

Article

The Gender of God's Gifts—Dividual Personhood, Spirits and the Statue of Mother Mary in a Sepik Society, Papua New Guinea

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Abstract: A Sepik myth tells of a time in which women were in charge of powerful spirits before jealous men reversed the gender roles by force. Today, the men of Timbunmeli (Nyaura, West Iatmul) have lost control over spirits who have started to act through female bodies. Christian charismatic rituals hint at mythical times, and remind villagers that women are the original custodians of spirits now understood as being spirits of God. While previously, male bodies represented spirits in shamanic rituals and through male ritual regalia, now women are the predominant recipients of God's gifts. This paper analyzes the current religious practices as onto-praxis in relation to the local concept of personhood and the relational ontology informing the Nyaura's lifeworld. Building on Strathern, Bird-David, and Gell's theories about the personhood of humans and things from an anthropology of ontology perspective and adding a gender perspective to the discussion, this paper argues that dividuality put into practice has not only informed the way the Nyaura have made charismatic Christianity their own, but is also central for understanding current events impacting gender relations in which material objects representing spirits play a crucial role.

Keywords: Papua New Guinea; relational ontology; onto-praxis; personhood; dividuality; gender; Catholic charismatic Christianity; charismatic space



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1. Introduction

When Timbunmeli village (Nyaura, West Iatmul)¹, situated at the southern end of Lake Chambri in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea, celebrated the month of Mother Mary in 2010, women caught the community's statue of Mother Mary in a fishing net and with that, performed what [Sahlins \(1985, pp. 53–54\)](#) call mytho-praxis—historical action as the projection of mythical relations. A Nyaura myth tells the story of two ancestral sisters who—while fishing for shrimps—caught the heads of two powerful spirits, referred to as *wagen* (ancestral clan spirit) in the local vernacular.² Those two spirits started to jump and dance in their net, echoing a pleasant sounding rhythm. The sisters took the spirits home to their village. From then on, women guarded the spirits, met in ceremonial houses and took care of important business, while men looked after children and cooked food in family houses. Jealous of women's power, men gained access to the spirits by force and expelled their female custodians from the ceremonial house—an institution that from now on became a men's house, governed by the principles of male seniority

¹ Timbunmeli belongs to a group of villages whose inhabitants identify as Nyaura in reference to the name of the clan that founded their first village, Nyaurangei (the place of the Nyaura). Anthropologists and linguists refer to the Nyaura also as West Iatmul. Gregory [Bateson \(1932a, p. n2\)](#) borrowed the name Iatmul from a clan in the East Iatmul village Mindimbit and introduced it as an ethnonym for a group of villages that showed linguistic and cultural similarities. Iatmul is not a name used by my interlocutors, but they recognize that they share similarities of culture, language and descent with other societies referred to as Iatmul by outsiders.

² Local vernacular terms are marked by italics and underlining, while terms stemming from the Papua New Guinean neo-melanesian Pidgin English Tok Pisin are marked by italics.

and initiation. Gender relations were reversed: women became the household caretakers, while men took over the *wagen* and learned esoteric practices from them. One of the skills an initiated man could acquire was the ability to establish a personal relationship with a *wagen*. In shamanic rituals the *wagen* could possess his body to heal others and prophesy (Bateson 1932b; Falck 2016).

Today, the men of Timbunmeli have lost control over spirits who have started to act through female bodies. In Christian charismatic rituals, villagers are reminded that women were originally the guardians of spirits. During a Catholic charismatic movement that reached their village in the 1990s, villagers received gifts from God enabling them to heal, prophesy, and speak in and interpret tongues. While initially men were also filled by the Holy Spirit, today God's gifts are clearly gendered—predominantly women receive them. In Catholic charismatic rituals, the women of Timbunmeli remind male leaders of their female entitlement to leadership and power. This is especially obvious in celebrations during the month of October—the month that the Catholic Church dedicates to the Holy Rosary and the Queen of the Holy Rosary, Mother Mary. During the month of Mother Mary (*mun bilong mama*), women catch her statue with nets, carry it around in the village influenced by her spirit, or are possessed by spirits of God and Mother Mary herself.

In what follows, it is argued that current religious practices in Timbunmeli village cannot only be analyzed as mytho-praxis but also as onto-praxis (Scott 2007). Building on Sahlin's (1985) theorization of the interaction of structure and agency and his concept of mytho-praxis, Scott has coined the term onto-praxis to “encompass the mutually transforming relationships, not only between myth and history, but also between the received and internalized dispositions, or practice-generative schemes, of a given socio-cultural context and people's everyday activities therein” (Scott 2007, p. 20). In Timbunmeli, basic ontological premises that characterize the Nyaura lifeworld and that are echoed in the Nyaura concept of the person can be identified in villagers' religious practices.

Elsewhere (Falck 2016, 2019c), I established that a Nyaura person is not only what Strathern (1988) has called a “social microcosm” but also a cosmo-ontological microcosm, reflecting basic principles of people's cosmos and existence. Not only social relations with others define personhood in Timbunmeli, but also visible and invisible entities such as totemic names, bodily matter and the spirit that connects humans with living and dead kin, the visible and invisible part of the world and its creator. It is precisely the dividual aspect of personhood and the ontological premises it contains that had implications for the way the Nyaura made Christianity their own. In this article, I will add another dimension to the analysis of religious change in Timbunmeli: gender, which, similar to personhood, is not a pre-given quality of the individual, but can be understood as an aspect of relations (Strathern 1988; also Eriksen 2008, 2012, 2016).

