TAJA The Australian Journal Of Anthropology

The Australian Journal of Anthropology (2014) **25**, 223–238 doi:10.1111/taja.12090

Ringing the living and the dead: Mobile phones in a Sepik society

Borut Telban[1] and Daniela Vávrová[2]

[1]Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts; [2]James Cook University

Since Digicel services began to operate in remote areas of Papua New Guinea in mid-2007, enthusiasm for mobile telecommunication devices has become a pan-New Guinean phenomenon. During our last fieldwork period, between December 2010 and December 2011, no mobile phone network existed among the Karawari people in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea. However, their expectations were high and some individuals had already purchased mobile phones, which they used as torches, radios, and cameras. In Ambonwari village, people were convinced that Digicel would soon build its tower on their land and enable them to ring both the living and the dead. The dead had already interfered with calls and some people were suspected of possessing phone numbers of their deceased relatives. In our article we explore the relationship between mobile phones, the increasing fascination with phone numbers, and the ways in which the Ambonwari perceive, interpret, and engage with the world.

Keywords: mobile phone, new technologies, spirits of the dead, religious movements, Karawari people, Sepik, Papua New Guinea

Different theories surrounding the impact of technology on societies and cultures have emerged over time. From a *substantive* perspective new technology is a domineering and irresistible force in its own right. People have no control over it; they have to keep up with new techniques and these need to be efficient. Technology also serves to explain everything that is taking place in the world, be it society, politics, economy, science or art. From this point of view, technology is not neutral but changes cultures and shapes societies and values (Borgmann 1984: 9; Verbeek 2005: 136). From an *instrumentalist* perspective, however, technology is value-neutral. Human beings have been perceived as tool-makers since the beginning and technology, regardless of its complexity, is simply an instrument that humans use to accomplish certain tasks. Both rationalism and liberal democracy hold to this perspective, leaving values to develop in a private sphere (Borgmann 1984: 10; Verbeek 2005: 136). Recently a new post-phenomenological perspective has criticised both of these approaches, since they separate technology from human beings, their histories and their cultures. Don Ihde, a philosopher with a keen interest in the history of technology and anthropology, has tried to develop a positive phenomenological framework and phenomenologically-oriented hermeneutics for understanding human-technology relations (Ihde

1990, 2009, 2010). By 'positive' we refer to his appreciative attitude towards the possibilities of new technologies. By combining an organism/environment model of pragmatism with a phenomenological understanding of active bodily perception, Ihde rejects the 'negative' perspective on the future of technology. Ihde also rejects any form of 'essentialism' which, in his view, 'keeps one from seeing particularities of technologies and thus makes it impossible to discern differences of contexts or of cultures into which technologies are embedded' (Ihde 2010: 21). Here, Ihde echoes a perspective widely recognised in anthropology, and recently reiterated by Horst and Miller, when they began their analysis of cell phones and new forms of linking-up in Jamaica by stating: 'Far from the homogenization that might be expected from the global appropriation of new technologies, ethnography reveals considerable variation in what technologies have become in different regions' (2005: 755).

In their book-length anthropological study of the effect that the cell phone has had on Jamaican society, Horst and Miller argue that new technologies do not push people into achieving new tasks. On the contrary, new technologies are appropriated to existing 'desires that are historically well established, but remain unfulfilled because of the limitations of previous technologies' (Horst and Miller 2006: 6). The authors select a path which they call dialectical. Their focus is not 'the Jamaican appropriation of the cell phone' but rather how Jamaican people and the cell phone in a reciprocal process created 'the Jamaican cell phone' (Horst and Miller 2006: 17; see also 181). In such a spirit, we would like to argue that recent aspirations among the Ambonwari to use mobile and wireless phones and build a Digicel tower in the Karawari-speaking village of Ambonwari, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea, are framed by cosmologically well-established desires to deepen the contacts with the usually invisible (external) world, their deceased relatives in particular, and bring all the advantages available to the latter into their living presence. They are interested in ways of enhancing their lives with the powerful know-how that would be provided by their spirits of the dead (see Lattas 2010: xxxii and *passim* for rural New Britain). It is part of their culture that the most powerful know-how has always been hidden. It was concealed during the times when big men with their ritual practices dominated their society. These big men kept the secret doings and sayings to themselves and important objects (slit-drums, spirit-crocodiles, flutes, and carved posts) were hidden in the enclosure of the men's house. In 1994 the last male initiation was held in the village. In that same year the Catholic Charismatic Movement (CCM) reached the village, and the knowledge of the big men was pronounced fraudulent. The conflict between the big men and the men, women and children who accepted the new charismatic faith, and between the spirits of the land and the Holy Spirit, has never been fully resolved. The men's houses were destroyed, secret objects removed, and many customary rituals abandoned. However, the anticipated new way of life did not eventuate. Initial enthusiasm for charismatic Catholicism slowly turned into bitterness as Ambonwari blamed the white people for concealing and controlling the production and distribution of money, goods and knowledge. From this perspective, the anticipated access to mobile connection and communication represents a means to achieve something that has

always been there, although persistently concealed and never fully accessible. What mobile telephony has actually most forcefully created in this context is a fascination with the power of phone numbers.

