotim*) people but also possessed (*usim*) them. Moreover, they revealed themselves not as foreign beings but local spirits—the spirits of dead villagers. A re-orientation towards the past began despite the influence of the Catholic Church proselytising in the area. People compared their myths with bible stories and their material culture and practices with that of the Catholic Church; they found congruency (see e.g., Gewertz and Errington, 1991, p. 157; Reithofer, 2006). Enabled by the CCR, villagers put ontological premises of their lifeworld into practice and experienced the Christian faith not as new and foreign but as something their ancestors had already known. Although they might have used different chants and names, their fathers had been worshipping the same spirits. God-Trinity (*God-Tri-Wan*) was a being that could appear in different forms and that carried different names. The Catholic pastoral worker Steven—the same man who had disputed his elders when young—told me: 'The names are different, but what they [the elders] thought or which man or God they thought of, it is only one [*em wanpela tasol*]. Every family or clan has its own name for God'. He continued: '*Nature* [*wagen*, bush and water spirits] looks after us. *Nature* provides everything for us—that is what we believe. [...] God is part of those spirits or He himself created those spirits'. But, he added, his elders had sometimes used their powers in the wrong way when they engaged them in malevolent magical chants. Rita—a charismatic prayer group member—replied to my question whether the spirits that had used a traditional shaman were different to the spirits that were using villagers now: 'They were the same spirits of the dead. [...] Before, when the ancestors lived, they did not know what souls are. They called them *wagen*, *undumbu* [spirit of the dead]'.

Yet while putting ontological premises of their lifeworld into action, villagers decisively changed their lifeworld by bringing a reality into being that differed decisively from that of their past. One of the most obvious changes was the inclusion of women, children, and uninitiated men in religious practices. Such changes predictably led to conflicts in a community whose religious-political domain had traditionally been controlled by initiated men. I have discussed the gender dynamics set in motion by this development elsewhere (see Falck, 2016, pp. 136–170; 2018a; 2019a) and will not go into details here.

It is important to note that the merging of traditional symbolic and expressive cultural forms with Christianity had already been promoted by the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). That the Catholic Church took measures to accommodate local culture within Christianity likely influenced the Nyaura's approach towards Christianity and how they have positioned it within their culture (Falck, 2019c, p. 304; see also Gewertz and Errington, 1991, p. 157 for the Chambri). How much the Catholic community has merged Christian theology with Nyaura cosmology and ontology is well expressed by Christian personae being claimed by different clans: while the *nyame* (mother) moiety identifies Mother Mary as one of their ancestral figures, the *nyoui* (child) moiety claims Jesus for themselves.

While the Catholic community professed their faith and assembled new followers during the 1980s and 1990s, a new denomination arrived in Timbunmeli. A man from Timbunmeli's village part Wongiambu introduced the Assemblies of God (AOG), a Pentecostal church that had been working in what is today called the East Sepik Province since 1948. The man had been exposed to AOG's ideas in town and assembled his family to pray in his house. His son Lemek was trained as an AOG pastor,

and the family built a church in Wongiambu. During the 1990s, Lemek started to baptise his followers, who were mainly recruits from his extended family, belonging to his clan and *nyame* moiety. But after a few years Lemek's private life no longer seemed to match the standards of an AOG pastor and the church services were abandoned; the church building soon fell apart.

Today, some of the AOG members not only attend Catholic charismatic prayer meetings but also Catholic church services. In fact, one woman who was regularly possessed by the spirit of a dead villager known as Saint David was originally an AOG parishioner (see Falck, 2016, p. 142ff.; 2019b; Figure 1).