The way people in Timbunmeli have appropriated charismatic Christianity provokes difficulties for male leaders who find themselves confronted with dynamics that increasingly appear to be beyond their control. Timbunmeli's relational ontology put into action by female bodies in Christian charismatic worship has started to transform their lifeworld. I argue that charismatic Christianity has been engaged with Nyaura mytho- and onto-praxis in such a way that it affects the gendering of Timbunmeli's charismatic space—“the space in which the Spirit reveals itself for the believers” (Eriksen 2014, p. S263)—and the power relationships this space produces.

First, I give a brief overview on religious change in Timbunmeli village. Second, I describe the local concept of the person and how its conceptualization has been engaged with charismatic Christianity by focusing of the practice of spirit possession. Third, I show that dividuality has not only informed the way the Nyaura have appropriated Christianity but that it is also crucial for understanding the agency of objects in religious practices. I attempt to make some suggestions for how Strathern (1988), Gell (1998), and Bird-David's (1999) approaches to personhood and the agency of things can be expanded to analyze the religious change in Papua New Guinea. Fourth, I describe how women, by putting ontological principles into action and by legitimizing their practices with

Nyaura mythology, currently challenge gender and power relations. Finally, I will discuss my findings in relation to the Pentecostal Gender Paradox (Martin [2001] 2003) and its consequences for power relations. I conclude that it is not only the social dimension of objects or persons alone that we have to look at if we want to understand the current trajectories of religious change in the Sepik, but also their cosmo-ontological dimension put into practice in the historical moment.

2. Religious Change at Lake Chambri

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Christianity—predominantly in the form of Roman Catholicism—has influenced Sepik lives: in 1913, the first Catholic mission station was built at Marienberg; in 1957, the Chambri Lake area received a Catholic mission station on Chambri island, one of Timbunmeli's neighboring islands. During the 1980s and 1990s, Christian influence gained momentum in Timbunmeli and today its inhabitants understand themselves not only as Nyaura but also as Christians.³

I (Falck 2018, 2020) have argued that the Nyaura's conversion to Christianity is connected to local conceptions of power, which understand access to and good relationships with spirits as a source of power. Before contact with Europeans, Iatmul societies were considered—by themselves and by neighboring societies—powerful local players, not only because of their skills in warfare and their dominance in trade relations, but also because of their spiritual repertoire (e.g., Gewertz 1983; Harrison 1990; Mead 1978; Metraux 1975, 1978). Exposure to modern warfare during WWII, Western trade relations and Christianity set in processes that not only changed the Iatmul's relationship with other societies, but also impacted the relationships they had with themselves and their cultural items. Villagers turned to the Christian God, whom they had come to perceive as a more potent source of power than their own spirits, and embraced Christianity.

While changing inter-cultural dynamics in the Sepik region were one factor that motivated the Nyaura on Timbunmeli to convert to Christianity, intra-cultural dynamics set into motion by ambitious young men also contributed to the success of Christianity. The Catholic Church established leadership positions for Nyaura men that enabled young men to achieve influence and power in a society that heretofore had been structured by seniority and restricted access to the secrets of the men's house. Christianity offered young men the means to devalue the base of their elders' power through a critique of the spirits upon which it was predicated: the Christian God and his spirits—i.e., the Holy Spirit, angels, saints—were not only said to be more powerful than Nyaura spirits, but Nyaura spirits were also devalued as evil. Attracted by the possibility to escape the strict rules of their elders' *wagen* cult and bring their community on the pathway to change, young men lacked the interest to learn from their elders and turned their back on Nyaura spirits and practices. The last male initiation took place during 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 esoteric knowledge to today's generation of male leaders.

While their elders had been able to directly engage with spirits during shamanic rituals and through esoteric language, the new generation of spiritual leaders depended on the mediation of God's help by expatriate priests and his word by the Bible. While waiting to be fully initiated into the secrets that they assumed the Catholic Church held, villagers experienced the Christian God and his spirits as distant and removed from their immediate lifeworld. A Catholic charismatic movement changed this perception by permitting direct encounters with the godly. Charismatic prayer groups evolved, during which sessions the spirits of God started to possess villagers' bodies. Interestingly, those Catholic charismatic séances show similarities to shamanic séances, during which shamans could be possessed by *wagen*. With that, the local understanding of personhood and spirit possession is central for the issue at hand.

³ In 2013 the denomination of the adult population (292 people) of Timbunmeli Island was as follows: 220 Catholics, 56 AOG (Assemblies of God), 6 SDA (Seven Day Adventist), 6 SSEC (South Seas Evangelical Church), 2 Israel Ministries Church, 1 Four Square Gospel Church, 1 Revival Fellowship.

3. Personhood and Spirit Possession in a Context of Religious Change

A Nyaura person can be understood as a composite or dividual being, reflecting central principles of the Nyaura cosmology and ontology. For my discussion here, I will focus on the intimate bond between body (*bange*) and spirit (*kaik*) that is not only crucial for personhood and life in Timbunmeli, but also central for understanding the local notion of spirit possession.

The body of a Nyaura person is made up of maternal and paternal bodily matter that conceptually is related to ground. The Nyaura creation myth centers around a being—Kavakmeli—whose body split to become sky and ground. In the newly formed soil, a hole appeared from which the people’s ancestors emerged. Today, the idea of bodily matter being related to ground is reinforced by the biblical story about Adam’s creation from a lump of soil. Furthermore, *kavak*—the local vernacular term for primeval ground—is also used as a synonym for the Christian God. However, not only bodily matter but also spirit (*kaik*) connects people with the creator of their cosmos.