MOBILE TELEPHONY IN AMBONWARI

The whole Karawari River area has experienced a large number of institutional novelties over the last 20 years. The most significant was the arrival of the CCM. Ambonwari charismatics dismissed over-enthusiastic traditionalists as sorcerers and ignored the sceptics. 'In a generational turnover, younger people took over many roles otherwise reserved for wise old men' (Telban 2009: 154). Some of the latter joined the movement while others, ritual specialists, diviners and healers in particular, slowly died of sickness and old age. The experience of the Holy Spirit, singing and dancing in trance, speaking in tongues, and healing powers became available to women and children as well. In 2004 they even suspended the leader of Sunday Church meetings and in 2005 tried to replace the orthodox Roman Catholic Church with the Catholic Charismatic one. The attempted ousting, however, was unsuccessful. The Polish Catholic priest Piotrek Waśko arrived at Amboin near Yimas in 2006. He began his regular bimonthly visits to all sixteen villages under Amboin Parish, including Ambonwari, and counterbalanced the overwhelming enthusiasm of charismatics. He organised the local leadership of the Catholic Church around the Parish Steering Team (PST, four meetings per year), Area Steering Team (EST, eight meetings per year) and Community Steering Team (KST, sixteen meetings per year). An elementary school with two teachers started in Ambonwari in 2001. The primary school in the vicinity of the village closed in 2009 after two Ambonwari men killed a man from the neighbouring village. Although the tension has not been completely eliminated the school reopened during the last months of 2012. From the beginning of 2011 the Ambonwari became preoccupied with selling rubber and earning money, which was suddenly within reach of everyone, including women. This was attributed to the successful prayers of charismatics and the rejection of customary practices. To provide the village with a mobile phone network became a logical next step and the ambition of many.

Across New Guinea there is overwhelming enthusiasm for mobile telecommunication devices. Mobile network operators such as Digicel Papua New Guinea (Digicel Group Ltd., operating since 17 July 2007) and B Mobile Papua New Guinea (launched as GSM system by Telikom subsidiary Pacific Mobile Communications Company Ltd. in 2003, which remained until mid-2009 under government-owned Telikom) found fertile grounds for the spread of their businesses to remote areas that lacked communication and information channels (see Watson 2011: 46-52). Remote villages were relying mainly on letters and *tok save* 'announcement, notification' over the radio or on traditional means of carrying the messages by either word-of-mouth or a drum signal.

The Ambonwari had already speculated about telephones during Telban's initial fieldwork between 1990 and 1992. The following practice was quite common at that

time. When a person was sick for a long time a clansman would cut a branch of *purum* tree that grows in the wetlands – it was also known as the favourite hiding place for crocodiles – and put it across a slit-drum in the sick person's men's house. It stayed there throughout the night. Early in the morning before going to the toilet and before having something to eat the clansman would throw the branch into the forest, saying: 'You should get a good spirit and straighten (i.e. 'heal') the sickness of this man/woman.' People expected that after a few days the sick person's health would improve and he or she would be able to bathe in the creek (bathing was the first sign showing that the sick person was better). Some villagers explained that the branch of *purum* tree was a 'letter' from the powerful spirit of a slit-drum, on behalf of the sick person, to the spirits of the land and especially to the particular spirit of a dead man who was responsible for the illness (spirits of dead women were rarely held responsible for people getting sick). However, other men thought the equation with a letter was not the right one. They said that by following the above mentioned practice they actually 'rang' all those (i.e. the dead) who were far away. The comparison of throwing the empowered branch of *purum* tree into the open space of the forest with both sending a letter and calling by phone was not surprising. It emphasised three things: first, people's communication strategies (i.e. the use-value of these practices); second, their continuous need to direct the relationship between the living, the dead and the forest spirits (i.e. communication embedded in cosmology); and third, their willingness to incorporate new practices into old modes of interpretation.

Similarities and differences between customary artefacts and practices are sought by both local people and foreign analysts of new technologies in different cultural environments. In the cultural context of the Sepik River of Papua New Guinea, it would be a mistake to see mobile phones simply as 'modern' replacements for slit-drums, or as a way to improve their communication practices. Slit-drums were first of all powerful spirits, with their own names, and were 'from the beginnings of time' owned by particular clans (see Telban 1998: 189-93). They belonged to the secret domain of senior men. Such a historico-mythical span, incorporating all dimensions and particularities of society's cosmology, revealed itself most powerfully during all-night dances and (now totally abandoned) male initiation rituals. This is not the case with the mobile phones.

