

Sorcery and Witchcraft: A Critical Challenge in Papua New Guinea

Tuan Viet Cao, CM¹

ABSTRACT

In the modern age of the twenty-first century, with rapid developments in technology and science, accusations of sorcery and witchcraft appear to be occurring with increasing and spreading regularity throughout Papua New Guinea (PNG), a country in the South Pacific, a strange neighbor of Asia. With ninety-seven percent of the population identified as Christian, issues associated with sorcery and witchcraft remain pervasive and severe. These concerns have heightened the apprehension of the government, international organizations, institutes, and Christian Churches, viewing them as among the most critical challenges to the country's peace and development. Based on various materials, research, and conferences on Melanesian culture, particularly on sorcery and witchcraft in PNG, and with experience of living in PNG as a Catholic missionary priest, the author relates to non-Melanesian readers the phenomena of sorcery and witchcraft in PNG with the reasons and the horrific consequences to the individuals, families, and communities. The author also delineates specific attitudes, strategies, and actions implemented by the government, organizations, and churches, grounded in Christian values, human

¹ *Tuan Viet Cao, C.M.* is a Vietnamese Vincentian missionary priest working in Papua New Guinea. Currently, he is serving in the Holy Name of Jesus, Port Moresby. At the same time, he is the Vocation Director of the Vincentian International Community in Papua New Guinea.

rights, ethics, science, and biomedicine. These initiatives aim to persuade individuals to embrace scientific and verifiable explanations for death, sickness, and misfortunes, discouraging attributions to sorcery and witchcraft. As with other societal challenges, the author underscores that the optimal strategy for addressing sorcery-related issues involves ensuring access to healthcare services, strengthening judicial enforcement, promoting education, providing religious education, and fostering economic development.

Keywords: *culture, sorcery, witchcraft, Christianity, development*

1. Introduction

Most modern people do not believe in the effectiveness of sorcery and witchcraft, but just as some imaginary stories in fairy tales, or some superstitions, beliefs, and practices in ancient and primal societies. However, the idea that all sorts of illness, death, and misfortune are frequently caused by the deliberate interventions of individuals with special powers or magical knowledge is pervasive throughout Melanesian countries, particularly Papua New Guinea (PNG). According to Forsyth and Eves, sorcery and witchcraft beliefs and practices influence the daily life of people in PNG. Those beliefs and practices are significant vectors for tensions, fear, insecurity, conflict, and brutal violence in communities.²

Regardless of residing in rural villages or urban settings, a prevailing belief persists among the populace that sorcery and witchcraft engender detrimental consequences, causing harm and death to innocent individuals. Consequently, sorcerers and witches are perceived as formidable adversaries to individuals, families, and communities within society, instilling fear and insecurity. Paradoxic-

² M. Forsyth and R. Eves, eds., *Talking It Through: Responses to Sorcery and Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia* (Canberra: Australia National University Press, 2015), 1.

ally, in the absence of substantive evidence, numerous individuals accused of practicing sorcery and witchcraft have been subjected to brutal forms of punishment, including public burnings, beheadings, and hangings, with such occurrences prominently featured in daily newspapers.³

Significantly, witchcraft and sorcery, along with their ensuing consequences, pose critical challenges to the society of PNG, necessitating concerted efforts and collaboration among the government departments and religious organizations. After a brief introduction to the country of PNG, this paper presents the phenomena of sorcery, emphasizing their alarming repercussions. Lastly, it outlines some attitudes, actions, and approaches aimed at alleviating the tension and fear associated with sorcery and witchcraft, thereby mitigating accusations that fuel sorcery-related violence. Perhaps with these measures, PNG may eventually be “free from sorcery and witchcraft-related violence through strengthened partnerships between relevant stakeholders” as hoped by the *Sorcery National Action Plan*.⁴

2. Papua New Guinea, a Strange Neighbor of Asia

2.1. Brief Introduction to Papua New Guinea

According to archaeological findings, the ancestors of the present inhabitants of PNG arrived possibly as early as 50,000 years ago from Southeast Asia, having traveled through the Southeast Asian peninsula.⁵ As the undiscovered land, most of the parts of PNG were unknown to the Europeans and Asians until Don Jorge de Meneses (1498-1537) discovered the principal island of PNG around 1526-27.

³ Forsyth and Eves, *Talking It Through*, 1.

⁴ The vision of the *Sorcery National Action Plan* (or *Sorcery Accusation Related Violence National Action Plan*) is the official document that gathers the different necessary actions that have been envisaged to counteract sorcery-related violence in Papua New Guinea with the support of the national government and many other relevant stakeholders.

