Comments on Sorcery in Papua New Guinea

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ABSTRACT

Variations of sorcery and witchcraft are commonly reported in Papua New Guinea. The Melanesian Institute (in Goroka, PNG) has published two volumes (Zocca, ed. 2009; Bartle 2005) that deal extensively with some of the issues and problems that have resulted from the practices. In this article I review Zocca, in particular, but add observations of my own and those of other authors. I provide a summary of the overall folk views of sorcery and witchcraft and the government and churches suggestions on how to deal with the traditional customs.

Introduction

Franco Zocca, a Divine Word Missionary and ordained Catholic priest from Italy with a doctorate in sociology, has edited a monograph on sorcery in Papua New Guinea (Zocca, ed. 2009). Before residing in PNG and becoming one of the directors of the Melanesian Institute, Zocca worked on Flores Island in Indonesia. His present monograph is valuable because it calls our attention to the widespread use and knowledge of sorcery and witchcraft in PNG.

Zocca’s monograph reports on 7 areas: the Simbu Province, the East Sepik Province, Kote in the Morobe Province, Central Mekeo and Roro, both in the Central Province, Goodenough Island in the Milne Bay Province and the Gazelle Peninsula in the East New Britain Province. The monograph follows Bartle’s volume (2005), also published by the Melanesian Institute. Before looking at Zocca’s volume and adding some observations from the Southern Highlands, I include some general comments on the word sanguma.

Sanguma studies

According to the Mihalic Project[^1] there are two theories on the origin of the word: (i) that it is from zanguma in the Monumbo language of Bogia, Madang Province (Mühlhäusler 1979:196; Laycock 1996), a rare example of a non-Austronesian lexical borrowing, (ii) that it is from sangoma brought home by native police recruited in German New Guinea who were posted to Africa.”

Poch (1908: 141) appears to be the first recorded reference to the Monumbo people at a Catholic mission station that opened in 1899, where he recorded zanguma. Laycock (1996) provides the best historical account of the word sanguma and the concepts associated with it. He attributes it to the Monumbu people on the northeast coast of PNG. His research also suggests that it is an innovation of that particular group but spread to other language groups through the association of indentured laborers in plantations. After WWII the word is recorded in many other areas, including the Gimi of the Eastern Highlands (Glick 1972).

Mihalic (1971:169) glosses sanguma as a “secret murder committed by orders from sorcerers” where poisoned thorns are inserted into the base of the tongue or into vital organs. Murphy (1965:91) attributes the term to the Madang area and describes it as “a species of malign sorcery and also the person gifted with the power of performing it.” He also claims that thorns were pushed into parts of the body to cause pain and into the tongue to cause swelling so that the victim could not name the sorcerers.

Regardless of its lexical form, the concept of *sanguma* is widespread in PNG at present and is basically a method of causing harm to someone, often at a distance, without necessarily laying hands on the person. The sorcerer often uses objects such as hair, excrement, bodily fluids, finger or toenails, if possible from the intended victim, to cause specific harm. More recently battery acid in a syringe or other modern instruments are reported in sorcery cases. *Sanguma* has been glossed in English as both “witchcraft” and “assault sorcery” (MacDonald 1984:206).

Zocca’s monograph reports, in particular, on the interpretation of sickness and death as caused by the spirit world. The seven areas chosen provide a cross-section of beliefs and practices across the whole of PNG. Of interest is how the churches have responded to the phenomena.

**The Simbu**

The Simbu Province lies within the central chain of mountains that runs from west Papua (in Indonesia) to the southern tip of PNG. It is heavily populated (260,000 people, or 42 inhabitants per sq km) and its languages include Kuman, Golin, Chuave, Dom, Sinasina, Salt-Yui, Nomane, Pawaia and Dadibi. The latter two are in the southern Karimui area.