Kaik is the Nyaura term for an invisible entity that is vital for life. In the local vernacular, *kaik* is also called *bangewagen* (spirit of the body) or *wasman* (guardian)—it flows through the body and makes it lively, healthy, and aware of harmful situations. If the connection between the lifespirt and body is lost, a person will fall sick, and if the connection cannot be restored, the person will die. Therefore, healing rituals often focus on guiding a lost *kaik* back into its body (see Bateson 1932b; Falck 2016, 2019c). After birth, a Nyaura child is given a totemic name (*gwaak si*) that connects it with an ancestral namesake. Its *kaik* will recognize this name and if the connection between body and spirit is lost, the totemic name will be used to lead the lifespirt back to its body.

The *kaik* of a person is perceived as coming from an invisible part of the world called Undumbunge (place of the dead) that nowadays is equated with heaven. With death, it turns into a spirit of the dead (*undumbu*, *soul*) and returns to heaven. While the spirit of a recently deceased person is referred to as *undumbu*, the spirits of people that have died before are referred to as *gwaak* (kinterm for paternal grandfather) or *wagen* (ancestral clan spirit). Today, people say that God bestows a baby with its *kaik*, which is understood as a breath of wind like that which God blew into the nostrils of Adam to flow through the body. Thus, people can feel God’s presence in their bodies—like *kaik*, his Holy Spirit is flowing through them.

Mosko (2010, p. 215) argues that “people’s assimilation of Christianity [in different Melanesian societies] has been effected through elicitive exchanges involving parts of their persons and corresponding personal detachments of God, Jesus, Mary, Holy Spirit, the Devil, and so on.” Although Mosko has been criticized by the authors whose works he cites in support of his argumentation (see Falck 2019c), from the Nyaura perspective, all persons are dividuals whether they are human or divine. God, too, is a partible being. In reference to Christian theology, they call him God tri-wan (God three-one), meaning God as Trinity. He can transform himself into a human (Jesus) and appear like a spirit (Holy Spirit). God is one, but he is also many. His Holy Spirit is present in everyone—the *kaik* of each person is part of the divine and the divine is a part of each living person.

The Nyaura’s perception that God is part of each person supports the egalitarian ethos of Christian ideology according to which everyone is equal in the eyes of God. Everyone, the Nyaura in Timbunmeli say, has a part to play in what they call “the work of God” (*wok bilong God*) and which contains the revelation of divine messages.

The idea that everyone can pursue God’s work has been reinforced by the impact of the global Catholic charismatic movement that reached Timbunmeli in the 1990s. During charismatic gatherings, villagers were baptized in the Spirit and assigned with patron saints (*wassanktu*)⁴ who could float (*flotim*) their bodies and out messages from God. When floating their bodies, God’s spirits controlled their actions and disclosed divine messages through

⁴ Within the Catholic Church, patron saints are holy persons and angels that can be assigned to a person, a group, an activity, a building, a country, and so on, to function as intercessors before God.

them. This development marked a significant change from former Christian practices and structures. Within the hierarchical organization of the Catholic Church, villagers depended on Church officials to learn about God's will. Now, practically everyone could become God's medium.

While the Catholic Church had embraced the Catholic charismatic movement as a new way to offer its followers a closer relationship with God, it withdrew its support after rivalries among charismatic leaders led to disputes. Nonetheless, in Timbunmeli, locally run charismatic prayer groups evolved. There, God's gifts not only floated the bodies of villagers; spirits of God also started to possess (*usim*) them. Villagers describe the experience of being filled by God's spirits as similar to being drunk. When God's spirits float their bodies, they feel pleasantly intoxicated and filled with a happiness that suffuses everything. They lose full control of their actions but stay conscious. When a spirit of God possesses a body, however, the consciousness of the possessed person disappears. The medium's lifespirt leaves the body to be temporarily displaced by a spirit of God. Because the connection between body and *kaik* is so crucial for life, spirit possessions are an exhausting undertaking. Once a spirit possession has ended, the bodies of mediums are tired and need rest (Figure 3b).

Spirit possession is not a religious innovation that charismatic Christianity introduced to the Sepik, but had already been part of Iatmul spiritual practices when Bateson (1932b) conducted fieldwork among the East Iatmul of Mindimbit in the late 1920s. He describes healing practices, in which *wagen* possessed the bodies of shamans to heal the sick. In 2013, I witnessed a shamanic ritual performed by an East Iatmul man that showed similarities to what Bateson had witnessed at the end of the 1920s. Interestingly, spirit possessions that take place during Catholic charismatic prayer group meetings show similarities to the shamanic séances Bateson described. For example, each shaman and Christian charismatic medium is only used by a specific *wagen* or spirit of God, respectively. In both cases, the spirit may take over the body of its medium in a way that overpowers the cognitive-sensual experiences of its medium. Similar to differentiating between being used or floated by a spirit of God, the Nyaura also differentiate between *wagen* possessions, during which the consciousness of the shaman (*wagemangnyang*) disappears, and *wagen* séances, during which the *wagen* only stimulates certain body parts of the shaman (*yanonyang*) via a pulsation of blood, which can be interpreted according to a code. Both *wagen* and God's spirits have their own language. While *wagen* use a metaphorical language intelligible only to the initiated, spirits of God may use glossolalia comprehensible only to those blessed with the gift of interpreting tongues. Those and other similarities were not only noticed by myself when I compared my findings with what Bateson had described, but had initially been pointed out to me by my Nyaura interlocutors. For them, these similarities were proof for a perception of Christianity that had grown among them when charismatic Catholicism became part of their lives. During their charismatic practices, God's spirits revealed themselves to be local spirits and villagers started to doubt whether the Christian pantheon was really so different from the spirit pantheon their elders had relied on (see Falck 2018). Today, my interlocutors call spirits of the dead and ancestral spirits souls, angels, and saints, whereas spirits of the bush and water are referred to as nature that God created. God himself is known by many names as different clans refer to him with the names of their first primordial ancestor, such as Mangensaun, Nyaugunduma, or Sukundimi.