### 3 | OPERATION JOSHUA ENCOUNTERING *KASTOM* AND CATHOLICISM IN TIMBUNMELI

Bateson (1958 [1936]) notes that the moieties structuring Iatmul societies are rivals. In Timbunmeli, too, men from different moieties often compete for influence and power. This dynamic also applies to denominational rivalries. While *nyoui* members dominate offices of the Catholic Church, the AOG mission as well as OJ were brought to Timbunmeli by members of the *nyame* moiety. The introduction of the AOG to the island during a time when Christianity became influential in the village certainly has to be understood in relation to clan rivalry and politics. Yet, rivalries between junior and senior men are also part of the picture, which becomes apparent in the way that OJ was introduced to Timbunmeli: In 2018, OJ found a foothold in Wongiambu, where the AOG had ceased to function in the mid-2000s. The man who introduced OJ to Timbunmeli is Richard, a junior *nyame* member. In April 2018, one of his brothers from Kandingei had heard the 'outreach talk' of OJ preachers from Sibilanga in Maprik town and invited them to come to his village. There, apparently, the leaders had received a calling to go to Kandingei's offspring, Timbunmeli, to proselytise. Richard became



**FIGURE 1** St. David, possessing Sandra's body during a Catholic charismatic prayer session, checks the body of a young man for sorcery items (photo: Falck, 2019)



interested in their work and invited them to stay in his community. After a short visit in April, they stayed for about 2 months from June to July 2018.

Richard had been the treasurer of Timbunmeli's AOG church but had come into conflict with its pastor, Lemek, before their ceremonial life stopped completely. The opportunity to lead OJ gave Richard the chance to prove himself as a leader to his community. His motivations for supporting OJ must thus also be understood within the context of local cosmo-ontological politics, in which men from different clans and age grades compete for influence. OJ offered Richard the chance to be known as the one who had helped to reveal God's true name.

OJ, I was told by the men from Sibilanga, was similar to P/e churches in that it sought to cast out all evil and end all sins. Its predecessors, the operations '*brukim skru*' (kneel down) and '*prea banis*' (prayer wall), were active in the late 1990s (see also Gibbs, 2001; 2005; Jorgensen, 2005), but their missions had not been completed—and so OJ was formed. Gibbs (2005) traces the formation of OJ to the year 2001, when the same Christians who had endorsed the previous operations started to promote OJ.<sup>5</sup> In the early 2000s, OJ 'took to the field in several locations' (Jorgensen, 2005, p. 451), among them Telefomin in Sandaun Province, where it initiated spiritual warfare. Apparently, in the aftermath the movement faded out. Paul, one of the OJ preachers from Sibilanga told me that Satan was still reigning in the country and Telefomin area, where people were 'still adoring idols, drinking blood, killing children, and performing sorcery'. OJ preachers in Port Moresby and Mount Hagen demanded to take OJ to the field and clean the country.

I was told that when OJ arrived in Timbunmeli, almost everyone went to hear what kind of revelations it carried. Most villagers, however, were quickly angered by what they heard. According to OJ, it was wrong to go to church on Sunday; instead, one should observe the Sabbath on Saturday. As it happens, Saturday is Timbunmeli's market day, on which villagers sell products to and also buy sago from neighboring communities. Not being allowed to work on that day was considered unreasonable. Moreover, OJ asked people to worship '24/7' for a week to shield PNG from evil forces that were going to attack the nation during the upcoming APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) meeting in Port Moresby. This, most people thought, was a preposterous demand, especially in a community whose very existence depended on a time-consuming subsistence economy. What repelled Timbunmeli's community the most, however, was the promulgation of the notion that both local spirits and Nyaura *kastom* were evil and had to be renounced. OJ's claim that the Christian God was a being radically different to the spiritual repertoire of their ancestors went against the Catholic community's understanding of Christianity and their Christian being-in-the-world.