⁵ “Papua New Guinea Country Profile,” *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, accessed August 1, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15436981>

However, the foreigners knew very little of the PNG inhabitants until the late 19th century.⁶

The northern half of PNG became a colony of Germany in 1884, called German New Guinea. In 1914, Australian troops occupied German New Guinea, and it remained under Australian military control until 1921. The southern coast of New Guinea was under British protectorate on November 6, 1884. The protectorate, called British New Guinea, was annexed outright on September 4, 1888. The possession was placed under the authority of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1902. In 1905, British New Guinea became the Territory of Papua, and formal Australian administration began in 1906 and ended with the invasion of the Japanese in 1942.⁷

Following the surrender of the Japanese in 1945, the civil administration of Papua (British New Guinea, as well as New Guinea (German New Guinea), was restored. Papua and New Guinea were combined in an administrative union to become the country of Papua New Guinea. The Administration of PNG became open to United Nations oversight. Elections in 1972 resulted in the formation of a ministry headed by Chief Minister Michael Somare (1936-2021), who pledged to lead the country to self-government and then to independence. PNG became self-governing on December 1, 1973, and achieved independence on September 16, 1975.⁸

2.2. Papua New Guinea, a Stranger Neighbor of Asia

Among the South Pacific countries, geographically, PNG is the largest island state that is connected to Southeast Asia through the common border with Indonesia. In fact, in May 1963, the United Nations transferred a part of PNG (West New Guinea) to Indonesia. Today, this region is called West Papua of Indonesia. Thus, PNG is the closest neighbor to Asia. Barton suggested PNG should be consi-

⁶ “Papua New Guinea History,” *Papua New Guinea Embassy in Japan*, accessed August 1, 2023, <http://en.png.or.jp/about-png/history-of-png/>

⁷ “Papua New Guinea History,” *Papua New Guinea Embassy in Japan*.

⁸ “Papua New Guinea History,” *Papua New Guinea Embassy in Japan*.

dered the tenth country in the Southeast Asian geographic realm after reunifying the South and North of Vietnam.⁹



Photo: Papua New Guinea and Southeast Asia

Source: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. (<https://www.britannica.com/place/New-Guinea#/media/1/411548/281347>)

Since 1976, PNG has joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a special observer. However, until now, after forty-seven years, due to some political and diplomatic reasons, PNG is still keen to join ASEAN but is waiting to become a full member of this association.¹⁰ On July 16, 2019, during the reception for the Vietnamese Ambassador to Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, Pham Vinh Quang, who came to present his credentials, the Governor-

⁹ T. F. Barton, "Papua New Guinea: Tenth Country of Southeast Asia?" *Journal of Geography* 77, no. 7 (1978): 269-272. DOI: 10.1080/00221347808980139

¹⁰ "Papua New Guinea Keen to Join ASEAN," *The Brunei Times*, August 5, 2015, <http://www.bt.com.bn/news-asia/2015/08/05/papua-new-guinea-keen-join-asean>.

General of Papua New Guinea, Bob Dadae, expressed his hope that Vietnam will help his country's bid to become a member of ASEAN.¹¹

Despite Papua New Guinea's geographical proximity to Asia, it remains relatively unfamiliar to most Asians. Six years ago, when I informed my friends and family members that I was going to PNG as a missionary, nobody knew where PNG was. During my travels to various Asian countries, including the Philippines, Singapore, India, Vietnam, and Hong Kong, customs officers frequently inquired, "Where is PNG?" or "Where is Port Moresby?" This underscores the limited knowledge that many Asians possess about Papua New Guinea.

According to the *New World Encyclopedia*, Papua New Guinea (PNG) encompasses the mainland along with approximately 600 offshore islands, constituting a collective landmass of around 462,800 square kilometers. The population exceeds 10 million, encompassing over 600 distinct tribes and 800 unique indigenous languages. Given this linguistic diversity, the official languages of PNG include English, Tok Pisin (Pidgin), and Motu (the lingua franca of the Papuan region).¹²

PNG is also famous for its richness of traditional culture. The provinces within the country often maintain distinct identities with limited interconnections. Numerous tribes residing in remote areas continue to uphold their unique traditional customs and rituals. An exemplar of such cultural preservation can be observed in the inhabitants of Kiriwina Island, specifically within the Trobriand Islands. Mosko M., Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the Australian National University, writes:

Despite the vicissitudes of contacts, colonization, Christian conversion, Papua New Guinean National Independence,

¹¹ Vietnam Embassy in Indonesia, "Papua New Guinea Governor-General Hails Vietnam's Position," *Vietnam Plus*, July 17, 2019, <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/papua-new-guinea-governorgeneral-hails-vietnams-position/156271.vnp>

¹² "Papua New Guinea." *New World Encyclopedia*, accessed August 1, 2023. https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/New_Guinea

globalization, and so on, the culture and social organization of Trobrianders have, in the eyes of many observers, exhibited characteristics of being congenitally resilient, conservative, and resistant to external influence.¹³

In PNG, around 80-85 percent of the populace engages in a traditional village-centered lifestyle, dependent on subsistence and small cash-crop agriculture. They directly derive their livelihood from farming. Only 15-20 percent of the population resides in modern urban areas in Port Moresby, Lae, Madang, Wewak, Goroka, Mt Hagen, and Rabaul. The population is young, with over half of the population under the age of 23.¹⁴

In health care services, roughly half of primary health services are provided by church agencies, with some funding from the government. Essential health services have declined in several provinces since the mid-1980s due to a lack of staff and supplies.¹⁵ As I observe, there is no clinic in the villages. On Kiriwina Island where I lived for four years, with a population of forty thousand, there is a small hospital with three nurses without any doctor. Provincial hospitals are under pressure, as are the general hospitals, few, that serve their neighboring provinces. People must travel a long way to reach the hospitals.