A major change between the non-Christian charismatic space and the Catholic charismatic space in Timbunmeli is the fact that previously, only certain initiated men had the ability and right to function as spirit mediums. During the Catholic charismatic movement, though, women, next to men, were baptized in the Spirit by Catholic charismatic prayer leaders and received access to spirits that started to lead charismatic prayer groups.

Although the Catholic Church had already included women in the work of the mission before the charismatic movement arrived, male leadership had never really been questioned within the paternalistic structure of the Catholic Church. Men obtained church offices, led church services, and directed Christian activities. Women became an organized part of

the church's structure as members of the Catholic Women's group, but they did not lead men. Today, women have started to lead Catholic charismatic prayer groups that men also attend. Although men can feel God's spirit moving in their bodies during charismatic prayers, spirits of God only possess female bodies.

Interestingly, spirits of God not only enter human bodies, but also slip into ceramic bodies similarly to *wagen* who had slipped into carvings and masks during rituals of the ceremonial house. Yet, while there are statues of Jesus or Archangel Michael found on altars and people call upon those Christian figures in their prayers, only the statue of Mother Mary features centrally in current religious practices. In the following, I will discuss local conceptions of personhood, gender, and possession in relation to the agency of these things.

4. The Personhood of Humans and Things as a Product of Relational Action

While the human body has to be filled with a lifespirt to be alive, things can also be filled with spirit and become persons. Things and bodies not filled with spirit, are conceptualized as empty shells called *saba* (empty hull of a thing) or *bange simbe* (outside skin), respectively. Bateson has documented that spirits could slip into human bodies and other material forms to which the East Iatmul referred as *tsimbi* (*simbe*) and *tsava* (*saba*):

Tfimbi [*simbe*] and *tjava* [*saba*] are important words connected with the theory of possession and life. [. . .]. When a shamanic spirit [*wagen*] enters into a crocodile the body of the crocodile is described as the *tjava* [*saba*] of the spirit. But when a shamanic spirit possesses a shaman the latter is not the spirit's *tjava*, but its *tfimbi* [*simbe*]. The body is apparently referred to as the *tfimbi* or *tjava* of the *kait* [*kaik*]. (Bateson 1932b, p. 418n40, underlining added; see also Stanek 1983, pp. 256–57 on *saba*)

The establishment of relations between spirit and body or spirit and thing is transformative. A human body loses its former beingness when the relationship with its *kaik* is altered temporarily or lost for good. When the *kaik* leaves its body during spirit possessions and a different spirit takes its place, the human body acquires the identity of the spirit using it. When the lifespirt has left the body for good, the body turns into a corpse (*tsing*), while the *kaik* turns into a spirit of the dead. Things, too, change their beingness when enlivened with a spirit. When a spirit has entered a human body or that of a thing, those bodies become that respective spirit being. Interestingly, the *kaik* is an entity that is gendered—it is either male (*kaikdu*) or female (*kaiktaugwa*). Spirits, too, are gendered, including spirits of God. When a gift (*present*) of God refers to a male spirit, it is called *presentman*; when it refers to a female spirit, it is called *presentmeri*.

In a recent article, Hauser-Schäublin (2017) has shown how carvings in the East Iatmul village of Kararau can be grown into persons. Picking up on my suggestion that Nyaura persons are composite beings constituted of relationships with visible and invisible others and made up of visible and invisible substances and entities, she has shown that ancestral agency is central for a carving to achieve personhood. In Timbunmeli, things are not only grown into persons by human intention; it is true that spirits can be made to slip into things and bodies via esoteric language or charismatic prayers, but they can also slip into material bodies of their own accord. Furthermore, my interlocutors told me that a carving could also lose its status as a person once the spirit enlivening it had left or had been removed. This enabled men to sell carvings and masks that once had been important ritual paraphernalia of the ceremonial house and now fill the archives of museums and art galleries around the world.

Whereas in former times spirits would slip into men's cult regalia, today, God's spirits can also slip into Christian statues, such as the statue of Mother Mary. In 2010, Timbunmeli village received a statue of Mother Mary from a Catholic sister with whom the headmaster of Timbunmeli's primary school and his wife were close. To celebrate the arrival of the statue, the community organized a Marian procession for the month of Mother Mary. The community decorated houses and pathways with flowers to honor the mother of God.

I was told that Mother Mary was happy about the welcome her statue received. Her spirit entered the statue that jumped and danced in the arms of villagers who carried her ceramic body from house to house, accompanied by prayers. Mother Mary not only moved in people's arms, but she also started to perform in a net held by women and with that, re-enacted the mythical scene I described above. Like the *wagen* in mythical times had started to perform in the net of the ancestral sisters, Mother Mary jumped in the women's net.