When OJ came to the Telefomin area in the 2000s, it initiated confessions, prayer sessions and the destruction of traditional relics (Jorgensen, 2005; 2014). In Timbunmeli too, public confessions, during which villagers humiliated themselves, were part of the processes initiated by OJ. Traditional relics, however, were not burned; most of the ritual items held by their fathers and grandfathers had been destroyed or sold long before OJ arrived. Therefore, OJ requested villagers to burn and destroy the clothes of dead relatives, their photos, and any statues or pictures that displayed God (e.g., Jesus, Angel Michael, Mother Mary)—for, as they claimed, it was a sin to 'make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth' (Exodus 20:4, King James Bible). Villagers were appalled. They could not see anything wrong with keeping the clothes or photos of their dead loved ones, nor did they see anything wrong with the images of God's spirits in statues that stood on their altars. Their forefathers, too, had visualised spirits in carvings and masks.

I interviewed Richard, whose words reflect the discourse employed by P/e Christianity: he referred to the bush and water spirits as 'Lucifer's angels' and condemned 'human nature' as sinful and lacking 'humility' and 'self-control'. Obeying the demands of the OJ preachers from Sibilanga, Richard had



publicly humiliated himself, confessing all the sins he had committed. He had felt intense shame when he was standing in front of his community, which had come in great numbers to hear the confessions of those who wanted to become part of OJ, but he said that he had also felt relief and released from his sins. Only a few others, however, stood up and followed his lead. Later, a few took the chance to confess semi-publicly in front of the men from Sibilanga and the men chosen by them to continue OJ's work in Timbunmeli.

Richard explained to me that the Nyaura *kastom* would follow false gods and that OJ 'will get rid of all of our *kastom*. Our *kastom* has no value. We [he points to his initiation marks] have already given our bodies and blood to a false god. We have to remove all false gods'. He continued:

We fight with spiritual beings. [...]. Because we believe that to get something—like the Catholics, and other churches and groups, sub-groups, like Thomas [Thomas Souls Ministry, see Falck, 2019c], this ministry of theirs, they believe they will receive something from the dead. But we, we do not really believe that we will receive blessings from the dead. [...]. Once we have finished off our sins well, we will see the outcome [...]. We believe that Lucifer—Satan—when God banned him from heaven, he sent him down with one third of his angels. So, when they came down, some went into the bush, the *miunjumbu*. Some went into the water, the *wanjemook*. So, we believe that they are the one third, the workers of the demon, they work together with Lucifer.

At the end of July, after the men from Sibilanga had left the village, Richard organised services on his compound under a roof erected to function as a temporary prayer house. Earlier, an improvised stage had been erected close to what Wongiambu's men called their men's house.<sup>6</sup> Since OJ preached against people's *kastom*, a conflict was inevitable. Richard got into a land dispute with the AOG pastor and his brothers about the future location of OJ's prayer house and decided to move it to his compound.

Although OJ officially claims not to be an institutionalised church but a movement of spiritual renewal open to all denominations, there are signs of institutionalisation at work: the men from Sibilanga baptised villagers—even those who had already been baptised by a Catholic priest or AOG pastor. This caused ridicule and irritation in the community, with people saying: 'How many more times do they want to be baptised? We are all Christians—be baptised once and done with it'. The young men chosen to lead OJ in Timbunmeli were appointed as prayer leaders by anointment with oil that was said to be olive oil from Israel. The prayer house that Richard had been told to build was completed in 2019, and people also referred to it as their church, claiming religious-political authority within a village structure in which Catholic and AOG leaders constantly belittled their work.

When I attended an OJ service for the first time, I noticed that its worship did not emphasise preaching and talk but was filled with dancing and ecstatic singing, during which 'intercessor mothers' were filled by the spirit and talked in tongues, calling out the name 'Yeshua!'. This was something that the Catholic pastoral worker Ivan criticised in his sermon on 12 August 2018. He said people should follow the structure of the Catholic liturgy and not call out 'lalalalala' and jump and dance around like stupid (*longlong*).

Although his flock was much smaller than that of the Catholic community, Richard was confident that his work would become fruitful. During OJ's services he accused the Catholic leaders of being compromised by sin and announced that their church would soon be empty; everyone would join them in their prayer house.

