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Sorcery, Witchcraft, and Christianity in Papua New Guinea

A Review Essay

Hans Reithofer

Media reports on sorcery and witchcraft accusations leading up to witch-hunts, torture and brutal killings appear with increasing regularity in Papua New Guinea's (PNG) newspapers. While the dearth of reliable data makes it debatable whether this reflects an actual increase in sorcery-related killings as compared to earlier times, editorials and public responses illustrate that the phenomenon has caught the attention of the general public and become a national issue of grave concern, a challenge to legislators, the police and judiciary, the churches and civil/human rights organizations. In a timely response to this challenge, the ecumenical Melanesian Institute (MI) has carried out a five year research project into sorcery and witchcraft beliefs and practices in PNG from 2003 to 2007, the results of which have been published in the two volumes that are the subject of this review (and referred to by indicating the respective year of publication).[1]

The project had a social science objective – research into contemporary sorcery/witchcraft beliefs and practices, the underlying causes for their apparent upsurge and their consequences for individuals and communities – but also an applied missiological and pastoral one, as it inquired about the counteracting strategies of various churches in past and present and aimed to offer some suggestions on "how to face this evil phenomenon" (2008: 6). The findings urge the publishers to call for a more united effort "to put an end to sorcery and witchcraft beliefs and practices as well as the violence related to them" (2008: back cover). The methodology comprised a review of the pertinent literature from a wide range of sources and field research in six provinces in order to arrive at a somewhat representative picture of the national situation. The provinces and field research sites, selected on the basis of criteria such as long-established ethnographic record and lengthy presence of Christian churches, were the following: Simbu (Kuman, Golin and Siane speakers), East Sepik (Plains and Mountain Arapesh, among others), Morobe (Kote/Kate speakers), Central (Roro and Mekeo), Milne Bay (Goodenough Island), and East New Britain (Tolai). Field research methods focused on personal and group interviews, complemented in some instances by questionnaires and workshops. The Institute also organized the "Sanguma in Paradise" Seminar in 2004, in which representatives of the civil administration, the churches, police, and judiciary discussed the highly precarious situation in Simbu, the province with by far the most incidents of witchcraft accusations and attendant killings. The research team consisted of two longtime resident expatriate missionaries with sociological and anthropological expertise (Franco Zocca, Philip Gibbs) and four national researchers

1 Zocca, Franco, and Jack Urame: Sorcery, Witchcraft, and Christianity in Melanesia. Goroka: Melanesian Institute, 2008. 188 pp. ISBN: 9980-65-011-7. (Melanesian Mission Studies, 5); Zocca, Franco (ed.): Sanguma in Paradise. Sorcery, Witchcraft, and Christianity in Papua New Guinea. Goroka: Melanesian Institute, 2009. 359 pp. ISBN: 9980-65-013-3. (Point, 33)

(William Longgar, Paul Petrus, Jack Urame, and Josepha Junnie Wailoni), whose academic training is not noted, neither in the publications nor on the Institute's homepage, with the exception of editor Jack Urame, a Simbu-born Lutheran pastor with a BA in theology.

Sorcery, Witchcraft and Christianity in Melanesia (2008)

The booklet contains four parts: an article covering the phenomena of sorcery and witchcraft based on the topical literature and the MI field research, a media review on the topic, covering PNG'S two English dailies and the Tok Pisin weekly from 2000 to 2006, an annotated bibliography of the literature on sorcery/witchcraft in Melanesia and PNG, and the problematic PNG Sorcery Act 1971, also accessible online (Papua New Guinea Consolidated Legislation 1971).

In the article, Zocca first reviews various scientific theories and approaches to understanding sorcery and witchcraft phenomena worldwide (ideological, psychic, psychological, socio-political) and argues that their explanatory potential for the Melanesian material is generally high. He also concedes some analytical usefulness to Evans-Pritchard's influential distinction between inborn "witchcraft" and learned "sorcery" and its adaptation to the Melanesian material by Michele Stephen, who suggested a continuum running from the socially despised "witch," blamed for intra-community misfortune, to the socially rewarded "sorcerer" who employs his powers on behalf of the community. Yet the inquiries taught the researchers that local concepts and practices were clearly more complex and ambiguous than these distinctions suggest and impressed on them the need to use as much as possible local terms and meanings. In his discussion on the state's attitude towards sorcery/witchcraft, Zocca addresses the problematic aspects of the PNG Sorcery Act of 1971 which criminalizes both acts of (evil) sorcery and acts of violence against suspected sorcerers as well as false accusations. From the legal point of view, the Act is criticized for its non-applicability, as even relaxed rules of evidence are difficult to implement in sorcery cases. The same relaxed rules may render the Act unconstitutional, as Bernard Narokobi argued at the "Sanguma in Paradise" Seminar (Zocca and Urame 2008: 30). From a pastoral perspective, the Act is criticized for reinforcing the belief in the reality and effectiveness of sorcery, by making it punishable, and for its tolerance of sorcery beliefs by considering such beliefs as a mitigating factor in criminal cases involving the torture or killing of alleged sorcerers. Zocca concludes that from the churches' point of view, the most effective revision of the legislation would be to simply abandon the Act altogether on the grounds that sorcery/witchcraft phenomena are treated as "mere superstition" (2009: 8) and to criminalize the accusations of sorcery/witchcraft instead.

