A Specialist in Red: Symbolism on the Interface of the Human and the Supernatural World in Futuna

An old Futunan story tells how the legendary hero Pomai obtained the secret of producing turmeric by sparing the life of a spirit. In Futuna, turmeric used to be and still is an important marker. Warriors used to paint half their face with turmeric. This would give them divine force and also was a mutual sign of recognition. At present, turmeric is still used ceremonially during life crises such as the first communion, circumcision, marriage and death. It also has a more profane function as protection against sunburn when used by women fishing on the reef. The paper focuses on the turmeric specialist (the lautilo) who still has a privileged link with the (pre-Christain) spiritual world, in spite of one and a half centuries of dominance by the Roman Catholic variant of Christianity. The material is based on recent fieldwork in Futuna, in Western Polynesia. The paper also seeks to compare with use and representations of turmeric in other parts of Oceania.