

Sorcery in Papua New Guinea A Missiological and Pastoral Challenge

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Abstract: This article is a free rendering of a chapter of my book *Encounter of Religions: Faith and no-Faith in a Global World*.¹ Therein one can also find the scientific apparatus. Here, I present an account of cases of sorcery in Papua New Guinea as well as instances when Christians' views about or responses to sorcery were documented and analyzed.

Keywords: Sorcery • Papua New Guinea • Melanesian Culture • Missiology

Introduction: Sori-money

It is a widespread opinion that the compensation one has to pay in case of an accident or crime in traditional societies corresponds with the gravity of the deed. We call it pay-back killing, a basis for the execution of the *lex talionis*, the law of blood revenge. Also we know about mechanisms capable to cool down the rage of the victims

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¹ *Wenn Religionen sich begegnen. Glauben und anders glauben in einer globalen Welt* (Wien, Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2014), 41-53.

in order to avoid the worst case scenario by means of tariffs.

The ancient Germans knew such tariffs under the name of “Wergeld”, payment for a person, a price list for murder, beginning with the murder of a slave and ending with the murder of a king. Thus a freeman in the kingdom of Burgundy (~ 5th century AD) was worth 300 solidi, someone from the middle class 200 solidi, and a victim of the lower classes 150 solidi. This system was not only working for murder, but for all kinds of lethal damages. The form of payment depends on the form of the economy and of the general culture. If we take the case of a killer among the Nuer (South Sudan), there the killer pays 40 to 50 cows, if he is successful to take refuge in the house of the chief, hoping that the chief will calm down the emotions and the thirst for revenge of the victim’s party.

Tariffs are also known in the Hindu–karma–system. Thus the Garuda Purana (an ancient Hindu text) stipulates that someone who despises the teacher will be reborn as an epileptic. Someone, who, as a priest, diverts the benefice of a sacrifice in favor of those who have not paid for it, will be reborn as a pig. Someone who steals poison, as a scorpion.

With regard to tariffs it is noteworthy that they do not always correspond to the “quality” or “value” of the deed or, for example of the stolen item. Thus among the Fore (highland of PNG) the number of pigs in case of theft does not depend on the value of the stolen good but on the power relationship between the thief and the victim. Equally important: do there exist other grievances between the two parties? Or the question, whether relatives of the thief are willing, when needed, to come to the rescue of the thief. Also: the victim has to go himself to collect the compensation. There does not exist any social pressure upon the thief to give the goods back, although

stealing is not, in principle, considered to be a praiseworthy action.

On the other side, if the system of tariffs is not always built upon the equivalency deed–punishment, then what, for many indigenous peoples, is the essence of justice? What energy or matter makes justice run, if it is not even the idea of equality in or through compensation? Compensation in the sense that we all know very well that a child killed in an accident cannot be replaced, cannot be brought back to life - and this regardless of the question of guilt or non-guilt of the driver who killed that child, or eventually of the child's responsibility for the accident. In other words, what is asked for is really this: co- misery, com-compassion, which means sharing the grief! Therefore the money, eventually paid is called sori-money (Pidgin for “sorry”); money expressing the respect for the other, the victim or the ones related to the victims.

Compassion, respect-solidarity are so important, since they are the warranty of peace in the community, in particular in a “small” one. Peace reigns, when there is an equilibrium between all the members regarding the burden they all have to share, an equilibrium above all on the social and emotional level! Anybody carry the other's burden, says the Bible. Then there is peace.

Yet, sometimes the peace is not sincere but rotten; a fake peace. A peace that works on her outside, but “stinks” on the inside - a peace not based upon sori, but on sorcery!

Sorcery

The “peace” that stems from sorcery is not based upon the fact of having found the right guilty person for a fire, an accident or death in the family and so on, but rather on having “found”, meaning having named a person a “sorcerer”. Sorcery is the method of naming, based upon

the conviction that evil must necessary be in need of “transportation”, of a carrier, of a support system, be it a human being, a “spirit”, an animal or something else in nature or culture.

The naming process is a process of disenchantment. Taking away, neutralizing what is en-chanting, by tracing it back to its supposed origin - to bring the black forces that threaten the community back to where they belong, namely “in a box” away from the living. Out of reach to a place where they can no longer ignite that fear that tries to terrorize us.