Zocca's synthesis of the churches' attitudes towards sorcery/witchcraft reveals, beneath a broad confrontational stance in the past and in the present, a wide variety of strategies informed by very different worldviews. The gamut runs from the mainline churches opposing the beliefs and practices in a fairly straightforward and "enlightened" manner (but to little effect) to Evangelical and Pentecostal churches which treat sorcery and witchcraft as evil spirit possession and emphasize the need for "spiritual warfare" in order to heal the possessed. It becomes clear that the majority of contemporary Christians and church leaders (still) subscribe to "magical" beliefs and are extremely hostile towards, and fearful of, sorcerers and witches. Some interlocutors considered the belief in sorcery as an integral part of the "Melanesian identity". After offering a critique of these various Christian approaches and attitudes, Zocca suggests that in order to put an end to sorcery/witchcraft beliefs and practices the only effective – if as yet unpopular – strategy in the long run is to expose these beliefs as dangerous superstitions and to encourage Melanesians to "accept scientific and verifiable explanations for sickness, death, and misfortunes," and to stop seeking any other than natural causes for the explanation of those events (2008: 54 f.). For Zocca, this is the only ethical strategy if one's answer to the "reality question" regarding sorcery and witchcraft is "No." This reality question, often sidestepped by Western academics and advisers, is deemed to be of cardinal importance because if sorcery and witchcraft were (considered) real, it would be "perfectly ethical to punish [a sorcerer/witch] in order to protect society" (2008: 57).

The media report collated by Jack Urame paints a vivid picture of the public debate on issues relating to sorcery and witchcraft, as articulated in editorial comments and letters from the public. The voices deplore the wide-ranging consequences of sorcery accusations and trials for individual suspects, their families, and the society at large. In general, they issue a strong call for a broad and united effort to put an end to the accusations and killings, and to restore the social order. But there are also other voices that see the "sorcery problem" only as the despicable deeds of sorcerers and witches, and the communi-

ties as victims. Such voices lend some credibility to police reports claiming that investigations into the cases of torture and killing of suspected sorcerers often fail due to the lack of cooperation by the affected communities.

Urame's survey also produces some statistical figures: over the 7-year-period (2000–2006), the media reported 166 single sorcery/witchcraft-related cases, 75 of which involved torture and murder, with a total of 156 victims. Broken down by gender, there were more female victims than male, and women have been accused of sorcery six times more often than men. Accusations are often made within a group, by people related to the suspect either biologically or socially, and the brutal interrogations are typically also carried out in groups and led by young people. The statistics are not, however, cross-checked with other sources, and it is evident, given the make-up of the country, that many cases are not published, let alone reported to the police.

The annotated bibliography, also prepared by Urame, is arranged regionally and chronologically in an attempt to allow assessment of any changes in sorcery/witchcraft beliefs and practices over time. This aim would have been difficult to attain in any case, but I find the bibliography of very limited value for other reasons: (a) the annotations are restricted to brief outlines of sorcery/witchcraft beliefs and practices resulting in a rather bewildering collection of concepts and techniques that are almost completely devoid of social and historical context; (b) the annotations do not include comments on the author, research context, academic quality or relevance of the source; (c) some obvious candidates are missing, while some marginal ones are included, such as rather holistic monographs that dedicate but a short section to the subject. It would have been more valuable to restrict this selection to influential comparative volumes and major sources.

Sanguma in Paradise (2009)

This is a larger book that contains seven reports on the field research projects carried out in the various provinces listed above. Zocca's short introduction outlines the objectives and methods of the overall project but includes no comments on the case studies as such. The editor refers to his article, published in "Sorcery, Witchcraft, and Christianity," as "an overall synthesis of the research results" (2009: 5). However, this statement is true in a very general sense only, as it makes no reference to specific reports. An editorial summary or discussion of the reports would have enhanced the volume greatly.