One of the few men who attended the OJ meetings on Richard's compound was Adrian. He felt changed by the new structure that the movement had offered him. The regular meetings and their strict rules, he said, helped him to refrain from doing things that caused conflicts with his two wives. Adrian



repeated the teachings he had received and stated that *kastom* was bad and had to be ended because it followed false gods. However, he felt that it was impossible to adhere to these new rules because he had responsibilities.

At the time I was talking with Adrian, he was involved in preparations for an upcoming traditional mourning ritual. Due to his siblingship with the dead woman, he wanted to perform customary work to receive the right to use her totemic name for his children. He said: 'They [OJ leaders] say no to this kind of customary work, but I still have to do it, because I will call that name'.

#### 4 | TO CALL THE RIGHT NAME

In the Sunday Catholic church service on 12 August, Ivan ridiculed the lax structure of the OJ worship after Nikki had once again substituted 'God' and 'Jesus' with 'Yeshua' in his part of the communal prayer. Nikki answered: 'It is not forbidden to use "Yeshua". [...] We do not know on which road this name came yet. We should not start to challenge each other. You just do your worship'.

Nikki is a young leader and has come into conflict with the older pastoral worker Ivan before. Nikki, as the KST chairman, holds the highest office within the clerical organisation of the village church, but according to the Nyaura *kastom* his senior clan brother Ivan holds more authority. This situation has led to Nikki and Ivan competing for influence. They withhold information from each other and release it strategically in the News announcement part of the Sunday church services, aiming to expose the other's ignorance and correct the information he has provided. Nikki's attempt to introduce the name Yeshua, and Ivan's ridicule of it, should certainly be understood in this context. However, it also reflects cultural assumptions that are part of cosmo-ontological politics.

After the church service had ended, I asked Nikki why he kept using the name Yeshua despite the resentment it caused. Nikki said he suspected that the woman he had seen in the video had acquired the status of a Catholic bishop because she had worn a similar cloth around her neck. She wanted to help people in PNG and speak out on the truth of Jesus' name. He repeated something that OJ had announced: God's son had died in the name of Jesus. Thus, the name was tainted with 'blame', and darkness was covering it. Because the name was contaminated with sin, it had lost its efficacy: 'When we pray and use the name "Jesus", God will not receive our prayers quickly. It is taking too long before God will hear and answer our prayers'. In the video, the woman had healed many people in Yeshua's name. A blind person could suddenly see, a cripple could walk. It was all about calling the right name.

Nikki went on to explain that the Nyaura *kastom* was similar to that of the Catholic Church, but '[t]he missionaries, the white men, confused us and now we don't understand our God's word anymore. Catholicism and our *kastom* is similar (*wankain*), but they turned everything into a different language'. In his clan, Jesus was known as Kivimbange. The Nyaura name for God was Kavakmeli. Listening to what Nikki had said, the pastoral worker Steven added: 'Our fathers did everything in the name of God, but they did not realise that it was the same God [the Church is talking about]. They used different names'.

Nikki's and others', attraction to the name Yeshua reflects their search for an underlying truth that the Church and missionaries are said to keep from them. Every Christian was praying in the name of 'God', 'Jesus' and the 'Holy Spirit'; there was nothing secret about it, everything was out in the open (*ples klia*). But the efficacy of names in traditional practices was also connected to the fact that only a few esoteric experts were in full command of secret names that lay underneath the layer of publicly known names. When they chanted those names, they opened a powerful channel that delivered their questions and commands to the spiritual sphere. People suspected that the Catholic Church kept crucial information, considered to be the source of white people's wealth and power, from them.

Ironically, Richard stressed the same reasoning: 'We are fed up with the hard work. If we pray in the name of Yeshua, the birds will come and carry our food. We will go back to the Garden of Eden'. Once one had reached the Garden of Eden, Yeshua would come together with the dead. However, in Timbunmeli people believe that the dead had already started to return—in the bodies of white people, as spirits possessing the bodies of community members, in visions and dreams (see Falck, 2016; 2018c; 2019b; 2019c).