Despite PNG's policies for universal primary education, schooling remains neither free nor compulsory. Schooling expenses are a heavy burden to most families in PNG. Many students must walk for hours to school. Consequently, about two-thirds of school-age children attend school, and some three-fifths of adults are literate; in both cases, rates are lower among women and girls than among men

¹³ M. Mosko, *Ways of Baloma: Rethinking Magic and Kinship from the Trobriands* (Chicago: Hau Books, 2017), 2.

¹⁴ "Papua New Guinea Country Brief," *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Government of Australia*, accessed August 1, 2023, [https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/papua-new-guinea/papua-new-guinea-country-brief#:~:text=Papua%20New%20Guinea%20\(PNG\)%20has,has%20over%20800%20known%20languages](https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/papua-new-guinea/papua-new-guinea-country-brief#:~:text=Papua%20New%20Guinea%20(PNG)%20has,has%20over%20800%20known%20languages).

¹⁵ "Daily Life and Social Customs," *Britannica*, accessed August 1, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Papua-New-Guinea/Daily-life-and-social-customs>

and boys. Only about half of those who begin primary school complete all six years and only one-fourth of those students enroll in secondary school.¹⁶

3. Problems of Sorcery and Witchcraft in Papua New Guinea

3.1. The Phenomena of Sorcery and Witchcraft in the Conception of Spirit World

PNG, characterized by its linguistic diversity with over 800 languages, exhibits a profound complexity in cultural traditions and beliefs. Each tribe within the region possesses a unique worldview encompassing spiritual beings, human existence, and the material world. According to Bartle, life in PNG is perceived as an integrated wholeness. Beyond the observable realm, there is a prevailing belief in the existence of an invisible world. Within the PNG worldview, the physical and spiritual, secular and sacred operate in tandem. So, as individuals and communities, human life is influenced and controlled by spiritual beings and religious rituals. The people of PNG believe that there are many spirits or spiritual beings. As Bartle observes, the people of PNG live in a world that is populated with spirits.¹⁷

According to Whiteman, many Melanesia religions do not have a great spirit like creator gods. It seems, however, that where they exist, creator spirits have become the objects of legend and myth but not the objects of worship. They are inactive and often need to be more approachable to people. However, it is ghosts and spirits that are active in the affairs of the human community, and so it is to them that Melanesian people turn to in veneration and propitiation.¹⁸ Besides, the beliefs in the spirit world are different from one another. Bartle divides the spirit world of PNG into four main groups: gods and cultural heroes;

¹⁶ "Daily Life and Social Customs," *Britannica*.

¹⁷ N. Bartle, *Death, Witchcraft, and the Spirit World in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea (Point No. 29)*, (Goroka, PNG: Melanesia Institute, 2005), 40.

¹⁸ D. Whiteman, *Melanesians and Missionaries* (Hattiesburg: William Carey Library, 1983), 108.

ghosts of ancestors and spirits of the dead; bush spirits or natural spirits; and evil occult forces connected with sorcery and witchcraft.¹⁹

In the belief of the people of PNG, spiritual beings must have power, which means they must be able to change things, to do something, and to affect the visible world, such as to cause sickness and even death to the people. They believe that spirits are very close to humans and have regular influence on human life. The people of PNG have grown up in a society with many sources of power. To have a good and abundant life, they need the help of various sources of power, such as the chiefs, the departed members of the clan, the supernatural spirit beings, and the natural world in which they live.²⁰

It was previously assumed that with the advancement of education and modernization, beliefs in sorcery and witchcraft would diminish. However, contrary to this assumption, such beliefs have not waned but rather proliferated. Moreover, the faith in Christian God does not supplant the traditional hierarchy of spirits; instead, it is incorporated alongside them. Often, God is perceived as the same high God of the ancestors or a Supreme Being in some tribal communities.²¹ Most of Christians in PNG still believe in that spirit but think that Jesus Christ has greater power than other spirits. Many Christians have divided loyalties and choose whichever source of power they think will be most appropriate at a particular time.²²

In the twenty-first century, marked by advancements in science, technology, and widespread access to information, the prevalence of modernization has not diminished the apprehension surrounding spiritual powers. Despite the flourishing of scientific and technological developments, the fear of sorcery and witchcraft remains pervasive. Beliefs and fears concerning these phenomena are not only widespread but have also intensified within communities, posing a

¹⁹ Bartle, *Death, Witchcraft, and the Spirit World in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea*, 41.

²⁰ Bartle, 40.

²¹ B. Narokobi, "What is the Religious Experience for a Melanesian?" in *Living Theology in Melanesia: A Reader*, ed. J. D. May, 69-77 (Goroka, PNG: Melanesia Institute, 1985), 72.