Zocca’s study of the Simbu (2009) complements the report of Gibbs (2010) on witchcraft among the Simbu people. Zocca describes the practice of *kumo*-witchcraft, which includes small animals the witch possesses and disposes of, as well as general observations on the power of witchcraft. The practice has been reported by many researchers and is prevalent throughout the area. The *kumo*-people have power that allows them to do things that normal people cannot, such as having a force that leaves the body, especially at night, feasting on the dead, removing victims organs, and so on. They are feared because of the illnesses and destruction they may cause, even by the police and authorities, who fear retribution for being involved in *kumo* cases. Churches in the Simbu Province react to *kumo* differently, with various suggestions about its treatment and power. The main issue is whether *kumo* is some sort of manifestation of an evil spirit and, if it is, what the Christian response should be to it.

**The East Sepik**

Philip Gibbs and Josepha Junnie Wailoni (2009) interviewed church workers and report on an area that has had intensive cultural studies (and cargo cults) over many years. They examine, in particular, the Yangaru, Arapesh, Maprik and Drekikir areas.

The cassowary is of “great mythic importance in the area and a cassowary woman is believed to be the first ancestor of the Arapesh and other groups in the area” (p.63). It is not surprising that the bones of the woman are the source of the first yams and that her bones are used in the *haus tambaran* (spirit house). Cassowary bones also have great power.

The Catholic (Society of the Divine Word) first landed off the coast of the area in 1896 and, following WWII, many other mission groups followed, e.g., South Seas Evangelical Mission and the Assemblies of God. They have considered sorcery the result of people being possessed by local spirits.

Sicknesses that cannot be diagnosed by medical personnel are attributed to “*sik bilong ples*”, that is, village illnesses that happen because of disruptive social relations. Arguments and problems result in sickness that can be caused by *sanguma*, although it is not always the purview of sorcerers. There are *posen/posien* men as well as *sanguma* men and women. They use bodily fluids, certain powders, lime from the burning of warrior’s bones, and so on, as substances for their evil deeds. They can lure the life

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2 For a language map of the Province, noting particularly those that SIL has studied, see [http://www.sil.org/pacific/png/maps/WHP_Simbu_small.jpg](http://www.sil.org/pacific/png/maps/WHP_Simbu_small.jpg).

3 See [http://www.sil.org/pacific/png/maps/ESP_small.jpg](http://www.sil.org/pacific/png/maps/ESP_small.jpg) for a map of languages in the Province, in particular those that SIL has studied.
force from a victim to kill the person, or even call the name of a victim’s clan to perform evil. Certain protective items, such as ginger, lime and tree bark (p. 81) can be used to counteract the sorcery.

The Kote

Jack Urame’ (2009) studied the Kote of Finschhafen, Morobe Province. The first missionary to enter the area was Johannes Flierl from the Neuendettelsau Mission Society of the Lutheran Church in Bavaria, Germany in 1884 (p.101). With such a long history of Christian churches and involvement, the acts of sorcery once seemed to have died out. However, more recently the old beliefs have resurfaced and “[t]he Kote of today view the destruction of their traditional powers of sorcery and magic differently” and have the suspicion (and curiosity) that the former secret knowledge would have given them success and prosperity (p. 137). It appears that Christian beliefs were substituted for traditional ones and that “people are beginning to experience a power vacuum” (p. 139). Although sorcery declined after the early missionaries attempts to eradicate it, new practices are now in use. One example is *maus posin* (mouth sorcery), which is a performative ritual that involves reciting magic words while naming the intended victim. Sorcery is also used to acquire land, for gardens to produce well, to fatten pigs and for hunting expeditions. In other words, sorcery is used as a form of power for economic reasons as well as to control sickness and death.

The Christian church is largely silent about sorcery because it is considered evil. It represents the old way with the concomitant rituals and traditions, and Christians are supposed to have overcome such heathen practices.

The Central Mekeo and Roro

Sorcery is not uncommon among two closely related groups in the Central Province, the Central Mekeo (Zocca 2009) and the Roro (Petrus 2009). The Central Mekeo were first visited by French Catholics in 1890 and the Roro area was visited about the same time, but from Yule Island where the first Catholic missionaries landed in 1885.