The first report comes from the Simbu Province, where the institution of *kumo* witchcraft was noted and studied by the first missionaries and ethnographers, and where the social and pastoral problems relating to *kumo* beliefs and practices are definitely the most pressing. As Simbu is one of the most densely populated provinces (already in colonial times), a correlation between witchcraft beliefs and the demographic pressure on arable land is very likely, but in itself hardly a sufficient explanation for the prevalence of witch-hunts and brutal killings in the province. In the emic scheme of things, sickness and death are almost exclusively attributed to *kumo* attacks. The great majority of the accused appear to be people of low status – women, childless couples, old people, even children – a statement somewhat contradicted by the claims that the accused are often owners of good gardens and many pigs, or successful business people, and that the real reasons behind the accusations are envy and greed. It is revealing that – notwithstanding the Catholic bishop's unequivocal support granted to the accused – the majority of church leaders favor pastoral strategies that aim at stopping the witches from continuing their evil practices!

In the East Sepik Province, many forms and techniques of sorcery and sorcery divination are known and practiced, including the notorious *sanguma* assault sorcery that involve physical attacks on victims resulting in widespread fear of sorcery and, to a lesser extent, witchcraft. Sickness, death, and misfortunes are still pervasively attributed to them, or to some angered spirits, but the resulting toll of tortured or killed suspects appears to be much lower than in Simbu, perhaps because sorcery divinations are a lengthy and inconclusive procedure, most likely for fear of the sorcerer's retaliation. Sorcery beliefs are nevertheless a serious social problem because they create intimidation and distrust within and between communities and require careful and positive pastoral attention.

Urame's fieldwork in the Morobe Province concentrated on the Kote (a.k.a. Kate) speakers of the Huon Peninsula, who were very early missionized by the German Lutheran mission. The missionaries' efforts to put an end to all magic and sorcery are even today viewed as a success, although a devastating one in the eyes of contemporary Christians: the demise of sorcery, the researchers were told, was also the demise of magic and secret knowledge that had provided their ancestors with success and prosperity. Christians today are left with the bible and with a God who doesn't answer to their prayers. Sorcery, therefore, appears to be a comparatively minor issue among the Kote, although old beliefs

begin to resurface and new practices are getting introduced from neighboring areas. It should be noted that Urame's report is the only one based almost exclusively and onesidedly on missionary sources.

The two reports from the Central Province deal with the Mekeo and Roro speakers respectively and present a fairly uniform picture that, again, diverts markedly from the Simbu one. Sorcery beliefs and practices have been deeply ingrained in both cultural traditions, and if practices have partly disappeared, due to a long history of Catholic Christianization, beliefs have not. Most people today still suspect sorcery behind sickness, death, and disaster, a belief reinforced with the more recent arrival of smaller Christian churches that propagate the idea that sorcerers are in collusion with evil spirits and need to be spiritually combated. Even though sorcerers were, in former times, insider-sorcerers directing their attacks against fellow-villagers or clan members, they seem to have been socially rewarded for functioning like policemen who guaranteed law and order, and protected the community; they were also under a complete control of the peace chiefs. For these reasons, and because their powers were feared, retaliation against sorcerers rarely occurred. Today, with the traditional chiefly institution rendered redundant by modern political institutions, the perception prevails that "sorcery has become wild" (2009: 206); it is no longer controlled by chiefs and no longer fulfilling a useful social function. New forms of (assault) sorcery have also arrived, adding to the atmosphere of suspicion and fear. Perhaps as a reaction to these developments, physical attacks and evictions of suspected sorcerers are becoming more common.

For Goodenough Island in the Milne Bay Province, the picture presented is by now familiar: a long Methodist and Catholic Christianization has hardly displaced firm beliefs in the power and omnipresence of sorcery which is today still mostly blamed for any kind of misfortune. Moreover, sorcerers command a measure of recognition as social regulators and protectors of their communities against enemy attacks, unlike witches, who are thought to attack solely for selfish reasons. Physical attacks or punishment of suspected sorcerers/witches apparently occur on a comparatively minor scale, but to the researchers the pervasive fear of sorcery casts a cloud of suspicion upon the whole island.

The Tolai in the East New Britain Province represent, in many respects, a counter-case to Simbu. Faced with a comparably high population density and a rapid demographic growth that creates many social problems, sorcery (not witchcraft) is said to be on the increase, but to a very different effect compared with Simbu. Even allowing for the sympathetic and culturally sensitive argument of the author (Longgar), the discrepancies are evident and must be explained in terms of cultural and historical idiosyncrasies. No mention is made of violent retaliations against suspected sorcerers, a difference also reflected in Urame's media report (Zocca and Urame 2008). If the answer to this lies in a very deadly form of retributive sorcery (*komkom*), by which a bereaved Tolai may dispose of a suspected sorcerer and his entire family rather clandestinely, the author does not tell. Again, sorcerers are characterized as essentially ambiguous, and insofar as they exercise their powers on behalf of the community (against internal and external enemies), they can also rise to some prominence, or did so in the past. Today, the author argues, sorcery may even work as a functional substitute for the government in upholding law and order and redressing social injustice, as the weak may turn to sorcery to put the powerful "back on track" – a claim that remains in stark contrast to the Simbu situation where witchcraft accusations often turn on the weak. A reverse tendency, however, is also noted for the Tolai: a frequent perception of a general departure away from the socially determined and sanctioned functions of sorcery that contributes to social disintegration and moral decay.