In Ambonwari the experience of mobile phones is of very recent origin. This new information and communication technology entered the village in 2010 at a time when the village and the whole Karawari area was, and still is, without electricity, television, and mobile phone connection. Two wireless phones and about ten mobile phones were brought to the village by people who already had a source of income. The mobile phones were then used as devices for showing time (wrist watches are neither used nor requested anymore), torches (when walking at night or looking for something inside or outside of one's mosquito net), music players (people take earphones and listen to music), cameras, toys, and phones whenever connection is available on the nearby hills (for a similar situation among Warlpiri see Vaarzon-Moral this issue). When a generator is put on people bring their phones to be charged. The

mobile phones are used as phones when people travel by outboard motor canoes to Angoram on the Sepik River. A trip takes between 10 and 12 h. Just before coming to Angoram the phones are switched on and the first calls are made. The purpose of these calls is to tell those Ambonwari who are already in the town about their arrival or to ask them for credit. A Digicel pamphlet (released in August 2008) advertised among its additional services two features: 'Credit Me' (usually asking for 3 Kina credit) and 'Call Me'. These features (the latter successfully launched in Jamaica in 2004, see Horst and Miller 2006: 28), as we soon discovered during our visits to Wewak, were in 2011 widely used by a small number of Ambonwari phone owners and their relatives (Fig. 1).

Another customary practice which enabled communication with the spirits was post-mortem bamboo divination (Telban 2001). When an Ambonwari person died divination was used in order to consult spirits as to the cause of death. Listening to the tapping of the bamboo pole placed into the hand of a deceased person a diviner examined the links between people's wrong doings and other past deeds and events. In the case of a young boy, for example, people asked his spirit:

> questions which could be answered by yes or no. When the answer was 'yes' the bamboo tapped lightly several times, when the answer was 'no' there was a single strong beat. Whenever people became angry with the boy's spirit and accused him of lying, the bamboo reacted vigorously and the tapping became wild and chaotic. People took this as a sign that the boy's spirit was possessed by an unidentified bad spirit so that the answers given by the bamboo's tapping were not really his (Telban 2001: 70).

Divination practices, however, were completely abandoned at the beginning of the new millennium after the last practicing diviner died. In 2008, the first Catholic charismatic leader Robin said about these practices:

> These are all lies. It is wrong communication. When you and I talk [so that everyone can hear] it is the right communication. [But in the past] we did not know. Only Kanjik and

Figure 1 Billy on a tree with a wireless phone trying to get connected. © Daniela Rachel Vavrova, 2014.

> Phillip [two big men], only they knew, others did not know. It is like telephone communication system. [When you listen to] radio, all others stand around and hear it too. When you talk with me, Daniela too hears us. [In the case of] telephone, however, it is just the two of us. The same is with the bamboo divination [laughing].

Robin was referring to the secrecy surrounding bamboo divination when only the diviner knew how to 'hold' the bamboo and was able to explain what the spirits said.

Purum leaves on a slit-drum and bamboo stick held in the hand of a diviner were, among many other items, important customary 'tools' used for communication with the spirits of the dead. Some individuals were able to communicate with the spirits in dreams, visions and, in the case of healing and other rituals, in trance (for comparison see Vaarzon-Morel this issue). In 2008 we were given letters to be delivered to people's deceased relatives in Europe (Telban and Vávrová 2010: 24). The introduction of mobile phones, however, opened up new possibilities. Crossing boundaries between the living and the dead, and between those living on the surface of the earth (people) and those living underground (the spirits of the land, creeks, and forests), used to be the privilege of a few big men who could survive the encounter with the spirits and gain from it. The spirits of the land, for example, helped them when going to fight or hunt. The CCM renounced the powers of the spirits of the land and rejected this kind of village hierarchy (see Telban 2009). It also rejected the hierarchy of the ordinary Church. The capacity to communicate with the invisible other, God, Virgin Mary, and the Holy Spirit, became ascribed to everyone regardless of age and sex. It was a person's degree of commitment (i.e. belief) which defined the level of communication they could achieve.

The radical rejection of the past by the most devoted members of the CCM influenced everyone in the village, including those Ambonwari who used mobile phones in the towns of Angoram and Wewak. Privacy and secrecy in phoning were unacceptable. Such communication practices were identified with the now abandoned customary practices of the men's house. During these early calls the mobile phone speaker had to be put on. Everyone present could hear the voice from the speaker and talk to the person on the other end. After a short time, however, this practice changed as Ambonwari did not want to be overheard by people from other groups (they are always alert to rascals, sorcery, and malicious gossip) and so used the external speaker only when surrounded by their fellow villagers. Like other Sepik people coming to the town, they always kept secret about their plans, movements and the amount of money they carried. Particular attention was paid to any casual passerby who could overhear their communication. For similar reasons those individuals who have already obtained mobile phones do not give their phone numbers to just anyone. They keep these numbers to themselves and their trusted close relatives and friends. They hide them. Once the number becomes too well known and once they receive suspicious phone calls they prefer to buy a new SIM card and get a new number. Some of those who own a mobile phone and spend longer periods of time in Wewak seek a phone pal from

Australia, Europe or the USA, just as they used to seek a pen pal in the past. Thus, for example, in September 2012 Vávrová received the following SMS, written in Tok Pisin: 'Good night sister Daniela. I am Elias Akuri. I am asking you to find me a phone friend and send me the phone number. 10.Q. [*tenkyu* 'thank you'] God bless you.'