This fear factor is especially strong in a society like modern PNG, where everything is in “construction”, on a breaking point in an unstable equilibrium, politics, society, economy, church, family, friendship, love and trust... Everything seems up for grasping, re-edition, re-formulation, re-invention.

However, fear is not the only motive for sorcery. Many other emotions and hard feelings can work as a threat to the peace and harmony of a community and thus become agents of sorcery. There are greed, envy, thirst for revenge and many other emotions as possible candidates. And above all, why are the victims quasi always the weak members of the society? Here some facts:

The popular PNG newspaper the *The National*² informs us under the title “Barbaric”, that O’Neill, then prime minister of PNG, condemns the “barbaric murder of a young women in Mt. Hagen.” He also asks for the full implementation of the power of the law regarding the culprits.

What was the case? A 20 years old mother of an 8-month old daughter had been tortured with a hot iron rod, was put naked and in chains and burnt alive—and this in public, people standing by. The mother’s name

² *The National*, 8-10/2/2013, pp. 1 and 3.

was Kepari Lanieta from Paiala, district Porgera Enga province. The woman was accused of having killed a boy by means of sorcery. The outcry of horror was so great that even the USA embassy in PNG sent a note of protest to the PNG government.

Prime minister O'Neill did not only condemn the action of the murderers as barbaric and horrifying. He also appealed to the conscience of the whole community - since "all of us including Kepari" belong to the same "society". O'Neill also added that the number of this kind of murder in some parts of the country was increasing. The newspaper then argued that sorcery killings had nothing to do with a legitimate legal process or the punishment of culprits, since the victims were always "women, the elderly and the weak ones", who had nothing to do whatsoever with the cases in question.

This kind of reasoning is not new. It is, indeed, well known. New, however, is the fact that the modern state of PNG tries to eradicate this kind of behavior thanks to the power of the law, that means thanks to its power of intervention through the power of the police force and the civil courts. Such a process, however, would include that the population remains calm and expresses trust in the work of the police, lets the police do "its work". In addition to this the laws concerning sorcery cases would have to be strengthened, indeed, have to become more strict.

Yet here we encounter a problem. Since the methods of the police, the state, the "law" are diametrically opposed to the methods of the witch-doctor to find the "truth". And naturally, the witch-doctor's methods seem to be more effective. When it comes to his prestige the witch-doctor still is not yet "dethroned" in the culture of the people. He still has it in his hands whom to let live and whom to kill! Furthermore among those the witch-

doctor lets die there is a high proportion of women - among 6 victims, 5 are women.³

No wonder that the case discussed above, the murder of Kepari Lanieta, has found the interest of the US embassy because of the gender problem, the gender-based violence. The Americans hoped that this gender-based violence problem could mobilize international sympathies in a kind of alliance between the PNG government and the so-called “civil society”, that is all “common citizens” of a given society.⁴ Yet, how strong is the “civil society” in PNG? And is there any hope that the PNG society will combat sorcery on the basis of “women rights”?

The *Papua New Guinea Post-Courier* informs us under the title “laws and studies on sorcery needed” that in PNG yearly 500 people lose their lives because of sorcery.⁵ The case of Kepari is far away from being a “single”, solitary happening. Sometime before Kepari’s killing, February 2008,⁶ we learn about a killing of a woman accused of sorcery, who was hanged together with her husband. The woman was pregnant, but lost her baby while trying to get free from the “gallows”,

It may be interesting here to call to mind a novel by the Portuguese Nobel prize winner José Saramago,⁷ in which he depicts all the cruelties committed by missionaries preaching Christian monotheism. The list produced by the *Papua New Guinea Post-Courier*⁸ does not differ much from the cruelties mentioned by Saramago in his book. According to a minister of the PNG

³ *Papua New Guinea Post-Courier*, 5/2/2013, p. 12.

⁴ See, *The National*, 8/2/2013.p. 3.

⁵ 15/2/2013, p. 12.

⁶ See, *ibid*.

⁷ *O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo*, (Lisboa: Editorial Caminho, 1991; *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (New York: Mariner Books, 2020).

⁸ 15/2/2013, p. 12.

government “sorcery”, also called “sanguma” or “poisin” or “black magic” operated against single, helpless women “by burning them on a pole, by stoning them, raping them, butchering them with an axe, burying them alive, electrocuting them, or by forcing them to drink petrol or killing them by fixing them at the back of a car and then dragging them through the streets until they are dead.”