The colonial government established village authorities that had power that was in competition with traditional leaders and this (as well as the coming of missions) affected the role of sorcerers in the society. However, productive magic (for crops, rain, love) are still sought after and the traditional rituals “although not the sorcery ones, are said to be now enriched with Christian symbols and features” (p. 191). According to Petrus, “sorcery is still their [the Roro] usual explanation of sickness and death” (p.235).

The *posen* among the Roro is a form of assault sorcery where practitioners inject their victims with poisonous substances, such as acids, leaves, bark and human fluids. One way to neutralize the effects is by applying something cold, such as washing the victim in cold water, because sorcery power is hot. Sorcery has diminished by Christian teachings, but the use and knowledge of *posen* is still widespread.

Goodenough Island

Zocca (2009) has also written about sorcery on Goodenough Island, one of the main islands off the southeast coast of PNG and in the Milne Bay Province.

Work began on Goodenough in 1898 when the Methodist Mission spread from Woodlark and other nearby islands. It was later aided by the London Missionary Society, the Anglicans, and the Wesleyan Methodists from Australia. Nevertheless, “[t]raditional beliefs and practices [still] influence the life of the Islanders and already in the late 1950s gave rise to a sort of cargo cult” (p.262). In Catholic areas,

4 The Morobe Province includes scores of languages (see http://www.sil.org/pacific/png/maps/Morobe_small.jpg).
5 For a language map of the Central Province see: http://www.sil.org/pacific/png/maps/CP_small.jpg.
Christian objects, such as holy water, medals, crucifixes, and statues assist with the common events of gardening, hunting, building, fishing, attracting lovers and breeding animals.

The traditional spirit world on Goodenough Island included a supreme being, sky people, nature spirits, culture heroes, ancient ancestors, ghosts of the recent dead, magicians, sorcerers, witches, and totems. The most common objects used in sorcery have been dead people’s bones, ginger, plant roots, herbs, leaves, lime, stones, stone axes, spears, knives, and betel nut. However, “The power of sorcery is not confined to the objects, spells, and performances, but it is believed to reside in the sorcerers themselves” (p. 269).

The following are listed as types of sorcery: causes TB and other sicknesses; a kind that makes people lazy and hungry; a type that stops people from eating meat; another causes loss of skills in speaking, hunting and fishing; still another is a curse that brings instant death; others suppresses appetite or cause blockages of the throat; some are used for gardening; love magic; one type causes lightning to strike someone, another causes swollen parts of the body; sores.

Some people also believe in witches, which feed on corpses, come as bats at night or other birds by day, and are most often women (called “ladies”). Witches and sorcerers are punished, the latter by making them eat some of the substance given to someone to cause sickness or death. In a trial by ordeal, if the sorcerer does not get sick, he (or she) was declared innocent.

Zocca presents tables that list how many people had heard of someone being accused of being a sorcerer or witch, their gender (mainly female for witches, the opposite for sorcerers), the accusations (mainly causing sickness), age of the accused, means of punishment and who gave the punishment.

**The Tolai**

The essay in Zocca by William Longgar (2009) reports mainly on the Tolai people of East New Britain.7

Tolai, a Melanesian language, has contributed substantially to the lexicon of Tok Pisin but, according to Longgar, “the term *sanguma* itself is unknown in the New Guinea Islands and the Papuan areas” (p. 310). Its knowledge came into the Tolai culture due to contact with indentured labors from other areas.

The Tolai number some 140,000, making it one of the largest language groups in PNG. The people make no dichotomy between the religious and the secular. Longgar researched the connection between magic and sorcery among the people and comments on the traditional spiritual nature of the Tolai, their sacred societies, artifacts, shrines, and land and their attitudes toward sorcery.

The Tolai believe in a life force for power than exists on three levels: (1) a powerful and active creator being that still regulates the customs and traditional laws of the people; (2) a middle level of beings that can be benevolent or malevolent, so shell money is made to placate them; (3) a lower level consisting of the ghosts (*tambaran*, a Tolai word now used widely in Tok Pisin) of dead people. A powerful ritual is able to control them.