RINGING GOD

In March 2008 Robin, the first leader of the Ambonwari charismatic movement, explained the differences between the ordinary Catholic Church and the CCM in the following words: 'Church is one! The difference between the two is that the priests look into the book [Bible] while the followers of charismatic movement use their own heads. You pray and pray and thoughts come to your head. They [thoughts] direct you to go so and so, they tell you what will happen. Even when I go and see the sick people I do not look into the book. I just pray and pray. The revealing talk will come as if a computer sent it. Computer will bring all the talk into your little machine [head].'

In 2011 Robin is at the forefront of those who heal the sick with God's power. He again tells us that thoughts arrive in his head as if they were sent by computer. He equates the computer with the spirit of God. This is the common view of the village. In the absence of actual computers in the wider Karawari area, Robin talks about computers in terms which are reminiscent of God and the spirits of the land. Many villagers have already discussed at public meetings how a computer has a kind of overseeing power, knows the distribution of land, and can easily provide the names of the owners. This was especially important in the context of border disputes between two Karawari-speaking villages, Ambonwari and Konmei. Stories of Osama Bin Laden hiding in the Karawari caves, and seeing and knowing everything by using only the computer, had been circling in the area for some time. Although we heard on the radio about his death in May 2011, the stories did not stop.

Like other villagers, Robin is inquisitive about the actual power of the new technology. He sees money and many other things in his dreams as if they were played on video. He communicates with God by using a secret number, which he received through a dreaming prophecy that same year. He emphasises that it was a white person, not a black one, who gave him the number in his dreams. He says: 'This is something that makes me strong and I walk around with this [power] ... All right, we have telephone numbers. I healed many Ambonwari in this way. But people do not really believe in the talk of Big One, the talk of Papa. That's why many of these numbers are powerless. I am using the one which is mine. I am still using it, it is with me now. It is the number, yeah!' Robin explains that he received the number as a blessing. He writes into Telban's notebook the number twenty-one. Then he adds a full stop and writes an additional three numbers. He is worried about the sudden revelation of his secret number. We promise him that we will not tell it to anyone. When trying to communicate with God Robin either simply repeats the number in his thoughts or 'writes' it with his finger on the palm of his hand. Then

he observes if he is connected. He waits for the 'communication' to go through. Robin explains that God sees his number. God sees his name and asks him what he is worried about. Robin tells him. When he gets connected his fingers begin to shake. He says: 'When my hand receives this gift I use it to check blood of people, blood with no power or blood that is dead. I use this [practice] with my children and they do not get sick. And I use it also for myself. Look, right now the number is on, my hand is on, and I can treat the sick. My hand moves. When I am not connected it does not move.' If God wants connection with him the number will be on and he will feel it in his shaking hand. In dreams he hears the voice of God saying: 'This is your satellite number.' He says that it does not matter where he is or where he is roaming, he will still get connected.

Robin identifies with the number. It is as much Robin's as it is God's. He is with God just as God is with him. It is not a phone number of God that can be dialled by other people. It belongs only to him. His connection with God reveals itself in the shaking of his hand. This bodily experience of connection is important as it suggests that the number is part of his body. This is his number. Number, as a logico-mathematical abstract concept, is not comfortably situated within the Karawari cosmological conceptualisation of the world. People look at the macrocosmic imagery beyond mere communication and seek material embodiment and emplacement of number. The number is perceived more as a tangible image than an intangible sign (Roy Wagner in Afterword to Mimica 1988: 163). Invisible and intangible numbers were first introduced in association with people's dates of birth, marriage and other significant events. In the short film *Enet Yapai: An Ambonwari Girl* (Vávrová 2008), one can observe how a child tacitly learns to comprehend numbers as part of her body (see also Mimica 1988: 101 and *passim*). When remembering the 'abstract' dates the numbers become rather confusing, not only for the child but for an adult as well. They generate mistakes, amusement and uncertainty. On the other hand, the numbers of bank accounts became identified with their owners and viewed as a necessary link between a money-giver and a money-receiver. For three Aid Post Orderlies, two elementary school teachers and those who returned to the village after living and working in towns, it was clear who the money-givers were. These Ambonwari individuals, and their younger male and sometimes female relatives, were also the first to bring mobile phones to the village. What people needed next was the phone numbers of those who could provide people with certain knowledge, send the goods, and put money into their accounts: God, spirits of the dead and white people.[1] It is not the technology of mobile phones which impresses them most but the sudden possibility of tangible connection opened up by the knowledge of numbers. Ambonwari people have always communicated with both the living and the dead, but they never communicated with them through numbers. This sudden enthusiasm surrounding mobile phone numbers, we argue, serves both to organise and to pin down the otherwise rather chaotic, and all too abstract, impressions of how to connect to and gain from the invisible and concealed world of God, spirits of the dead and white people.