Mother Mary's spirit not only entered the community's statue, but also used the body of one of the women who had held the net—Grace. One of my interlocutors, Anna, remembering the day, said: "They caught it [the statue of Mother Mary] in a net that they use to catch shrimps. Mother Mary danced inside of that net and when Grace held it, she jumped and jumped." Mother Mary was happy to be held by Grace, her medium.

I learned that Grace has a personal connection with Mother Mary via her totemic name. While Grace's Christian name carries its own meaning, her totemic name is of more interest for the dividual aspect of Grace's personhood and Timbunmeli's relational ontology that I discuss. As I have stated above, every Nyaura person is bestowed with a totemic name that connects her/him with an ancestral being. Grace's *gwaak si* is Mariuamangi—a totemic name belonging to Grace's patriclan. Her clan brother, the headmaster of Timbunmeli's Primary School, had, qua customary work that he performed,⁵ started to lay a claim onto her name and given it to Mother Mary's statue. Doing so, he emphasized Mother Mary's connection to his clan. I have already mentioned that my interlocutors have re-interpreted Christian spirits as local spirits. Mother Mary, too, is understood to be an ancestral being belonging to the totemic repertoire of the clan that Grace had been born into. By bestowing Mother Mary's statue with the name Mariuamangi, an official relationship between the ancestral being, Mother Mary, Grace, and Grace's patriclan was established.

When Mother Mary enters the statue or Grace's body, they become Mother Mary and the actions performed are perceived as being her actions. Thus, personhood is not an intrinsic quality of humans or things but has to be understood as being relational and contextual. Humans and things reveal their being when they are being engaged (e.g., Heidegger [1962] 2001, pp. 95–122, 153–63; Jackson 2012, pp. 171–72; Willerslev 2007, p. 97). Ingold, for example, says "[...] whether a stone is alive or not will depend upon the context in which it is placed and experienced" (Ingold [2000] 2011, p. 97). Similarly, Bird-David (1999, p. 78) understands personhood of non-human entities as being made in social relations "as, when and because we socialize with them". This idea of a relational epistemology resonates well with Gell's theory of the agency of art objects. What matters for a thing to have "social agency", Gell (1998, p. 123) says, "is where it stands in a network of social relations".

While in Bird-David's relational epistemology, non-human persons are understood as the objectifications of social relations, also in Gell's (1998, p. 21) theory, objects, specifically art objects, function as objectifications of social agency, namely that of "'primary' intentional agents in their 'secondary' artefactual form". Objects only contain secondary agency. They are material "indexes" that permit a "particular cognitive operation" that Gell (1998, p. 13) calls "the abduction of agency", from which a "causal inference" about the intentions or capabilities of another person can be made. I, however, suggest that this perspective is too limited to understand the way objects become part of religious contexts at the Sepik. From an emic perspective, it is a spiritual substance that enters the object and bestows it with personhood via the connection created between spirit and material form. The issue at hand is not only that of a relational epistemology but also that of a relational ontology.

At this point, it is interesting and important to note that not only personhood may be established and changed via relational actions, but also gender. For example, a man has to get rid of his mother's blood during initiation to become fully male. He has to detach the gendered substance during a scarification process. Furthermore, relational actions

⁵ In Nyaura societies, a brother has to perform customary duties for his (classificatory) sister to acquire the right to use her name in the future.

between spirits, humans, and material bodies can affect gender. Some of the female bodies possessed by spirits of God during Catholic charismatic prayer sessions were not possessed by female but male spirits. For example, Sandra was regularly used by a spirit of the dead called David (also referred to as Saint David); Helen was used by a spirit of the dead called Thomas. The possession of a female body by a male spirit transformed the body's gender—it became male. This was not only evidenced by changes in villager's approach towards those bodies, e.g., using a male form of address or behavioral rules related to men, such as men sitting on the ground whereas the (female) body used by a male spirit was sitting on a stool (Figure 1).⁶ It was also evidenced by behavioral changes of the bodies the spirit used, e.g., assertive demeanor, sitting with one's legs apart on a stool, or preaching like a Catholic priest.



Figure 1. Using the body of his female medium, a spirit called Thomas counsels a man (photo: Falck 2013).

The Nyaura in Timbunmeli have appropriated charismatic gifts from God in a way that corresponds with ontological principles of their lifeworld. However, putting the relational ontology of their lifeworld into practice in a context of religious change holds the potential for further far-reaching change as I will discuss in the next section. Today, God's gifts are clearly gendered—mainly women receive them. This development not only challenges men's self-perception as leaders and leads to conflicts between men and women but can also be understood as a form of onto-praxis during which women put both ontological premises as well as the mythology of their lifeworld into practice. The consequences of this for gender and power relationships, is a topic I turn to next.

5. The Gender of God's Gifts—Gender, Power, and Religious Change

When in 2010 the statue of Mother Mary danced in women's arms and a net (Figure 2), powerful messages were revealed to Timbunmeli village. The Mother of God reminded villagers that women had encountered the power of spirits first. Women—visible for everyone to see—laid claim on their custodianship by carrying the statue in their arms and net where Mother Mary approvingly danced.