Richard himself encountered the spirit of his dead father, who had died in April 2018, after he had confessed all his sins publicly. His father's spirit visited him at night, carrying presents for his son. But he did not leave these things, and Richard wondered why. He suspected that his house had lacked a table on which his father could have put the things, and he had thought about finding a table. But OJ had taught him that it had not been his father but a false god trying to pull him into sin. Only in the name of Yeshua would he be blessed with all the good things to come. He changed his mind: 'I started to think that he was one of those minions, those one third of angels, who come to deceive you and trick your good sense'. However, even after Richard had sent the spirit away, his father kept visiting him at night. Richard tried to perceive the spirit of his father as one of Lucifer's angels, but he struggled to do so.

While Richard was trying to execute the spiritual warfare that OJ had requested him to carry out, most villagers were reluctant to renounce any memories and encounters with their dead loved ones. Fewer and fewer people attended the worship sessions that Richard organised. Towards the end of my fieldwork in September 2018, the structure that OJ had tried to establish had started to fall apart.

The KST chairman, too, stopped using the name Yeshua after an incident in Mali, a neighbouring community, shocked Timbunmeli in mid-August. Young men, in their enthusiasm for OJ, had destroyed two statues of Mother Mary. This had caused much comment in Timbunmeli and was also addressed by Ivan in a long sermon on 19 August in which he talked about Mother Mary's importance for Christianity and humankind in general. She was God's mother; only because of her was Jesus born and Christianity evolved; every church owed its existence to Mother Mary, and it was a sin to destroy her picture, which also decorated Timbunmeli's Catholic church (see Figure 2).

In Nyaura communities, mothers are ascribed with a central importance (Falck, 2019a; also Silverman, 2001). Everyone knows that they would not exist without a mother. In fact, people say the hole from which the first ancestral beings emerged was the vagina of the first primordial woman. In his sermon, Ivan hinted at this belief when he equated Mary with Eve, the first woman mentioned in the Bible. Without Mary, or Eve, or women in general, mankind would not exist. Everyone agreed: destroying the Mother of God was a big sin and the culprits would probably encounter a premature death. This time, Nikki did not use the name 'Yeshua' in his prayers, and in the following weeks he returned to using the names 'Jesus' and 'God'.

## 5 | A SEPIK PLURIVERSE IN THE MAKING

When I returned to Timbunmeli in April 2019, I was eager to learn about the developments that had taken place during my absence. In the first months of my stay OJ did not meet at all, because it was highwater season, I was told. However, I found out that there had been discord within the group. Adrian had stopped attending the meetings, and so had the other young men entrusted with offices in 2018. Richard, I was told, wanted to decide everything alone and alienated his male supporters with his selfishness. When Richard announced meetings in August 2019, only a small group of 10 to 15 women and children came to worship (see Figure 3).





**FIGURE 2** An Operation Joshua worship in August 2019 (photo: Falck, 2019)



**FIGURE 3** The pastoral worker Ivan during a church service in Timbunmeli's Catholic church with a statue of mother Mary on its altar (photo: Falck, 2019)

While OJ still struggled to find support among a wider audience in Timbunmeli, this small but persistent group supported OJ's mission to cast out evil influences. Women prayed to Yeshua to help their sons and husbands to stop abusing alcohol and marijuana. They asked Yeshua to drive out Satan and his minions and guide their family members to join them in their prayer house.



The group had hoped for an elaborate opening ceremony for their newly completed prayer house to take place in September 2019, but one of the preachers from Sibilanga, Paul, who had come to stay with Richard for a couple of weeks, crushed their hopes, stating that the officials from OJ's 'headquarters' had a full schedule and could not attend. Also, there was the opening of a prayer house planned in Kubalia (ESP) that needed the attention of the leaders from Sibilanga. The group's disappointment was obvious; they had wanted to praise the Lord's name in all his glory with a grand opening ceremony that would demonstrate to everyone in Timbunmeli and beyond that the one true God was supporting their work.