²² Bartle, 44.

significant societal concern. This concern has prompted numerous regional, national, and international conferences dedicated to discussing these issues.²³ Consequently, a substantial majority of Papua New Guineans, irrespective of age, gender, residence, education, religion, or profession, continue to harbor a belief in the existence of sorcery. They think certain individuals, through the practice of evil sorcery, have the power to inflict death or sickness upon others.²⁴

A substantial number of unexplained illnesses and accidents in Papua New Guinea are attributed to sorcery and witchcraft. When an individual succumbs to illness, the prevailing belief is not a natural cause but rather an attribution to sorcery. Consequently, efforts are made to identify the alleged sorcerer or witch responsible for the demise. This perspective extends to accidents, including traffic incidents, where human error is not considered the primary cause. In the PNG mindset, accidents are perceived as occurring under the influence of supernatural or extraordinary powers. The pervasive belief in malevolent intent and sorcery instills profound fear among the populace, shaping their perceptions of adverse events.²⁵

In a Catholic community within the parish of Bomana, where I am serving as the acting parish priest, four people passed away in a week. A young man died in a traffic accident, a woman passed away due to old age, and two others succumbed to illness. The community was gripped by fear to the extent that they refrained from attending

²³ In 1982, a conference was held by the Research Centre for South-West Pacific Studies, La Trobe University, with the theme: "Sorcery, Healing and Magic in Melanesia." In 2003, the Melanesia Institute of Goroka undertook a research project under the provisional title of "*Sanguma* in Paradise." A conference was held by The Australian National University in Canberra, 5-7 June 2013, on "Sorcery and Witchcraft-Related Killings in Melanesia: Culture, Law and Human Rights Perspectives." In December 2013, there was another conference on "Sorcery and Witchcraft Accusations: Developing a National Response to Overcome the Violence" in Goroka, PNG. In 2003, the Melanesian Institute started a project on Sorcery and Christianity in PNG.

²⁴ R. Auka et al., "Sorcery and Witchcraft Related Killings in Papua New Guinea: The Criminal Justice System Response," in *Talking It Through: Responses to Sorcery and Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia*, ed. M Forsyth and R. Eves, 241-53 (Canberra: Australia National University Press, 2015), 241-42.

²⁵ Bartle, 219; Auka et al., 250.

church for two consecutive Sundays. There was suspicion among the residents that a sorcerer or witch resided in the village. This pervasive fear of death extended to encompass concerns for both individual well-being and the safety of family members.

To identify the witch or sorcerer, the people consult the diviner or tribal chief, believed to possess the ability to see the invisible world. Alternatively, they devise means or reason to accuse the alleged witch and sorcerer. For example, a man had a dream that the suspected sorcerer came and carved out his son's eye with a knife. Shortly after his dream, the son developed swelling in his eye and succumbed to that swelling. That man concluded that the suspected sorcerer had employed sorcery to cause his son's death.²⁶

3.2. Variety of Sorcery and Witchcraft

In PNG, distinctions and categorizations of sorcery, witchcraft, and magic lack clarity and are often complicated by myriad permutations across various dimensions. Due to the diversity of cultures and beliefs, every province or region has its own ways of beliefs and practices. According to the Sorcery Act 1971 of PNG, sorcery and witchcraft are known in various languages and parts of the country as witchcraft, magic, enchantment, *puripuri*, *muramura*, *dikana*, *vada*, *meamea*, *sanguma* or *mailra*.²⁷ The Papua New Guinea Sorcery Act 1971 distinguishes between innocent sorcery, which is protective and curative, and evil sorcery, intended to harm others.

According to Zocca and Urame, various methods exist for gaining power through the practice of sorcery and witchcraft. Generally, practitioners employ natural materials, such as leaves, stone, ginger, garlic, or animals like rats and snakes. Additionally, materials associated with humans, such as cloth fragments, and bodily

²⁶ Auka et al., "Sorcery and Witchcraft Related Killings in Papua New Guinea," 247.

²⁷ Auka et al., 242.

remnants like human waste or body parts, including sexual secretions, semen, vaginal fluid, and menstrual blood, are utilized in their rituals.²⁸

Among the various forms of sorcery and witchcraft prevalent in PNG, *sanguma* is the most popular. In *tok pidgin*,²⁹ *Sanguma* (“occult powers”) generally denotes an evil power or spirit that manifests itself in animal form, compelling individuals to inflict illness or death upon others. Believers hold that the victim of *sanguma* will suddenly fall sick and die. However, the term *sanguma* can be used to refer to all different kinds of sorcery and witchcraft. Generally, among the people of PNG, *sanguma* is regarded as inherently evil, and people who are accused of being *sanguma* are seen as a threat to society. They are frequently hunted down, burnt alive, or killed.³⁰

Today, witchcraft and sorcery-related beliefs and practices are being transported around PNG to places that never previously existed. These beliefs and practices have become mixed and localized. People living in cities and towns come from different provinces or districts, learning sorcery and witchcraft-related beliefs and practices from each other. Moreover, witches and sorcerers employ modern techniques such as computers, mobile phones, or chemicals to poison people. Sorcery practices are also being commodified and increasingly able to be bought at local markets. Forsyth and Eves observe that the variety of sorcery and witchcraft seems to be increasing rather than diminishing.³¹

According to Zocca, there are many theories to explain sorcery and witchcraft beliefs and practices. In primal societies, people tend to attribute the cause of natural phenomena to non-empirical entities, such as gods, spirits, ancestor’s spirits, or persons with special powers

²⁸ F. Zocca and J. Urame, eds., *Sorcery, Witchcraft, and Christianity in Melanesia. Melanesian Mission Studies* No. 5. (Goroka, PNG: Melanesia Institute, 2008), 173.