During the procession, conflicts about who was allowed to carry the statue arose. In the aftermath, disputes between male leaders and women escalated. While the Catholic Women wished to organize further Marian processions and celebrations of the Month of Mother Mary in the following years, Timbunmeli's church leaders—who, in the paternalistic structure of the Catholic Church, hold higher ranks—did not allow it. Only in 2013, after

⁶ Customarily, Nyaura men sit elevated on a stool, whereas women sit on the floor. Ranks between men may also be expressed by higher and lower seating order.

the female leader of the Catholic Women had apologized to male leaders for any wrongs the group had caused, a reconciliation looked feasible. Still, the men did not give permission for the month of Mother Mary to be celebrated. Despite lacking approval from church leaders, the Catholic Women organized daily prayer meetings on the Primary School ground for October. They argued that everyone had the right to praise God and perform his work—men could not prohibit it.



Figure 2. (a) Timbunmeli's statue of Mother Mary (photo: Falck 2013); (b) A Nyaura woman during a celebration with a contemporary version of the net that two ancestral sisters had caught wagen with while fishing for shrimps (photo: Falck 2013).

During the month of Mother Mary in 2013 (Figure 3), several spirit possessions took place and women's bodies, guided by spirits, performed what were referred to as miracles. Mother Mary danced in the arms of women who carried her statue during a procession on Timbunmeli's Primary School ground and Mary's spirit also entered Grace's body on several occasions to deliver divine messages.



Figure 3. (a) The statue of Mother Mary dancing in the arms of a woman during a Marian procession in October 2013 (photo: Falck 2013); (b) two women recuperating from spirit possessions towards the end of a charismatic prayer meeting during October 2013 (photo: Falck 2013).

This was criticized by Timbunmeli's Catholic church officials who felt that their authority had been thwarted. One of the pastoral workers, Ivan, felt especially alienated by the women's actions and attacked the Catholic Women in his sermons. Ivan especially criticized how women had performed cleaning rituals on the Primary School ground where sorcery items were said to be hidden to impair the operation of the school and harm its teachers and other villagers (see Falck 2016, 2019b). Pointing to the violation of the Catholic

Church's structure and due procedure for organizing religious activities in the community, Ivan complained publicly about the women's actions. In his sermons he even called the spirits that were using female bodies "home made spirits", which caused utter resentment among the Catholic Women and other villagers.

During a meeting of the Catholic Women, Briska—their leader and the wife of the Primary School's headmaster—said: "I arranged that we could meet for our prayers on the school ground and I do not feel good about what Ivan said. Ivan is jealous, because the women followed me." Grace complained: "Every time we women want to organize something, Ivan complains. He wants to be in charge of everything." Briska added, "The men have already corrupted the life on this ground [meaning: men have exploited leadership positions for personal gain, fallen prey to corruption, and mismanaged community affairs], it is the time of the mothers now!" The Catholic Women agreed—the men were jealous and tried to hamper their work of God. They wanted to stick together, otherwise no change would come to their community. It was the month of the Mother (*mun bilong mama*)—the Catholic mothers (*katolik mama*) had every right to take the lead.

During a prayer meeting on the Primary School ground, Mother Mary possessed Grace's body to talk to the women about the men's lack of support:

Mother Mary: "I, I forgive them [the men], the father [God] forgives, the child [Jesus] forgives. It is something that belongs to God. You are doing my work, you are doing God's and Jesus' work. That's it. You aren't happy, are you? You are hiding your feelings, why? Are you afraid?"

Rita: "Saint Mary, I am not afraid. Maybe the others are, you should ask your children."

Mother Mary: "Some of you have already voiced their anger. [. . .]. You were given more strength and power on this ground Timbun[meli]."

Nancy: "Amen!"

Mother Mary: "You shall not abandon this ground [the school ground]. I will be here. One day, that man who made that talk will come. I think some of you have heard it already, he is afraid, ah?"

Rita: "That's right."

Mother Mary: "[. . .]. Don't be afraid of him. Return to him. [. . .]. Papa God will bless this ground from where you have removed much harmful things already. You are carrying my pain. A man of this ground cannot degrade [*daunim*] you. [. . .]. Whatever they do to you, they do to me. [. . .]. You're not pursuing the work of the ground, it is the work of Heaven that you are pursuing. [. . .]." They said, 'It's not the true thing that they are making', did you hear that, too? [Answer: 'Yes!'] 'They said the school will not run well.' But God has spoken and he has said, it will work."

It did not take long before Ivan came to the school ground during one of the prayer meetings to address the Catholic Women with an apology. Ivan, like other male leaders, did not want to attract the anger of God and his spirits: "I want to apologize for what I have said. [. . .]. I apologize to you. [. . .]. We leaders, we don't want to feel pain. [. . .]." Briska—speaking for the women—answered:

It is true, I was very angry, but now you came and you asked me to accept your apology, and I accept it. [. . .]. I am marking the voice of the women and I tell you, you should not attack [*bagarapim*] the women. The women carry God's talk. [. . .]. You have seen that your church service remained empty [because of what you said]. Many people did not turn up. [. . .]. Ok, speaking for the women, I want to come and shake your hand and let you know that I am *wanbel* [reconciled with you] and I ask all my sisters, you forgive him.

At the end, not only Ivan but other leaders who had raised critique, too, had to publicly apologize to the Catholic Women and the spirits that guided them as their work

had proven successful: the spirit of a dead villager—called Saint David—together with the spirit of Mother Mary had identified sorcery bundles that were publicly removed from the village ground.