The ground that OJ's prayer house was standing on was still contested with Lemek, the AOG pastor, who claimed that the area was consecrated ground of his denomination, on which he intended to build a new church. Lemek was clearly upset by the fact that his junior clan members, who had been part of the congregation he was leading, had taken it upon themselves to start a new mission:

We did not meet to discuss. They are my [AOG's] youth, who decided it [to invite OJ] on their own. It is consecrated ground; I could cast a curse on them, but I do not want to destroy them. But they still have to leave. [...]. It is not a real church; it is only a ministry. [...]. I will build a new church and send one of my youth to AOG bible school—I will take on a political office.

In August 2019, the election of a new councillor for their village WDC took place. Two *nyoui* and two *nyame* members competed. A *nyoui* member won. Recognising that the village might drift into further disharmony with the *nyoui* half now dominating both Catholic Church and village governments, the new councillor arranged for counterbalance: Richard and Lemek became part of the new WDC as vice councillor and magistrate.

While the men pledged to work together as leaders in the WDC, they were clearly divided on spiritual matters. The new councillor had consulted a prayer medium and a traditional shaman to support his candidature with their spiritual work. He was a firm Catholic believer and charismatic prayer group leader who had accommodated the teachings of the Catholic Church to the principles of his lifeworld. Only recently had he taken two of his classificatory sons to an initiation ceremony in Kandingei and been trained to take over central parts of the initiation ceremony himself in the future. Whereas Catholics made Christian prayers part of initiation ceremonies and other traditional rituals, the position of the AOG was more complicated. Their pastor—who had been initiated himself—was torn between his *kastom* and his church's repudiation of 'heathen' customs. For Richard, however, the situation was clear: initiating men or employing magic was sinful because these practices were connected to spirits radically different from, and plotting against, God. About the shaman whom the new councillor had consulted, Richard said:

I cannot go to see uncle Benny anymore. Because he amounts to a god; he would become my god [if I consulted him]. [...]. Now I feel like I cannot go back to my uncle, because he is this false god [who is using his body]. Because the first of the ten commandments says: "Worship no god but only me".

Barth (1987) has shown how politics of knowledge and secrecy pursued by esoteric experts created a diversity of cosmological traditions among Ok societies (Western and Sandaun Province). Because ritual lore was looked after by a few ritual experts and only periodically revealed in initiation rituals, there was room for innovation when the men guarding it reshaped it by putting it into practice. Cosmologies were never fixed and static but always in the making. While the religious experts of Mountain Ok societies might





have consciously and unconsciously created cosmological plurality, OJ's leaders strategically sought to implement not only a new name but also an ontology to Timbunmeli's lifeworld that the Catholic community had dismissed since the CCR. OJ aimed at a spiritual transformation that for the Catholic community would also have been ontological in nature.

In Timbunmeli, a Christian pluriverse is in the making, brought into existence by different world-making practices of different denominations. Ontological politics of Catholic and P/e Christianity promote different spiritual worlds in which Timbunmeli villagers are now at home. That denominational differences can cause ontological differences is best expressed by the fact that OJ understands Satan to be a cosmological entity whose evil influences and henchmen need to be fought, while many Catholic believers negate Lucifer's ontological existence as a cosmological being, instead understanding him as a rhetorical figure used in discourses that frame human imperfection. Many have expressed what one Catholic parishioner said when I asked him about Satan: 'Satan? I don't think that he exists. It's only a metaphor [*tok piksa*]. When I curse, when I do something bad, we say Satan made me do it. But it was really me'.