Yet, where were the “laws”? Where the efforts to stop this? There was something the German government in New Guinea and the Anglo-Australian authorities tried to do in the name of “civilizing” the customs and manners. There were the Native Board Regulations of 1889 of the British government, followed after World War I by the Australians, to punish the practice of sorcery with a prison sentence of 6 months. Also, customs and manners were not supposed to contradict the “principles of humanity”.

However, these “principles of humanity” were a loose cannon. Hence the practice of revenge killings could pretend to be just this: an expression of the “principles of humanity”(!), since a pay-back-killing was presented as an action of duty! In other words—and this problem exists until today—were sorcery actions really criminal actions, falling under the criminal code, or could they be “excused” while falling under a separate legislation, called the “sorcery act”? Here, clarification is still needed! So much still remains to do. Therefore we see also the Christians entering the scene!

The medical council of the Churches of PNG (CMC) has asked the government to declare illegal all killings related to sorcery: “Urgent laws on sorcery needed”.⁹ CMC criticizes that many innocent human beings, in particular women and old people are still harassed and killed because of that “outdated belief” (i.e., sorcery). To

⁹ See, *Papua New Guinea Post-Courier*, 4/3/2013, p. 2.

forbid sorcery is even more important according to Mr. Wallace Kintak, president of CMC, since sorcery is no longer a phenomenon threatening only the countryside, but invading the cities also. Again, CMC criticizes the government to have neglected the sorcery problem in the previous legislature. So the crime could continue. CMC proposes the following program in three points:

1. Each action having to do with sorcery can be treated as criminal action.
2. Any law in this matter must deal also with the “witch-doctor”. This is someone who abuses the role of the bush-doctor. For reasons of money he pretends to read the future and to be able to identify a sorcerer. Via the process of “denunciation” and because of his claim to be in possession of special knowledge, he just becomes guilty of throwing people into disaster and death. Consequently, in particular these “doctors” should be severely punished, i.e., in the harshest way possible!
3. Punishment in general for all those who cast suspicion on others to be sorcerers.

Finally, it is important to note that CMC is in particular unhappy with the fact that Christians play a role in the dark business of sorcery. Should they not know better as followers of the Gospel? It is true that the Churches try their best through preaching, but Christians simply don’t stay their ground in this matter. By showing disappointment that Christians are so “weak” in front of sorcery CMC touches an important point. The whole fight against sorcery is a fight on the spiritual level, not only on the “society” level: that is only on the level of what actually “is in”, is “sexy” and fashionable—like gender criticism, women’s rights, etc., the level on which also the US embassy tried to deal with the case of Kepari, mentioned above.

On the other hand, what CMC is asking for is a “showdown” between the values of the Gospel and the

values of “culture”. Here, each Christian, so CMC, has to make a personal decision on which path to follow, the path of Jesus or the path of the sorcerer sanctioned by “tradition”. In fact, we are touching here one of the most important problems of missiology and pastoral theology in PNG. How do we “read” the Gospel? What do we learn from the Gospel? Which are the spiritual resources the Gospel-stories offer to us, Christians of PNG, people of our country and of the Church?

How urgent and how complicated at the same time all this is in particular for Christians, can again be illustrated by another example of the *The National*, a sorcery case under the title: “Roasted alive!” with the explanation that a man affirms he and 6 women with him were burnt as Easter sacrifice (!), in order to eradicate sorcery! The “sacrifice”, (the roasting to stop any future roasting!?), is supposed to have taken place in Merep, Nipa district, Southern Highlands.¹⁰

The police of Mendi, responsible for that case, could not confirm this event, but the man, by the name Komape Lap, who contrary to the 6 women could escape, tried to corroborate the story by showing his wounds (face and back part). He told *The National* that he and the women were forced to get naked and to sit on a sheet metal roof that was heated by a fire underneath. Poles were pushed into the genitals. Komape Lap left his two wives who were part of the 6 women, behind, when he escaped. He could not say if they were still alive. He added that this was already the second attack against him and that now he was looking for justice and protection.¹¹

Already during the first attack the whole family was destroyed, houses, domestic animals, food and coffee garden. His relatives had been unable to protect him. During this first attack (last January) his wife was burnt

¹⁰ *The National*, 4/4/2013.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4/4/2013, p. 2.

to death, while his daughter Nongkang was put into chains and thrown into a cave. She too perished.