²⁹ *Tok* is derived from English “talk” but has a broader application, also meaning “word,” “speech,” or “language.” *Pisin* derives from the English word “pidgin”; the latter, in turn, may originate in the word *business*, which is descriptive of the typical development and use of pidgins as inter-ethnic trade languages (Wikipedia).

³⁰ Bartle, 43.

³¹ Forsyth and Eves, 5-6.

(magicians, sorcerers, and witches).³² Thus, sorcerers and witches are believed to possess supernatural powers for good or evil purposes. Conversely, individuals experiencing negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, guilt, envy, hatred, and despair, seek to find a reason for their suffering. Accusing sorcerers and witches serves as a means of releasing these negative emotions.

3.3. Sorcery and Witchcraft with Violence

The issues of sorcery-related violence are ultimately rooted in the existence of the belief and practice of sorcery and witchcraft. Most Papua New Guineans believe in sorcery, viewing it as akin to a religion with a supernatural aura. Many people in PNG fear the efficacy of evil spirits involved in these practices. Even Tom Amukele, a member of the parliament, reported that sorcery and witchcraft were significant causes of death in his district. The impacts of these beliefs and practices in village communities are challenging to comprehend.³³

Regarding the problems of sorcery and witchcraft, Forsyth and Eves propose that two perspectives must be considered. First, from viewpoint of the local people, the problem of sorcery and witchcraft adversely affects the community and society due to the actions of sorcerers and witches. These actions include killing or injuring innocent people, undermining the businesses, and instilling fear and insecurity. Victims in this context are those believed to have been harmed or killed by the actions of a witch or a sorcerer.

From the perspective of outsiders, such as the church, international NGOs, and institutions, accusations of sorcery and witchcraft lead to violence, tribal conflicts, and murder. Those accused of being witches or sorcerers may be subjected to harm, including potential death, with the community possibly attacking or expelling them.³⁴ Many other indirect victims live in villages under suspicion of

³² Zocca and Urame, *Sorcery, Witchcraft, and Christianity in Melanesia*, 14-18, 39-43.

³³ Zocca and Urame, 117.

³⁴ Forsyth and Eves, 2.

being witches or sorcerers, and the spouses and children of the accused individuals also become victims.³⁵

There is no way to demonstrate that a person practiced sorcery because sorcery and witchcraft involve the use of supernatural power and spiritual beings. There is no clear evidence to prove the effectiveness of sorcery, and accusations of sorcery and witchcraft are typically employed to target innocent or defenseless victims.³⁶ In fact, the accusations reflect the tensions and conflicts between individuals and groups. Simultaneously, people use sorcery as an excuse or explanation for deaths, sickness, or unnatural events. The accused may admit culpability under duress to escape torture.³⁷

When a doctor is unable to determine the illness or cause of death, people seek alternative explanations from a *Glassman* (diviner) to find who might be responsible for the illness or death.³⁸ Many of these suspicions and accusations result in violence. Cox and Phillips recount the story of a Papua New Guinean doctor who returned to his village for his uncle's funeral. He took the opportunity to explain that the uncle died of cancer, not sorcery. However, his advice was ignored. Several days after he returned to town, some of his relatives attacked suspected sorcerers, assaulting them and burning their houses.³⁹

Unfortunately, many women suspected of being sorcerers face acts of torture, violence, abuse, or even death. According to Eves and Kelly-Hanku, in Goroka, the majority of the attacks recorded during the research targeted women, with 30 of the 32 victims being women and 25 of the 27 murdered being women. As a result, the women must

³⁵ F. Zocca, ed., *Sanguma in Paradise: Sorcery, Witchcraft, and Christianity in Papua New Guinea (Point No. 33)* (Goroka, PNG: Melanesia Institute, 2009), 32.

³⁶ M. Stephen, ed., *Sorcerer and Witch in Melanesia* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 250.

³⁷ Zocca and Urame, 6, 27; Auka et al., 249.

³⁸ J. Cox and G. Phillips, "Sorcery, Christianity and the Decline of Medical Services," in *Talking It Through: Responses to Sorcery and Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia*, ed. M. Forsyth and R. Eves (Canberra: Australia National University Press, 2015), 42-43.