THE DEAD INTERFERING WITH PHONE CALLS

The relationship between the mobile phone network and the possibility of getting connected to the dead became clear at the end of April 2011 when Terrence, an Ambonwari man in his late thirties, died in a boat accident in Madang. We learned about his death over the mobile phone while in Angoram on our return trip to the village. Suspicions spread that he had been killed by an axe stroke over his head and the villagers became inquisitive about those who, in their view, had hired the killers. Rumour said that Terrence's wife had been previously married to a criminal who had been killed by police in Madang. The previous husband's relatives were suspected immediately. But for the moment the biggest question was when and how the dead body would be brought back to the village. It was the first time in the wider region that a corpse would return home from another province. Over the next few weeks several men tried to ring Madang by either wireless or mobile phone. We heard stories of how other Sepik people had already retaliated by burning the culprits' houses and confiscating their boat with a powerful outboard motor. The dates of arrival became fixed – first one, then another, and then yet another. Some of Terrence's friends, who had left Lae immediately upon receiving the news of his death, were now in Madang waiting for *belkol* 'cooling of belly', i.e., the first portion of compensation. Many misunderstandings about the events, the actual cause of his death and the dates, were attributed to the interference of Terrence's spirit whenever a phone connection was or was thought to be established. It is generally the case that the spirits of dead foreigners and those of the long dead do not usually get in the way of those they do not really know. Consequently, nobody could think of any other spirit who would get into the phone line. The voice of Terrence's spirit apparently drowned the voice of a person on the other end and misled the villagers. Several times we covered our faces and bodies with white clay, anticipating in vain the arrival of the corpse. Together with Terrence's parents, we travelled by motor canoe to the Karawari airstrip in Amboin and waited for the plane. It did not arrive. On the hill next to Karawari Lodge we successfully charged the wireless phone with 5 Kina (AUD$2.00) and called the mobile phone numbers of Ambonwari men in Madang. Before long we were out of credit and so were they. We waited for them to buy more credit and call us back. They were waiting for compensation in order to charter a plane and bring the corpse to the Karawari airstrip. The actual date of arrival was not known. We returned to the village (Figs 2 and 3).

Ten days later we decided to spend a few days in a camp upriver. Vávrová had arranged with an old friend to hunt for cassowary. While we were asleep three young men paddled from the village to our camp and woke us in the middle of the night. The plane with the corpse was about to arrive. We had to return speedily as our outboard motor was needed to travel to the Karawari airstrip. Vávrová had to give up her hunting plans and we returned to the village. We were sceptical about the actual arrival of the plane. It was again interference in a phone call, later attributed to Terrence's spirit, which determined the day of its arrival. We decided not to go to Amboin. However, the village Aid Post Orderly and his small group left shortly after we had

Figure 2 Augustina talking on mobile phone in Angoram after she had learned that her sister's son Terrence had died. © Daniela Rachel Vavrova, 2014.

Figure 3 Terrence's father Donald speaking on wireless phone on the hill near Karawari Lodge. © Daniela Rachel Vavrova, 2014.

returned to the village. Terrence's parents stayed in the village and covered their bodies with white clay. We sat the whole day in a recreational house and waited for the sound of the outboard motor. At the end of the day there was no sound and no corpse. The group of men who had travelled to Amboin returned after dark, alone. They had to paddle upriver after running out of petrol. The plane with the corpse had not arrived. Just when we decided that we would not go to the airstrip again, a motor canoe arrived carrying four young Ambonwari men who had returned from Madang. It was Saturday. They had chartered a plane which would bring Terrence's corpse, his wife and two children, and his classificatory brother, Jack, to the Karawari airstrip on Monday. And so it was. We were there together with Terrence's parents and other fifty villagers. The plane flew high over the airstrip, first south towards the highlands then north towards the sea, and then east somewhere towards Lae. We were looking up into the sky for a long time. Then the plane finally landed. Later on we were told that

Terrence's spirit wanted to see Karawari River for the last time and blinded the pilot who could not find the airport. Terrence was finally brought home and after two days and nights of mourning he was buried in a recreational house next to his parents' house (for an extended discussion and video about this case, see Vávrová forthcoming).