In March 2017, I had a long conversation with Ivan—a man who has spent his adult life in service to the Catholic Church. I asked him about his assessment of the current situation in the village where God used women to perform his work. We started to talk about mythical times when it was women, not men, who were in charge of spirits and important affairs. I asked Ivan what he thought about the similarity between ancestral times and the present (see also e.g., [Hauser-Schäublin 2019](#), pp. 174, 225–33; [Wassmann 1991](#), p. 180), as women are again the custodians of powerful spirits, he replied:

Mary delivered Jesus. And that is why the women receive everything. We men, no. Joseph did not do anything. He was only there. [. . .]. The women got the Holy Spirit first, the women looked after the *kastom* [customary law with ancestral agency] first. And I, the man, I just came in and by force chased her away. And I, wrongfully became the caretaker [of spirits]. It was not mine [to take]. Ok, and that's why we see that the women are receiving the big, big presents [gifts from God]. This spirit is using the women. [. . .] Before in our *kastom*, the women were its guardian and that is why everything goes to the women now and they are the owner. [. . .]. Ya, it is something that they own. They want it back now. And you see, the spirits, too, they use the women. It wants to use the women. And we see that the women are owning it now. [. . .]. It strongly wants to use the women. And so, we see that the women are owning it now. I, the man, I only watched over it. I can say: take care only. [. . .]. The good things came from the side of the women and so the women lead. I, the man, I have no part in it, I only support and steer them. Now, everywhere the women work now. And what can we men say? It is not something that belonged to us. It belonged to the women and they already pulled it back. I was not its rightful owner.

Motherhood and female creative powers, as discussed by [Silverman \(2001\)](#), are important motives in Iatmul culture. Everyone knows that without a mother, one would not exist. The importance of female reproductive powers is also reflected in the local creation myth. The primeval sea that stood at the beginning of the cosmos and the hole in the primeval ground from which humankind ascended represent the reproductive fluids and organs of the first female ancestral being. In male rituals, Iatmul men appropriated women's reproductive power and transformed it into a masculine form that, via initiation rituals, could give birth to men or re-create the structures of the cosmos via the enactment of esoteric knowledge ([Silverman 1996, 2001](#); [Wassmann 1987](#)). However, male entitlement to this power rested on theft and the concealment of the fact that “the primordial sea and the terrestrial birth of the universe symbolize the primacy of female fertility and the maternal as opposed to the paternal body” ([Silverman 1996](#), p. 37).

Interestingly, the importance of female fertility for everything that exists has been transferred by my interlocutors—both women and men—onto Mary's importance for Christianity. Without Mary, they say, Jesus—and by extension the Catholic Church or Christianity in general—would not exist. Thus, everyone should honor mothers and venerate the Mother of God.

Marian devotion is a global Christian phenomenon, but it receives a distinctively local face when it encounters local cultural concepts and practices (e.g., [Kingsbury and Chesnut 2019](#); [Smith 1994](#)). The importance of Mother Mary in Melanesian religious practices has most prominently been described by [Hermkens \(e.g., Hermkens 2007, 2008, 2020\)](#), who suggests that “Mary's submissive image falls in line with pre-existing gender relations and gender hierarchies, in which women are constituted as submissive to their husbands, their primary role being that of caretakers of the families, as mothers” ([Hermkens 2007](#), p. 7). As elsewhere (e.g., [Chesnut 2003](#); [Hermkens 2020](#); [Vuola 2019](#)), in Timbunmeli, too, women identify with the Mother of God. However, Iatmul mothers—and Iatmul women in general—cannot be described as being submissive to men, per se. There are contexts and spaces in which

women express assertive behavior usually identified with the male ethos (Bateson [1936] 1958; Falck 2019a; Silverman 2001). Although customarily, Iatmul men are “very much in control of the ritual power of each village, and, as a consequence, of representing its physical strength” (Kaufmann 2010, p. 174), there also exists the underlying notion “that there is nevertheless a maternal source to this power, and in fact rituals play at rendering this relationship between men and mothers visible” (ibid.). One of the rituals commenting on gender relations in Iatmul societies is the famous *naven* rite—referred to as *sorak* by the Nyaura—in which a reversal of gendered behavior is publicly performed by male and female bodies. As my interlocutors explained, the ritual is a public celebration and appreciation of motherhood (Falck 2019a). Today, Marian devotion reflects the general appreciation of motherhood in a Christian context. Moreover, the identification of women with Mother Mary empowers them. As charismatic prayer leaders and during spirit possessions, women act in an assertive and authoritative manner, building their strength on the support granted to them by Mother Mary, but also by other spirits of God and God himself.⁷

According to Silverman (2001, p. 36) the fear that women might regain their former powerful position taken from them by devious men is prevalent among the East Iatmul in Tambunum. Considering the happenings in Timbunmeli and the disputes that arose as a result, one could say that a male nightmare has come true: the male cult has lost its significance and women have acquired a direct access to the most powerful spirits there are today—spirits of God. The different spheres from which men and women acquired their self-worth (e.g., Hauser-Schäublin 2019) have started to change with women pushing into a space that, since the mythical theft, had been gendered male.

Because both women and men know who the original custodians of spirits were and because God clearly favored women with his gifts, there is not much room to maneuver for men to influence the changes taking place. One strategy has been to insist that the paternalistic structure promoted by the Catholic Church provides men with the authority to steer religious affairs. Yet even within this structure women can acquire leadership positions, as the example of the Catholic Women demonstrates. The Catholic charismatic movement, however, has introduced a new powerful basis for female entitlement: Nyaura spirits that are now equated with God and his spirits have found a way back to their original guardians. There was nothing men could do about it. God has given his gifts to women and he wants to use them to pursue his work.