³⁹ Cox and Phillips, "Sorcery, Christianity and the Decline of Medical Services," 43.

relocate to their husbands' village, rendering them vulnerable outsiders.⁴⁰ This regrettable trend is consistent with the widely held view that women have less influence in the PNG community than men.⁴¹

4. Some Attitudes and Actions Towards Sorcery and Witchcraft

4.1. The Responsibility of Medical Services

From the sociological view, sorcery and sorcery-related violence can be attributed to poverty and societal inequality. Simultaneously, when the public health service system fails to operate effectively in the community, it creates confusion and suspicion among people regarding sickness and death. In the society of PNG, one of the most significant issues is the decline in medical services and training, resulting in inadequate treatment for people's illnesses. There are insufficient doctors even for essential service provision. According to Doctor Lino Tom, the Health Minister of PNG, there is only one doctor for 30,000 persons.⁴²

Cox describes the situation of the hospitals in PNG:

In severely under-resourced hospital environments, where there are barely enough doctors for even basic service provision, the role of the competent, experienced doctor as a teacher is impossible. Junior doctors and students are left to their own devices in many hospitals. They make critical clinical decisions without supervision and often progress through their career without access to ongoing medical education opportunities. Those senior doctors engaged in teaching and training rapidly become burnt out as demands for their skills exceed the limitations of their goodwill and

⁴⁰ R. Eves and A. Kelly-Hanku, "Witch-Hunts in Papua New Guinea's Eastern Highlands Province: A Fieldwork Report." *In Brief* 2014/4 (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2014), 78.

⁴¹ Auka et al., 252.

⁴² "One Doctor to 30,000 Persons Ratio in PNG," *PNG Health Watch*, April 23, 2023, <https://health.onepng.com/png-health-news/one-doctor-to-30000-persons-ratio-in-png>.

energy. Professional frustrations compound this, where doctors are forced to work below their skill level and training due to limited resources and inadequately supported health systems.⁴³

Most cases of sorcery accusations are related to sickness and death, particularly when a doctor fails to provide a clear explanation for the problem. According to Cox and Phillips, people in PNG distinguish between an illness that is curable by biomedical means (*sik bilong marasin* – sickness of medicine) and one that biomedicine cannot cure (*sik bilong ples* – sickness of place/village).⁴⁴ They believe that “white”⁴⁵ medicine can cure “white” sickness, but only Papua New Guinean cures can heal Papua New Guinean illnesses. Therefore, they seek alternative explanations in sorcery and witchcraft-related beliefs and practices.

Moreover, one of the leading causes of death in the country is HIV/AIDS. Many HIV/AIDS patients die without even knowing the nature of their sickness, or they keep it a secret from their relatives and friends. When a person appears sick and experiences pain or other symptoms of an illness, they immediately consider the possibility of sorcery. In situations where there is no doctor, or when the doctor is unable to diagnose the illness, sorcery is often used as an explanatory framework. Poor medical service further contributes to the prevalence of beliefs in sorcery and witchcraft.⁴⁶

For the near future, Cox and Phillips warn that if medical education, training, and ongoing professional development continue to be under-resourced, it is highly likely that doctors, health extension officers, and nurses will lack the expert knowledge necessary to reassert the importance of biomedical understandings of diagnosis. Consequently, curative practices that center on this expertise, requiring a functioning hierarchy of roles to be effective, are currently being

⁴³ Cox and Phillips, 47-48.

⁴⁴ Cox and Phillips, 44.

⁴⁵ The people in PNG use “white” to refer to what belongs to the foreigner, such as “white man” means the foreigner.

⁴⁶ Cox and Phillips, 47.

undermined. This situation lends credibility to sorcery as a perceived cause of illness and injury.⁴⁷

Sorcery accusations, from the perspective of a medical doctor, are the social outcomes of an impoverished system of biomedical service provision where the training of expert staff crucial to producing effective health services is neglected.⁴⁸ Therefore, improving health-care services, including training doctors and nurses, constructing more clinics and hospitals, ensuring an adequate supply of medicine, and educating people in healthcare, may contribute to the decline of sorcery and witchcraft beliefs and practices.

4.2. The Attitude and Actions of the Church

The Christian Bible consistently forbids any practice of magic, sorcery, witchcraft, necromancy, and divination⁴⁹ because these practices set themselves up against God by attempting to compel the powers of the universe, particularly the evil spirits. However, according to Zocca, the Bible does not deny the effectiveness of sorcery and witchcraft. Sometimes, sickness and death are understood as the consequence of satanic influence or God's punishment, but not necessarily from magical evil practice or sorcery and witchcraft.⁵⁰

Concretely, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2116 writes:

All forms of *divination* are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead, or other practices falsely supposed to “unveil” the future. Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums, all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate

⁴⁷ Cox and Phillips, 48.

⁴⁸ Cox and Phillips, 49.

⁴⁹ From Old Testament, cf. Deut. 18: 10-14; Ex 22: 17-18; Lev. 19:26; Wis. 17:7. From New Testament, cf. Acts 13: 6-12, 16: 17-24; Gal. 5: 20; Rev. 9: 21; 21: 8, etc.