The relationship between the Tolai and their ancestors continues because the ancestors “are alive not just in the memory of their progeny and in ritual reenactments, but also in their totems, and appear to them in dreams.” Further, “ancestorship is not attained after death; rather, it begins in old-age” (p. 323).

Tolai sorcery can be deadly, referred to as projected and assault sorcery, or it can be “sympathetic”, as with *malira* to reduce the effects of love magic. In the deadly forms a sorcerer can transform himself into an animal and thus pursue and harm a victim. Another form of sorcery involves retribution, generally a payback for the death of someone. It cannot be reversed by counter-sorcery and involves divination and some object from the intended victim (clothes, bodily substance).

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Benevolent sorcery (magic) can protect or cure people, so it is not feared by the Tolai. It may be represented with an amulet or something hung from the rear-view mirror in a vehicle and calls for some ritual to be effective. Benevolent forms of sorcery may be used to produce rain or to win an election.

Two things about sorcery and magic are greatly feared by the Tolai: the fear of death and the way a person dies. Upon the death of a person, the distribution of shell money is especially significant. Sorcery turns out to be a means of survival, economically and socially.

Longgar also comments upon church groups that seem to use a Christianized form of magic and sorcery. For example, church healing groups use religious symbolism, embracing the process of syncretism in their ministries.

**Discussion**

Other Tok Pisin words used in the etic genre of sorcery are poisen, poisen man, poisen meri, puripuri, pawa, blak pawa, kawawar, marila, and tambaran (man). Although we can describe and attempt to analyze these words individually, it is important to note that in the folk beliefs there is no separation of what happens in the so-called spiritual realm on the one hand and the natural on the other. The dichotomy is an artifact of many denominations in Christianity as well as our so-called scientific or empirical approach to describing cultures and societies.

For example, in Lawrence and Meggitt (eds. 1965) there are three societies (Huli, Mae Enga, and Kyaka) described that are linguistically and culturally related to each other and to the Kewa, with which I am familiar. As the authors explain, “Neither Highlands nor Seaboard natives have special words for religion and magic as mutually exclusive cultural entities” (p. 7). Sorcery and its variations, rendered both as poisen and sanguma in Tok Pisin, can be related closely to ancestral spirits and deities, as well as nature spirits and other spirit-beings.

Nevertheless, poisen is generally (and generically) used in Tok Pisin for sorcery and as a substance it is allegedly placed in food or other places to cause sickness and even death. There are poisen types, such as maus poisen (words that are performatives, spoken or called out to direct the power of the word towards an individual), and poisen men and women (poisen meri), who can kill people by supernatural means, sometimes removing or damaging their organs.

Mihalic (1971:159) glosses poisen as black magic, sorcery, a spell, or a charm and the poisin man as a sorcerer. 

Because marila does not cause illness or death, researchers such as anthropologists, call it a benevolent type of sorcery. It is most often referred to as “love magic,” a spell that men (in particular) use to cause women to desire them. However, Longgar finds the translation unsatisfactory saying that it is not about making a woman love a man but “is more about overcoming or weakening the will power of the targeted woman, who might be resisting the approaches of a man for sex [or] for some marriage arrangement” (p.311).

Although, there are some individuals more adept at the use of marila than others, the important thing is for someone to place the charm into the food or somewhere as an agent to cause the spell. Marila is therefore in the category of “beneficial” magic, along with garden magic, arrow or hunting magic, and rain magic.

The Mihalic project reports that puripuri is also a word for sorcery. As early as 1898 Haddon (1904:320) reported that it was used for producing disease or sickness by magic. The word is also well known in the

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8 Note that the “poison” of a snake bite is called gip in Tok Pisin.

9 Kewas have told me of men putting substances—leaves—in their ear ornaments so that when they are close to women, they are mutually attracted.
Torres Strait and used in Aboriginal English. Shnukal (1988:187) claims that it is from the Kala Lagaw Ya language of the Western Torres Strait.