Ivan’s remark that “everywhere the women work now” corresponds with the observation that globally, Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity are numerically dominated by women who outnumber men in religious activities. Martin ([2001] 2003) has described this phenomenon in relation to another observation, namely that despite the predominantly female face of the world-wide movement, it paradoxically reproduces male leadership and thus paternalistic power. Martin ([2001] 2003, p. 54) notes, “[t]he implicit deal seems to be that a substantive shift towards greater gender equality will be tolerated so long as women are not seen to be publicly exercising formal authority over men.” Other scholars, too, contend that women’s religious emancipation through their participation in Christian contexts may not challenge gendered structures that perpetuate power relationships but reproduce paternalistic structures. Yet, women may find ways to assert influence on gendered relationships with recourse to spiritual support in a Christian context (e.g., Brusco 1986; Chong 2006; Griffith 1997; Soothill 2007). In Timbunmeli, as I have shown, women have started to publicly undermine men’s authority when demonstrating their entitlement

⁷ In Timbunmeli, women not only outnumber men during the month of Mother Mary, but also during weekly charismatic prayer groups when female bodies are possessed by God’s spirits to pursue his work. Usually male attendance increases once it becomes clear that something important was put on the agenda of the prayer group. Then, male leaders take part to ‘steer’ (*stirim*) religious activities, but in fact they have little influence on the direction activities take, because the instructions are delivered by spirits of God and thus are endowed with divine authority.

to ritual power by drawing on both the importance of Mother Mary in Catholic theology as well as on a powerful truth of Nyaura cosmology in their spiritual practices.⁸

Recently, [Eriksen \(2016\)](#) criticized Martin's presentation of the Pentecostal Gender Paradox, arguing that it is based on certain assumptions about gender and power that do not necessarily fit the Melanesian context. While in Pentecostalism, gender was seen as an individual quality, this is not necessarily the case in Melanesia. There—as my findings evidence, too—gender may not so much be a stable quality of individual persons, but a dynamic quality. Among the Nyaura, the gender of God's gifts as well as the gender of human bodies can be revealed and changed in relational actions. By establishing relationships with God's spirits and predominantly performing God's work, female bodies have disclosed the gender of God's gifts and the charismatic space as female. Furthermore, through being possessed by a male spirit, female bodies can become male.

Another criticism that [Eriksen \(2016\)](#) raises is the presentation of gender relations as power relations in Martin's work. Yet, even if gender relations in Melanesia should not be understood as power relations per se, Christianity may change this. [Eriksen \(2008, 2012, 2014\)](#) has shown that Christianity is based on gendered values and perceptions of what is proper for a man or woman to do. [Eriksen \(2014\)](#) has also demonstrated that women's agency may be restricted by forms of Christianity that reproduce paternalistic values and dominance. Christianity may impact local notions of gender and power.

Instead of asking whether Christianity changes what gender is ([Eriksen 2016](#), p. 46), I have looked at how current Christian practices that can be understood as mytho- and onto-praxis affect the gender of the charismatic space in Timbunmeli. While the charismatic space of shamanic séances had been male, Christian egalitarianism merged with Catholic charismatic practices and Nyaura onto-praxis have led to a transformation of this space from male to female. The Christian charismatic space opened up possibilities for a (re-)empowerment process and a (re-)gendering of that space. Practices performed within it via female bodies not only impact male self-perception but also power relationships in Timbunmeli village. This is the case because the Nyaura trace the source of power ultimately back to the access to and good relationships with spirits. Thus, the question of who has access to spirits has consequences for power relationships—and this question has a gender dimension within the Timbunmeli's charismatic space because of the onto-praxis of agentive relationality and dividual personhood.

6. Concluding Remarks

While Strathern has stressed social relations that constitute Melanesian persons as dividual beings, I argue that whilst social relations are a central aspect of people's being in Timbunmeli, it is the cosmo-ontological dimension of personhood as well as the gendering of the charismatic space that we have to look at if we want to understand the way people in Timbunmeli have appropriated Christianity and engaged with objects as persons. Following [Scott \(2007, p. 20\)](#), I suggest looking at ontologies as practice generative schemes that inform the way people engage with Christianity and religious objects. Persons in Timbunmeli are made up of visible and invisible substances and entities that connect them not only with living kin, but also with ancestral beings, their world and its creator. Depending on relations established between those entities, personhood is established or lost.

In Timbunmeli, villagers put ontological premises encoded in their dividual being into action when they appropriated charismatic Christianity. Likewise, it is the ontological assumptions characterizing Timbunmeli's lifeworld that we have to look at when we take the meaning of objects in religious practices into focus. To understand the agency of objects in religious encounters, we not only have to ask how things and people reveal their being to others; we also have to ask how the beings of entities are transformed by

⁸ [Soothill \(2010, p. 96\)](#) warns to conflate social and spiritual empowerment. Women who may exercise spiritual agency “exist always in relation to a complex set of structures and constraints which shape and sometimes limit their actions and experiences.” Elsewhere ([Falck 2019a](#)), I have discussed religious change and its gender dimension in relation to changes in political and economic realities in the Sepik region, arguing that women have benefitted from changes set into motion when outside influences met principles of the Nyaura lifeworld.

the relations they enter with other entities. What are the “root assumptions operative here concerning the essential nature of things and their relationships within [. . .] cosmological schemes” (Scott 2007, p. 3) that ascribe personhood to humans and objects? How do these assumptions act on people and how do people act on them in changing contexts? It is not the social dimension of objects or persons alone that we have to look at if we want to understand the current trajectories of religious change in the Sepik, but also the cosmological dimension of personhood put into practice in the historical moment.

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