⁵⁰ Zocca and Urame, 21.

hidden powers. They contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone.⁵¹

In accordance with established Christian doctrines, church leaders, mirroring prevailing sentiments in contemporary society, regard sorcery and witchcraft as mere superstitions antithetical to Christian beliefs. They reject any substantive association between sorcery, witchcraft, and malevolent consequences, vehemently prohibiting all forms of magical practices as being inconsistent with Christian teachings.⁵² Some evangelical denominations equate sorcery and witchcraft with evil spirits, considering them as the work of people possessed by demons. Some churches understand that practicing sorcery and witchcraft is a form of worshipping the power of evil.⁵³

According to Zocca, in the history of evangelization in PNG, missionaries have endeavored to root out sorcery from society. However, there were some differences in the reasons for their opposition. Some missionaries opposed sorcery and witchcraft beliefs and practices, viewing them as satanic. Others considered sorcery and witchcraft phenomena as merely products of ignorance, superstitions, and fraud in primal societies. In the name of science, they tolerantly tried to educate and explain to people the fundamentals of basic scientific knowledge.⁵⁴

While opposing the belief and practices of sorcery and witchcraft, missionaries preached the existence of God and supernatural and spiritual beings such as angels, evil spirits, and the human soul. They emphasized the power of God in blessing and punishment, miracles, and visions. Furthermore, they talked about the evil activity of demons in the world. All these beliefs easily fit into the traditional magical mindset of people in primal societies.⁵⁵ Consequently, the people of PNG accepted the Christian faith quickly and widely. After

⁵¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church: revised in accordance with the official Latin text promulgated by Pope John Paul II* (Washington, DC, United States Catholic Conference, 2000), n. 2116.

⁵² Zocca and Urame, 25.

⁵³ Zocca and Urame, 26.

⁵⁴ Zocca and Urame, 27-28.

⁵⁵ Zocca and Urame, 28.

one hundred years of evangelization, ninety-seven percent of the population are Christians.

However, Christianity should accept that it has been unable to eradicate the magical mentality with its beliefs and practice of sorcery among the Christians. In PNG, most of Christian believers maintain their traditional beliefs and practices related to sorcery and witchcraft, even when these conflict with the Gospel message or scientific explanation. Thus, Whiteman quoted the observation of Shapera about the society of Africa, which is analogous to the situation in PNG: “The greatest failure of the Church and Western civilization generally has been regarding magic and sorcery.”⁵⁶

The people of PNG strongly believe that they live under the influence of spirits and ghosts of ancestors. Mindful of this traditional mentality, some church leaders redirect the blame from sorcerers or witches to spiritual beings like demons, ghosts, angels, and God. Adverse events are seen as indications that God wants to reveal something to humans or has a mysterious divine plan.⁵⁷ Church leaders should explain to people the meaning of suffering in the wisdom of God with the example of Jesus on the cross. During funeral celebrations, drawing from the story of Job (2: 1-11), leaders need to emphasize the truth that God is the owner of life. Without God’s will, nobody has power over human life (Job 2: 6). All negative events always have their own meaning that we need to discover. From the story of Job, the faithful need to learn to be patient and persevere in the faith.

To assist the faithful in difficult circumstances, religious leaders, parish priests, and community leaders should spend time visiting the sick to comfort them and their families with prayers. They help the sick prepare for death and assist the family in accepting the sickness and death of their family member. During these visits, they could try to convince the family not to seek sorcerers and witches but to trust in God and accept the realities of human life. They may explain

⁵⁶ Cf. D. Whiteman, *Melanesians and Missionaries* (Hattiesburg: William Carey Library, 1983), 356.

⁵⁷ Zocca and Urame, 54.

the sickness being experienced using relevant biomedical explanations. For young people and children, the church needs to provide a solid religious education in Catechism and Bible classes, explaining why the Bible and the church consistently forbid the practice of sorcery and necromancy. Simultaneously, pastors should promote respect for law and order and foster faith to influence attitudes and emotions.⁵⁸

4.3. The Criminal Justice System Response

4.3.1. *The Response to the Practices of Sorcery and Witchcraft*

At the end of the nineteenth century, the colonial government of British New Guinea sought to prevent the practice of sorcery through the law to fulfill its civilizing mission, believing that the introduction of the Western legal system would essentially achieve this goal. However, they had difficulty prohibiting something they believed did not exist. The *Native Regulations 1922* declared: “Sorcery is only deceit, but the lies of the sorcerer frighten many people and cause great trouble. Therefore, the sorcerer must be punished.”⁵⁹

According to Stewart, the *Native Regulations 1939* also prohibited the practice of sorcery by an alleged sorcerer who:

- (a) practices or pretends to practice sorcery; or
- (b) threatens any person with sorcery, whether practiced by himself or any other person; or
- (c) procures or attempts to procure any other person to practice or pretend to practice or assist in sorcery; or
- (d) is found in possession of implements or “charms” used in sorcery; or accepts payment or presents in the shape of food or otherwise when the obvious intention of

⁵⁸ P. Gibb, “Practical Church Interventions on Sorcery and Witchcraft Violence in the Papua New Guinea Highlands,” In *Talking It Through: Responses to Sorcery and Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia*, M. Forsyth and Eves, R. eds. (Canberra: Australia National University Press, 2015), 311-14.