Slone (2001:1050) indexes the word *tambaranman* to signify “a spirit intermediary” sometimes associated with a men’s secret society.

From this general discussion and from Zocca, we can suggest the following about sorcery, sorcerers, *sanguma* and witches:

**Folk characteristics of sorcery and sorcerers:**
- Sorcery substance is hot, so that it can burn people, but it can be made cold.
- Sorcery involves the use of bodily substances as agents.
- A sorcerer uses instruments such as bones, stones, arrows, as instruments.
- The sorcerer uses ritual actions and speech.
- The sorcerer is a man/men who live on the earth.

**Folk characteristics of sanguma:**
According to Laycock (1996:273-74) and others, the following are characteristics of *sanguma*:
- It is an institution of murder, not only sickness.
- It is carried out by men, acting in groups, with instruments such as needles.
- It takes place in the late evening or early morning.
- It involves a physical attack on one individual in a lonely place.
- The individual cannot recount the experience due to a number of factors.
- The individual dies later back in his village.
- It is antisocial and without protection.

**Folk characterizations of witches:**
- They have supernatural powers and can dwell in animals.
- They are commonly found near corpses and burial sites.
- They are usually women.
- They travel most often in the dark.
- They desire blood or other human parts.
- They are responsible for suffering, illness and death.

**Folk characterizations of nature spirits (*masalai*):**
- They are special kinds of non-humans.
- They live in unusual and dangerous places, such as deep in a river or lake, in caves or heavily forested areas.

**Comments from the Engan perspective**
In this section I examine briefly the attitudes and beliefs of four groups from the Engan language family: Kewa, Huli, Kyaka Enga, and Kyaka.¹⁰ The views are basically observations from those who live outside the culture, although some of the researchers have learned to speak the vernacular languages.

Traditionally the main force among the Kewa has been the *remo*, the spirits of the departed.¹¹ These spirits include major deities to whom cult practitioners appeal during their ritual activities. The spirits were

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¹⁰ From Lawrence and Meggitt, eds. 1965; Draper 200; and Franklin and Franklin 1978.
most actively called upon in the *rimbu anda* (spirit house) and the noise of the flutes blown during certain ceremonies to frighten people were called the *ribu agaa* (spirit talk) and the head man of the *rimbu* ceremony was the *rimbu asubaa*. The word *remo* can also be used to describe withered old people who are about to join the ranks of the departed ancestors.\(^\text{12}\)

The generic word for sorcery in Kewa is *romo* or *romo-malu* and refers more to the substance than to the practice. The most common event was for someone to place hair, saliva, etc. in the object’s food and thereby cause illness and, in some cases, eventually death. Once the cause has been determined, perhaps by divination, the ill person must take counter-sorcery “medicine.”

Traditionally, for most sicknesses (*yaina*)\(^\text{13}\), Kewa head men “cured” them with particular ceremonies involving named deities, such as the *Adaalu Rimbu* (also Tagane Rimbu, Franklin and Franklin 1978:442). The leaders would kill a pig with a ceremonial stone axe and the blood drained onto sacred painted stones in a pit. (Franklin and Franklin 1978:256).

Sorcerers (*romo ne aa*) used the cassowary leg bone (*pandala*) to cause good fortune. It could be used to make a woman like a man, for trading partners to give pork and shell bargains, or to dispose of a sickness by discharging the poison (the *romo*). The bone might be stuck in the man’s armband or near a comb in his hair at either side of the head.

The Kewa ritual stones (*remo apaa*) had unusual shapes (generally concave and bowl-like) that the men used in spirit houses such as the *Agunape* and *Opayo*.*\(^\text{14}\) The head men carried the sides of a butchered pig into the spirit house by the cult leaders and then cooked and eaten along with some of the pig fat. The ritual stones were collected in a small room and decorated with the pig fat and red clay, and pearlshells and oil were put in them. The head men then called upon the departed spirits to help (bless) them. When finished with the ritual they took the shells back, departed the spirit house and closed it up again.