DIGICEL TOWER AND RINGING THE DEAD

The rubber business continued to be the main preoccupation of the villagers during the following months. Young men were constantly on the move between the village and the town of Wewak, where they delivered and sold the bags filled with rubber. Whenever they returned to the village they talked about the Digicel telecommunications operator planning to build a tower in the area. It became important for the Ambonwari that the tower would be built on their land. An Ambonwari man, known as little Elias, who had spent several months in Wewak, became the person in charge of the whole process. On 13 November 2011 he organised a village meeting where he tried to explain what needed to be done. Being from the Crocodile-1 Clan – the first settlers and the owners of the land on which the village is erected – he informed everyone that the crocodiles would set up *Manbo* 'crocodile' Incorporate Land Group (ILG) and register their land. No land has yet been registered in the area. As crocodiles 'have many eggs', someone commented, almost half of the villagers could join the 'family tree of the crocodiles'. A long list of names of those who had the slightest kin relation to the crocodiles was read out and others were invited to join. The ILG would be created only for the purpose of building the Digitel tower and receiving all the benefits that would come with it. Elias explained that Digicel would help them to 'get inside through the back door' and the total cost for registration of their land would be much lower than if they had tried to register individual blocks by themselves. The participants agreed that as they did not have any experience or knowledge about this, they should trust Elias to continue his work, and should try to get the tower before others in the area. The prospect of a Digicel tower and access to a mobile phone network in Ambonwari gave rise to much private discussion in houses and camps. People became especially inquisitive about the numbers of their deceased children and what could be gained from connection via the mobile phone. Their eyes turned towards Terrence's brother Jeffrey, or 'Captain'. He had been living for many years in town but had returned for his brother's funeral. As a young healer and diviner who combined customary practices with those he had learned in town, he was immediately perceived as the one who knew how to bridge the gap between the living and the dead. These matters, however, were not discussed in public. The following example shows how casual reflections took place in private settings.

When Monika, Vávrová's 'brother's daughter', who had stayed for more than a decade in Vanimo, the capital of Sandaun Province, returned to the village and began to sell many goods from the Batas market located near the border with West Papua (which she had been successfully doing in Vanimo), many close relatives asked from

where she had received the money needed for all these things. Her father's brother, Daniel Akwi, was especially wary and he often talked about it in his sister Augustina's house. Vávrová had been adopted as Augustina's sister in 2005, when she began making an ethnographic film about her. While staying with Augustina, Vávrová recorded the following conversation, in the Karawari language, in 2011:

> Daniel Akwi: 'I was sitting with them over there [in the bush camp]. I was talking, I took a ginger plant saying: "You spirit, you must listen to me too." He [the spirit of his dead son Luke Pangay with whom Daniel got 'connected' after chewing the ginger] could stop the pain [Akwi feels constant pain in his back].'
>
> Augustina tells her brother that she would like to cook greens, which she collected with Daniela earlier that day.
>
> Daniel Akwi: 'He [the spirit of Monika's son who died in Madang as a small child] said to Monika: "You will get something big." Monika did not talk about this. She did not tell anything. I was really surprised to hear this yesterday. He [the spirit of Monika's son] said, "I did my work [of sending money] and therefore I came. You already got it [money]. That's what I did in the bank."'
>
> Augustina: 'You listen to too many mouths [stories]. You should tell all this to Captain [the nickname of Jeffrey, the young healer and diviner]. Tell Captain. Jeffrey talks to you only on the surface [you should ask him directly]. Captain got the phone number [to call her dead son] and gave it to Monika. You shouldn't think that he doesn't have it [power]. He can get the number and give it to you.'
>
> Daniel Akwi: 'Yes. We don't know.'
>
> Augustina: 'You give Captain a small portion of sago pudding together with some money and a cluster of betel nuts. Then he will take you around during the night. He will take you with him and give you the number. He got this number and gave it to her [Monika]. That's why she talks to him [her dead son] there in Vanimo. Jeffrey said to me that he could get the phone number [of Augustina's deceased son Sangrmari] and give it to me too. He said: "You don't have a phone and that's why I will not give you the number."'
>
> Daniel asks Augustina to cook for Daniela. Augustina tells him how they went to collect greens. Daniel says that if he had some sugarcane in his garden he would bring it for Daniela. Then the talk returns to Jeffrey and the dead people's phone number.
>
> Daniel Akwi: 'He [Jeffrey] is hiding it [the phone number].'
>
> Augustina: 'Where is he hiding it? You go and talk to him! He will not reject you. Go and tell him! He will give it [the number]. Go up the village, get *rama* fish and put it on sago pudding for Captain [present him with the gift of food]!'
>
> Daniel Akwi: 'Yes. I've heard it. That's enough. You two sisters [Augustina and Daniela] cook and eat. I am leaving now.'