The second attack which took place in April, the one revealed to the newspaper, was due to the fact that his family was held responsible for the death of a Church-elder. However, the newspaper did not explain whether the name “Easter-sacrifice” had to do with the timing of the crime or whether some “spiritual” meaning laid behind it. Again the police declared its ignorance of the whole affair adding that the story still needed to be investigated.

We see immediately how difficult such an investigation would be. But that would not be anything new for the police. Take for this also the example of a case that happened the 8th of April, 4 days later than the Komape Lap roasting. Here, we are dealing with a sorcery killing in Bougainville in the village Lopele, Bana district (South Bougainville). Two elderly women were decapitated. The police called the action “barbaric and senseless”. The two women, held “responsible” for the death of a former village teacher, were tortured for 3 days (having axe and knife wounds) before being put to death.¹²

This in itself is nothing new, given what we have seen so far. However, what is especially revolting and tragic in this last case is the fact that all this happened in the presence of the police. The newspaper tells us how the policemen, supported by some Churchmen, tried everything possible to prevent the killing—but in vain. The police was in the minority and the Lopele people were armed with heavy, high-powered weapons, plus knives and axes.

The appearance of this high weapons is new. It shows that the purpose of the armed intervention is no longer the restoration of a situation of equilibrium, of peace and

¹² See, *Papua New Guinea Post-Courier*, pp 1-2.

harmony in the society, in order to make any future peace possible (as we have seen in the case of sori-money). Rather the purpose is the domination and elimination. The relatives of the victims flee to other places and the rest of the population is taken for security reasons to “safe locations”.

The situation does not change if we take into account the fact that in the case of the newspaper article the inspector Birengka was very angry with his superiors for the lack of support. Birengka also defended his position not to further interfere, arguing that his police force simply as too small to be effective, so that by not interfering he avoided a bloodbath.

In sum, the number of killings is in a steady increase in particular, thanks to the use of heavy weapons, destroying any pretense to act in the name of any future social peace. But was this not something that the “old sorcery” was supposed to do even if it killed randomly the old and the weak? The use of heavy weapons however has only one goal: to eliminate the police! Yet, how can under these circumstances democracy, how can the new state PNG inspire trust in the minds of its citizens? Trust and faith that the old sorcery mechanism can and must be stopped by new methods. Yet, again, sometimes it is the elite in economy and on the state level that benefits most from sorcery practices.

Furthermore, it is after all necessary, to see the main motive for sorcery not only in fear but also in greed, envy and a kind of “will to power”.

I was supported in this view by a group of students from the highlands with whom I discussed the question of sorcery. They all insisted on the greed and envy factor, but they added that this greed can only destroy a life and develop its nefarious dynamics, if the local community gives its assent. Without this assent of clan or tribe, or as a minimum tacit toleration, nothing can happen. It is

never a single person, but rather a group of village people, if not the village in its totality, that will enter a house, drag a person outside and put it on a pole. Then it is up to one who just likes it to put the victim into pieces. However, most people, as always in such cases, might just only act as onlookers.

However, as the students also pointed out, the most important part of the execution act happens after death has claimed its victims. Since now, the family of the victim(s) can claim “sori-money”—money, pigs, or whatever seems suitable. Once the payment has taken place, the whole thing is forgotten, “justice” has been accomplished.

In other words, sorcery as a method of systematic enrichment! We have already seen in some of the cases related by the newspapers, how the aggressors were after the possessions of the victims, but it sounds like a really perverse irony that the relatives of the victim(s) are transformed into the true beneficiaries. Thus, sorcery as a money making machine. No shame involved, no guilt. And the weaker and more helpless the victims are, the surer the gain. Gain for the others, the relatives of the victim(s). Has the jungle of PNG joined the jungle of Wall Street?

Finally, I was told that there had been one case, where a religious Brother was able to stop the tragedy of slicing a person into pieces in public, but this Brother was very strong, a true Arnold Schwarzenegger type. Obviously, courage without muscles is not enough!

In sum, what can we do? What would Jesus have done?

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