Spirit masks (*rumbu eta*) were used when deities were “carried” (imported) into an area. They kept outsiders (non-participants) from knowing the identity of those who were singing at the spirit houses. They were made out of large shells traded from other areas.

My observation is that anything unusual can be attributed to the *remo*. Notice, simply from lexical uses (some which will be mentioned in more detail later) the following: *remo-agaa* (spirit—talk) is the kind of “talk” that flutes make when they are played for the spirits; *remo-apaa* (spirit-stone) are specially shaped stones that are thought to be magical and therefore placed in spirit houses; *remo yaanda* (spirit fight) “whirlwind”; *remona-ini* (spirit.its-eye) “firefly” may look like what some people think are a spirit’s eyes; *remona-maa* (spirit.its-taro) is an “inedible taro” that only a spirit would eat; *remona-mata* (spirit.its-dance) is “a hopping insect,” and a spirit could do that; *remo-supi* (spirit-spit) appears overnight as “dew/foam” that the devil has caused, and so on.

On the other hand, the spirit beings are not sorcerers because they are not human. They do not invoke sorcery substances, but they do require pacification through the means of rituals and ceremonies. A sorcerer requires payments, not pacification, for his rituals and curing. So there is some overlap—curing is provided in both cases and both employ rituals—but even sorcerers are fearful of spirits. Spirits always trump sorcerers and even nature spirits.

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\(^1\) Some idea of the scope of spirits in Kewa stories can be found by consulting the index of MacDonald (1991). Of her 188 stories in the South Kewa (Mararoko), at least 67 refer to spirits of some kind.

\(^2\) For a discussion of the names of Kewa deities see Franklin and Franklin 1978:441-443.

\(^3\) The Kewa word *yaina* means to bespell something by seeking help with ritual speech.

\(^4\) *Opayo* (Franklin and Franklin 1978:256) is the name of stones with a particular shape and was used for certain curing ceremonies, especially for curing pneumonia (*perani kopea*).
Goblins and ogres (nature spirits) come in several varieties, but each is translated into Tok Pisin as *masalai*, or nature spirits. While feared, they do not require pacification or payment. One type are called *kalando* and generally live in caves, rapids and deep places in the water. The *pando*, on the other hand, live where the wild cane grows and has a long nose like a woodpecker. The *tamapo* also live in the wild cane and can be heard yelling from inside large stones when they are heated.

Within the Engan language group (e.g., Enga, Huli, Kyaka and Kewa) spirit deities (*tambaran* in Tok Pisin) are the prominent agents that control sickness and head men interact with them by means of rituals. For example, among the Huli “the sorcerer attracts the deity Toro to certain stones in his possession” (Glasse 1965:41) that then have the power of the deity in them. The stones can emit invisible, lethal particles that the sorcerer can aim in any direction.

The Mae Enga have a terrestrial society that “is thought to be isomorphic with the celestial society of the causal people” (Meggitt 1965:108). The celestial society includes quasi-human beings—sky people (the sun and the moon as father and mother)—that were formed in phratries and sent members who founded the terrestrial phratries. Other sky people arrived on earth with ancestral stones that are now the property of the particular phratry or clan. A man can influence, but not control, the decisions of the sky dwellers with divining techniques.

Next in rank below the sky people are the ghosts and all injuries, illnesses and deaths are attributed to them. These ghosts are dead ancestors and must be kept at bay and placated by killing pigs or game and rubbing pork fat or tree oil on the clan fertility stones. The Mae Enga also believe that demons inhabit caves and waterfalls, the traditional *masalai*, as they are called in Tok Pisin.

In the case of magic, men use magical spells in several ways: for personal health protection (including from sorcery); for the attraction of wealth, especially pigs; for the enhancement of appearance and avoidance of sexual defilement; and, finally, to counter the injury of enemies. There are, however a limited number of sorcery techniques and some of them are thought to be imported.