While these seven reports bring to light certain marked variations in all aspects of the subject matter, they also reveal a number of recurrent features. To begin with, the sustained engagement with Christianity has not eclipsed sorcery/witchcraft beliefs to any significant degree but yielded, via their Evangelical and Pentecostal versions, rather new stimuli and reinforcements. The analytical distinction between the socially despised "witches" and the ambiguous "sorcerers" appears still useful, even though the latter seem to shift away from their positive roles as social regulators. Sorcery techniques and practices exhibit a high degree of fluidity across communities and through time, evidenced by processes of borrowing and innovation, waxing and waning, assimilation and hybridization. Factors contributing to the perceived upsurge in sorcery/witchcraft activities include: increased social and geographical mobility, growing social and economic disparities, demographic pressure on land and other resources, the young generation's prospect of a bleak economic future, and erosion of social control mechanisms.

The MI research project arose out of an obviously deeply felt pastoral concern for the well-being of PNG individuals and communities increasingly beset by problems related to sorcery and witchcraft. Having both anthropological and missionary roots

and sympathies, I consider this concern a profoundly valid and legitimate reason to engage in anthropological research. What I want to highlight here (by way of conclusion) is not the research methodology and how it affects the validity and persuasiveness of the authors' findings and suggestions. Rather, I want to challenge the pastoral *and* anthropological soundness of the core suggestions put forward by the editor, Franco Zocca – namely, that we need to expose these magical beliefs as dangerous superstitions, encourage Melanesians to accept scientific and verifiable explanations for sickness, death, and misfortunes, and to seek no further than the natural causes. While this recipe gives away a good measure of concern, frustration and anger, it blocks the way to a deeper cultural and human understanding of Melanesian sorcery beliefs and experiences, and precludes a pastoral ministry that is truly helpful and transformative. I see a more appropriate and promising approach in the reflections of one contributing research team (Gibbs/Wailoni): "Ultimately Sorcery beliefs are cultural variations on the age-old problem of evil. It is not so much a matter of dismissing Sorcery as mere superstition or thinking that conversion will mean the substitution of a Christian way for the tradition. Rather, the Christian response must be to engage with the beliefs and practices in question so that people, young and old, can come to see 'evils' such as sickness, death and misfortune through the eyes of faith" (2009: 89). As one important task the authors identify the development of a culturally sensitive pastoral theology of death because without it "little will change with regards to Sorcery as an explanation for death" (2009: 88) – another worthy challenge for the MI and its research team.

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The Diary of Saint Faustina Kowalska Objectified in a Religious and in a Village Community

The Case of Rybno

Anna Kapusta and Agnieszka Późniak

At that moment I felt transconsecrated.
My earthly body was the same, but my soul was different;
God was now living in it with totality of His delight.
This is not a feeling, but a conscious reality that nothing can obscure.

(Kowalska 2006).[1]

Hooray! We found the house from "the Diary"!
We settled at the ruined presbytery. And this name: Rybno becomes like the symbol of Christianity.

(Jakimowicz 2006).

Preface

Drawing on the results of our field research, we would like to present how a ritual script supports playing ritual roles, or in other words, how a ritual text changes into social practice. We regard narrative practice as a vital component in a culture's ongoing creation and negotiation of its shifting forms. The ritual text that we will discuss is the "Diary" written by Saint Faustina.[2] Our aim is to show it as a social construct, a phenomenon and idea that is "(re)constructed" and developed through social practice. We observed this process in a recently founded cloistered women's order.

Fieldwork Research: Preliminary Considerations

Our fieldwork was based on observations which were initially not given any theoretical framework or structure. An area of investigation was not conceptualized before setting about the project. We were not familiar with the topography of Rybno (both the convent of the Sisters Handmaids of God's Mercy and the village) before going there. Because we were using electronic means of collecting data, the audio registration, we did not keep the classic explorer's diary. Our own comments on the events of the day were recorded in the evening of the same

1 All further *Diary* quotations are from this source.
2 Kowalska (2006). First published in 1981; since then a new edition has been published each year.