When Catholics put their cosmo-ontological assumptions into practice, they create and engage a different world from that of their P/e counterparts. When they pray, they call for God and His spirits, which also include the spirits of dead villagers, to guide, strengthen and bless them in their undertakings. When they encounter spirits of the dead in the form of white people coming to their village, or during spirit possessions, they have embraced these events as welcome outpourings of God's power, glory and blessing. OJ followers, on the other hand, understand every sign of the dead's agency as Satan's power in disguise, trying to trick them into sinful behaviour. Similarly, whilst the Catholic community understands that God created bush and water spirits to look after their natural surrounding, OJ demonises them as Satan's workmen. While Satan is a central being in OJ's cosmology, on which many of its world-making practices focus, the world-making practices of Timbunmeli's Catholic community have brought a different reality into existence in negotiation with Nyaura cosmology and ontology.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

It is often argued that Christianity, and especially its charismatic and P/e forms, involve local communities in projects that seek to break with their past. While this holds true for OJ's aspirations, in Timbunmeli the CCR has led to a re-evaluation of the past and a re-appropriation of local spirit beings as positive forces in people's lifeworld. The Nyaura have positioned Christianity within their culture and merged its theology with local ontology and cosmology. Catholicism is perceived more as a part of people's *kastom* than contradicting it, and some villagers claim that the Christian faith is inherently local. Consequently, OJ's leaders encountered difficulties when they tried to break with the past and pursue spiritual warfare against what the Catholic community understands to be spirits of God. Since Christianity was accommodated to Nyaura culture long before the new movement arrived, Nyaura cosmology, their world-making practices and Catholicism work against the success of OJ, whose leaders present the Christian faith, spirits and being-in-the-world as something radically different to people's *kastom*. While OJ successfully recruited some villagers, most decided that OJ was not for them because it went against their understanding of Christianity.

Politics in Timbunmeli are part of Christianity, and Christianity is a part of politics (see also Tomlinson and McDougall, 2012). OJ profited from the gap that had opened up in Timbunmeli's village part of Wongiambu, where the AOG mission ceased its activities. An ambitious young man took the chance to introduce an innovation to his village and thus establish himself as a leader. However, cosmo-ontological politics are not only fought out in "intra-cultural" differences' (Jebens, 2011)



between ambitious men but also between different denominations pursuing their own politics of ontology. The significance of ‘social groups in and through which Christian practice takes place’, Handman and Opas (2019, p. 1001) point out, has not yet been sufficiently emphasised by the anthropology of Christianity. As I have shown, we have to pay attention to both individual actors and denominations engaging with each other in a context of dynamic power relationships.

Nyaura Catholicism and OJ subscribe to different truth claims that via politics of ontology embedded in the world-making practices of individuals and social groups have created ontological difference, or a pluriverse, in the Sepik. However, as indicated by the Nyaura's appropriation of charismatic Catholicism, power-laden negotiations between denominations and people may not only create frictions and fissions, they may also produce fusions when different ontologies meet and merge in human engagements with each other and the world in which they live.

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## ORCID

Christiane Falck  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2356-2543>

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Tok Pisin terms are marked by italics, the local vernacular by italics and underlining.
- 2 Tok Pisin term referring to ancestral custom or law containing spiritual agency.
- 3 OJ's leaders from Sibilanga used three names, Adonai (God), Yeshua (Jesus) and Ruach HaKodesh (the Holy Spirit) but only the name ‘Yeshua’ was picked up by villagers.
- 4 In 2013 the 292 adults of the village identified as follows: 220 Roman Catholics, 56 AOG, six Seventh Day Adventists, six South Seas Evangelical Church, two Israel Ministry, one Four Square Gospel Church and one Revival Fellowship.
- 5 According to Gibbs (2005, n.a.), in the 2000s OJ used ‘images from Joshua in the Old Testament who challenged the gods of the original inhabitants of the “Promised Land” and conquered them’. The movement that came to the Sepik in 2018, however, equated Joshua with Jesus. In Hebrew ‘Yeshua’ can refer to both biblical figures, Jesus and Joshua.
- 6 Most villagers referred to it as a *house boi* (gazebo where men socialise) and not *haus man* (men's house that has ritually been inaugurated—nowadays with a combination of traditional Nyaura and Christian rituals).

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