The Kyaka are closely related to the Enga, in fact, “[i]n broad outline Kyaka and Mae are alike in economy, social organization and religion” (Bulmer 1965:132). Traditional Kyaka cosmology includes ghosts of the recent dead, nature demons, the Fertility Goddess, ancestral ghosts, forest spirits, sky beings, a stranger ghost, a female forest spirit, cannibal ogres, and minor nature spirits.

The Kyaka claim to practice several kinds of sorcery and believe in a mild form of witchcraft. They also have techniques for divining, curing sickness, bringing luck, and promoting the health and fertility of pigs. All groups possess fertility stones and other stones of power.

The main categories of ghosts are the recent dead, collective ghosts, individual named ancestral ghosts, and powerful spirit-beings. Ghosts haunt burial grounds and can manifest themselves in the shape of certain reptiles, insects, or birds.

In cases of misfortune the Kyaka employ divining techniques to find out who is responsible and there are certain sicknesses that are attributed to sorcery or poisoning, rather than to ghosts or demons.

The Drapers (2002:650-651) provide an appendix that discusses traditional medicines and the role of the shaman in treatments. In the Kyaka society “there were more or less hereditary shamans, mostly males who were [called upon] to manipulate supernatural influences or forces.” At least one or two functioned in each clan, using leaves and stones with magical properties to perform their rituals.

**Responses from some groups**

Bartle, a Nazarene missionary, studied the importance of contextualizing the Christian message and presented a model for theology in Melanesia. He outlines a number of PNG cultural practices and provides a Christian response by relating them to stories and examples from the Bible. These cultural beliefs and practices include:
Burial with the ancestors.
• Consulting mediums and talking with the dead.
• The location or place of the dead.
• The appearance of spirits.
• The fear of death.
• The transformation of the body (reunited with the spirit).
• Deceitful spirits of the dead.

Bartle tackles the “problem of sanguma” head-on because he concludes that it is an “evil spirit who lives within a person and coerces the person into doing things that a normal person would never want to do” (2005:287). He outlines a number of personal “steps to freedom” including renouncing certain practices, such as praying to the spirits or seeking a sorcerer for help, destroying certain items belonging to the dead, such as bones, hair, and clothes, and things that were dedicated to spirits. He also discusses setting a person free who is recognized by the community as having a sanguma spirit (2005:296-298).

The Catholic church in the Simbu has taken these steps to counteract witchcraft (Zocca 2010:36-39):

• Visits to victims by church workers.
• Teach people about the causes of sickness.
• Provide meetings and courses on witchcraft.
• Give shelter to the afflicted people.
• Report incidents to the police.
• Visits to those accused of sanguma.
• Establish church sanctions.

Evangelical Protestant churches generally consider that someone with sanguma power is “possessed” by an evil spirit. They suggest:

• Counseling those with an evil “psychic” power.
• Exorcism for those possessed by an evil spirit.
• Providing praying and healing groups.

Secular groups (Zocca 2010:43-45) suggest the following:

• Educational courses.
• Improving health and community services.
• Taking suspected perpetrators to court.
• Involving the police and judiciary in violent cases.
• Modifying the sorcery act (which incriminates both parties).
• Leaders present at deaths and burials.

Summary and conclusions

Sorcery, especially the violent sanguma, is prevalent in PNG and shows no signs of diminishing. The phenomena is acknowledged in the religious and secular communities, as witnessed by both groups adopting policies to deal with it.

The relationship of sorcery to cargo cults and millennium movements is more obscure but is prevalent in benevolent sorcery (magic) of various kinds. However, when an action that is meant for good, such as
compensation, turns out unexpectedly, the results are open to question, such that divination and sorcery is always an option.

Sorcery is an attempt to act and not sit passively just because the event seems overwhelming. Churches and secular agencies have strategies and plans that deal with sorcery and especially its harsh form—sanguma. We can be certain of future reports on the matter by the Melanesian Institute.

References


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