

Firefly, and its Meaning in PNG

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The firefly is a communicative creature, and full of signs in Papua New Guinea culture. It is believed to be a spirit of the dead, that has ties of relationship with the people, and is well believed to be living and sharing in-between the material and spiritual world. The firefly travels longer distances at night than at daytime. Some have very dim light, and are identified as ancestors and relatives, and are much closer to the people than the one with the brighter light.¹

Asking several people about their own belief in the firefly, the first informant, from Port Moresby, responded, “the confrontation of the firefly shows signs to safety and danger”. The second informant, from the Highlands, also had this to say, “*Firefly em i sanguma*”². Thirdly, I heard my mother yelling angrily at me to spare the firefly, when I took hold of one. Then, I wondered why my mother ordered me to spare the firefly. Many similar answers were also given by older people, such as being identified as ancestors, messengers, spirits, friends, devils, and many more.

My first encounter with a firefly was a night, when I and my brothers lost our way under the oil palm trees in the middle of the night, when on our way home from a feast. Failing to locate a track to our home, we gave up hope, and then, finally, a tiny firefly appeared before us. My cousin brother, with a rich knowledge of customary ideas, grasped his way towards the firefly, and ordered us to follow. With a sigh of relief, it led us to discover the mini-track that led to our home. This wonderful experience of a firefly, as a guide, however halted my doubt and elaborate research.³

On another occasion, in Port Moresby, a figure was spotted up a tree, with fireflies surrounding. This was repeatedly sighted by village travellers.

¹ Firefly with a dim light is just a dead relative. This belief still exists in Oro Province.

² I saw an Eastern Highlander attack a firefly, believing it to be a bad spirit, when I was a student at the Goroka Technical College – *sanguma* really means “devil”.

³ Even though I was a full-blooded Melanesian, yet I had no belief in a firefly, that it was a helper, till I experienced it myself.

Sometime later, the villagers tried to catch the unidentified figure. The figure avoided being caught by the climbers, and moved fast on the treetops, like a fast-travelling cuscus. However, more climbers were added, and, finally, a funny ugly little man, with a deformed body, who could not speak, was caught. The fireflies dispersed soon after.⁴

Of the views and the stories, several questions can be raised. Are the communicative signs directly and indirectly from God? What is its spiritual- and material-world relationship, and can this be the ancestors' direct involvement? Such questions can be answered within each respective culture, according to its own understanding! Yet the whole issue can be understood by seeing the firefly as a creature of God, that fulfils God's purpose on earth.

There is no indication, in the Old Testament, of the firefly being the guide for the Israelites, yet divine guidance, through light, fire, etc., is often read, and in which Jesus fulfils the concept of light in the New Testament. Papua New Guinean culture, from a theological point of view, can bluntly identify the glorious light of the firefly as a divine guidance in rare cases, such as my own experience of unidentified beings, as in the second story.

I would rather say, though, that we believe God guides the firefly to give an indication of situations that are both good and bad. The firefly is a guide, messenger, friend, or an enemy, in ordinary times, and in times of trouble. Although various cultures in Papua New Guinea may interpret, and explain it accordingly, yet, on the whole, it is a go-between between the material and spiritual worlds.

Western culture disagrees with the Papua New Guinean concept of the firefly,⁵ however, our strong belief and relationship still remains. Most importantly, we need to thank God for His communication and relationship to us, through the firefly. We also ought to be careful not to treat the firefly as a mini-God, but as God's creature, as St Francis put it.

Today, I often hear the old people advise the new, growing generation to continue to spare the firefly.

⁴ My Father actually witnessed the event in Port Moresby, and told me the story when I grew up.

⁵ I mention Western culture, because I heard an Australian and an English man, at separate times, speak against the firefly as a helper.