Two things are worth emphasising in this short dialogue. The first is the procedure for receiving money from the spirits of the dead. It is a general conviction that once people know the phone numbers of their deceased relatives they can ring and ask the

spirits to put money in their bank accounts. The second concerns the method of receiving the phone number of a particular dead person's spirit. It is those with special powers, Jeffrey Captain in this case, who know how to communicate with the spirits. While certain practices have changed, the old principles underpinning their culture have not. Daniel did not bring any food to Jeffrey and did not ask him for the number of his deceased son. Similar discussions, however, were held in other houses and camps. Monika told Vávrová that her dead son's spirit often appeared to her in Vanimo, as if being played on video, but never in the village where she experienced a lot of envious gossip about her goods and money. In the village, she said, she was unable to contact him. The awareness that only some individuals can ring the spirits of their deceased relatives and profit from such a contact while others cannot has disrupted relationships and created conflicts over money. Those few who are in possession of a wireless or mobile phone are constantly watched and expected to provide others with both information and goods.

The villagers do not rush to get mobile phones. They simply wait to see what will follow. Daniel Akwi's classificatory brother Francis Kwandukan told us that in the past the white people had not had special 'machines' such as computers and mobile phones. He said that one could not challenge or lie to a computer. A computer knows what the truth is. The stories which circulate among people reveal that a computer is perceived as the spirit of God; it is powered by the spirit of God. Mobile phones, Francis explained, are used for different purposes by white people, including calling the dead. If you want to get something you just ring your deceased children or parents. You exchange telephone numbers with them, and provide them with the number of your bank account. Once the dead put money in your account they ring you back and tell you to check it. After you withdraw thousands of Kina from the bank, Francis explained, you ring the dead and tell them that you got your money. Francis, however, has no mobile phone, no numbers to call, and no bank account. His daughter died in 2010 and he will wait to see if the stories he heard are true.

Francis was told that many things which were sent from Australia to PNG by their dead relatives were simply stolen by the Australians. The addresses with names were removed from parcels during the night and new addresses, those of the Australians, were put on. He heard, moreover, that mobile phones, computers, and other things were actually not made by white people, as humans could not make so many powerful things. They were made by *their* spirits of the dead (those from PNG and Ambonwari in particular), but were later stolen by white people. Things which are sold in shops were also sent to Papua New Guinea by their deceased relatives but white people took them away. Francis, who is actively involved in the local Catholic Church but is nevertheless regarded as being traditionalist, concluded that white people did business with things which originally belonged to Papua New Guineans. His reasoning is very much in accord with the egalitarian, though competitive, organisation of his society and cosmology, in which people coexist with the spirits of the dead.

Many Papua New Guineans recurrently remark that their spirits coexist with white people (Hirsch 2008: 148; Lattas 1998, 2010; Leavitt 2000; Telban and Vávrová 2010:

24). By being engaged in the production of technology, from the manufacturing of planes to the printing of money, the spirits retain domineering know-how while white people, in the view of Papua New Guineans, do not understand but steal the procedures from the spirits of the dead. The powerful knowledge of Creation, which has always been attributed to the most powerful ancestral spirits, is in the eyes of the Ambonwari never completely revealed: it never appears at an open and visible place. Technological devices are given to be used without providing know-how about their production. The world at large, the larger cultural context that created these tools and the secret of their manufacture remain obscured.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of 2013, *Manbo* (crocodile) ILG have still not registered their land and Digicel has not yet built its tower in the area. New information and communication technology, however, made its impact in the Karawari River area of Papua New Guinea even before the establishment of the mobile phone network. The absence of the network is the cause of competition among people from different villages as to who will first get the Digicel tower. New technologies continue to be objects of fascination and prestige. When looking at cultural hermeneutics, that is, 'the ways in which cultures *embed* technologies' (Ihde 1990: 124 italics in original), we can see that immediate use-context is not separated from its cultural frame: to think of something in terms of use is already cultural. Therefore, to understand how this new technology is being incorporated into the Ambonwari socio-cultural milieu, one has to go beyond mere functional issues of communication and information. The latter can all too easily become prey to uncritical generalisations based on a particular kind of reasoning (utilitarian, technocratic, or market oriented), which is not characteristic of a New Guinean life-world. Horst and Miller (2006: 113) describe how communication and social networking is a value in its own right for low-income Jamaicans. The same could be said for urban Papua New Guineans. In the Karawari River area, however, networks of acquaintances have not really expanded, due to the lack of a mobile phone network, the small number of those who own mobile phones, and a general distrust of people from other groups.

Many of the issues presented in this article are quite common for areas with a history of cargo cults. Andrew Lattas (2010), for example, provides a large number of examples of the ways in which people in New Britain came to use modern technological devices as a method of contacting the dead, the underground, and the white people. In search of 'truth' they wanted to bridge the gap between concealed and unconcealed worlds. Both the cult followers and non-cult villagers tended to explore different strategies for appropriating everything associated with the white people and the socio-cultural changes which they intended to create. Although there was no similar cult in the Karawari River area, the introduction of new technologies nevertheless led to similar practices. However, people have not embraced 'the utopian promise of transcendence encoded in modern technology' (Lattas 2010: 302). Rather, they explore the utopian promise of modern technology, and phone numbers in particular, as

embedded in the immanence of kinship relationships with the spirits of the dead, mainly those of deceased children and parents, while white people can always be perceived as their potential deceased kin. There is actually no opposition between transcendence and immanence but only between different modes of existence, which in the view of Ambonwari were once closer to each other and much more intertwined. During their initial acquaintance with mobile phones the Ambonwari actively explored the power of mobile phone numbers and ways of ringing their dead. The hardest thing for the villagers to accept is the death of their children, sons in particular. The Catholic Charismatic leaders, who otherwise strongly oppose all customary practices, are indulgent regarding relationships between parents and their children. Parents grieve for a decade or longer over the loss of a son. Thus, it is not surprising that the phone numbers they are seeking are mainly those of their deceased children. Getting in contact with them would, in their view, provide them with access to money, goods and ways of life which are typical of otherwise hidden realms inhabited by the dead and white people.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is based on our cooperative research in Ambonwari village, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. This joint venture began in 2005, was deepened in 2007 and 2008, and culminated during twelve months of fieldwork between December 2010 and December 2011. We are very grateful to our Ambonwari family and friends. Vávrová would like to thank The Cairns Institute and James Cook University for a postgraduate research scholarship, and additional funds which enabled her to conduct her fieldwork. Telban would like to thank his home institution, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, for generous support, and The Cairns Institute, James Cook University, for affiliation before and after the last fieldwork. The grant, which we received from the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research, also covered some of our expenses in the field. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Australian Anthropological Society Conference in Brisbane, 26-28 September 2012. We would like to thank Jonathan Marshall and Tanya Notley for their constructive comments on our article.

Please send correspondence to Borut Telban: borut@zrc-sazu.si

NOTE

1 'White people' are not confined to any particular region. They can be Asian, European or even Papuan. Spirits of the dead become white people and move where the white people live. They dress up like white people, they drive cars like white people, and they look like white people. Because we stayed in Ambonwari, entered the village life, received our local names, ate the local food and followed the local customs, we were often perceived as the spirits of dead Ambonwari who had returned home to their place of origin.

REFERENCES

Borgmann, A. 1984 *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Hirsch, E. 2008 God or Tidibe?, *Melanesian Christianity and the problem of wholes, Ethnos* 73(2): 141–62.

Horst, H. A. and D. Miller 2005 From kinship to link-up: Cell phones and social networking in Jamaica, *Current Anthropology* 46(5): 755–78.

Horst, H. A. and D. Miller 2006 *The Cell Phone: An Anthropology of Communication*. Oxford: Berg.

Ihde, D. 1990 *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ihde, D. 2009 *Postphenomenology and Technoscience*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Ihde, D. 2010 *Heidegger's Technologies: Postphenomenological Perspectives*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Lattas, A. 1998 *Cultures of Secrecy: Reinventing Race in Bush Kaliai Cargo Cults*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Lattas, A. 2010 *Dreams, Madness, and Fairy Tales in New Britain*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press.

Leavitt, S. C. 2000 The apotheosis of White Men?, *A reexamination of beliefs about Europeans as ancestral spirits, Oceania* 70(4): 304–23.

Mimica, J. 1988 *Intimations of Infinity: The Cultural Meanings of the Iqwaye Counting and Number System*. Oxford: Berg.

Telban, B. 1998 *Dancing through Time: A Sepik Cosmology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Telban, B. 2001 Temporality of post-mortem divination and divination of post-mortem temporality, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 12(1): 67–79.

Telban, B. 2009 A struggle with spirits: Hierarchy, rituals and Charismatic movement in a Sepik community, in (eds) P. J. Stewart, A. Strathern *Religious and Ritual Change: Cosmologies and Histories (Ritual Studies Monograph Series)*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press, pp.133–58.

Telban, B. and D. Vávrová 2010 Places and spirits in a Sepik society, *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 11(1): 17–33.

Vávrová, D. 2008 *Enet Yapai: An Ambonwari Girl (film, 25 minutes)*. Ljubljana: Institute of Anthropological and Spatial Studies, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

Vávrová, D. Forthcoming Skin has eyes and ears: Audio-visual ethnography in a Sepik society. PhD Thesis, The Cairns Institute, James Cook University.

Verbeek, P.-P. 2005 *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Watson, A. H. A. 2011 The mobile phone: The new communication drum of Papua New Guinea. PhD Thesis, Queensland University of Technology.