⁵⁹ Cf. C. Stewart, “The Courts, the Churches, the Witches and their Killers,” in *Talking It Through: Responses to Sorcery and Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia*, ed. M. Forsyth and R. Eves (Canberra: Australia National University Press, 2015), 185.

making such payments or presents is to propitiate a Sorcerer, shall on conviction be liable ...⁶⁰

In 1971, the National Parliament issued the *Sorcery Act*, which made sorcery (including what is known in various terms) an offense. However, there was a big problem with dealing with sorcery in the formal court system because it was difficult to find evidence demonstrating that a person practiced sorcery. Sorcery is a sacred practice that no one wants to discuss openly. The other problem was convicting a witch or sorcerer for killing by supernatural powers, as the evidentiary burden was on proving the effectiveness of the act of sorcery in a court of law.⁶¹

4.3.2. *The Response to Sorcerer and Witch Killers*

According to the basic principles of the law, sorcerers should be brought to justice and not killed by the villagers. Thus, killing the sorcerer was clearly considered murder under the Criminal Code. However, during the colonial era, customary beliefs in sorcery were automatically accepted by the courts. Hence, the courts came to treat a genuine belief in sorcery not as a defense against the charge but as a special factor to be considered in mitigating the sentence after the accused had been convicted of the crime.⁶²

For example, in 1980, there was a case involving 15 men who killed a woman accused of being a sorceress at Porgera in Enga Province, in the highlands. However, they expressed no remorse, as they believed she had killed many people, and it was an act of honor to rid the community of such a threat to the well-being of all. Finally, the judge ordered a three-month jail sentence and a compensation payment for the pigs.⁶³

The witch-killers usually say they were acting, believing they were defending the community. Sometimes, the whole community

⁶⁰ Cf. Stewart, "The Courts, the Churches, the Witches and their Killers," 186.

⁶¹ Stewart, 188; Auka et al., 242- 43.

⁶² Stewart, 187; Auka et al, 246).

⁶³ Stewart, 190.

gathered and agreed that, to save the people, the sorcerer should be put to death. It is challenging for the judge to decide because to act on behalf of the community to commit a severe crime takes or requires so much courage on the part of actors, as was the case of the two accused.⁶⁴

In addition, not long ago, the Supreme Court decided it was no longer automatically a “special” mitigating factor. Henceforth, the sentence’s mitigation would depend on the facts in each case. In 2007, in a particularly nasty case of witch torture and killing, the death penalty was imposed. As recently as 2013, a newspaper report claimed that a man in Enga Province had been sentenced to 30 years in jail for killing his aunt on suspicion of sorcery.⁶⁵

On May 28, 2013, the PNG government amended the existing laws in the *Criminal Code*, which state that any person found guilty of murdering a suspected sorcerer is liable to the death penalty. It means the government firmly stands against sorcery-related killings.⁶⁶ After 2000, there have been more reported cases of sorcery-related violence, and the sentences imposed by the courts have been harsher than in the 1980s.⁶⁷ Today, at least in theory, the PNG courts will not tolerate sorcery-related violence anymore.

However, most cases relating to sorcery and witchcraft-related violence were not brought to the court of justice or followed up in investigations to result in legal proceedings.⁶⁸ Instead, the people try to resolve the sorcery-related problems among themselves. Besides, in PNG, the police force is poorly trained and paid. There are not enough police officers to respond to violence, particularly sorcery-related violence. And usually, sorcery-related violence is a group attack. Police officers cannot control the situation when they are often outnumbered and outgunned.⁶⁹ In Milne Bay Province, where I live,

⁶⁴ Stewart, 190.

⁶⁵ Stewart, 192.

⁶⁶ Auka et al., 250.

⁶⁷ Auka et al., 246.

⁶⁸ Auka et al., 244-46.

⁶⁹ Auka et al., 251.

there are only 18 police officers in the province. Thus, they cannot face the group of criminals, such as in sorcery-related violence.

5. Conclusion

As a neighboring country of Asia, PNG is quite unfamiliar to most Asians due to its diversity in language and culture. The rapid development of science and technology does not significantly change traditional beliefs and practices, including sorcery and witchcraft. People still believe in the effectiveness of sorcery and witchcraft, thinking that some individuals can use evil powers to harm and kill others. Therefore, many people are trying to identify who the sorcerers and witches are in their communities to either murder or expel them. Zocca observed that almost every day, the PNG press reports cases of sorcery-related killings and torturing with various kinds of appeals.⁷⁰ So, sorcery and witchcraft problems are not merely criminal acts or traditional belief systems, but criminal acts based on a belief system.

Most of the accusations related to sorcery and witchcraft stem from a lack of understanding of basic biomedical knowledge and the weaknesses in the healthcare system, particularly in relation to sicknesses and deaths. Therefore, the government needs to open more medical schools, clinics, and hospitals to improve healthcare services across the entire country. Additionally, the churches, through pastors and religious and community leaders, should consistently proclaim the truth of the Gospel to help people change their minds and believe in God, the author, and owner of human life, so that the faithful may live according to Gospel values and virtues.

Today, the criminal justice system takes sorcery and witchcraft-related crimes more seriously. With control over the police forces, the government of PNG is making efforts to prevent and stop violence and criminal activities related to sorcery and witchcraft. Besides healthcare services, churches, and the legal system, addressing

⁷⁰ F. Zocca, ed., *Sanguma in Paradise: Sorcery, Witchcraft, and Christianity in Papua New Guinea* (Point No. 33) (Goroka, PNG: Melanesia Institute, 2009), 6-7.

the problems of sorcery and witchcraft also requires the collaboration of the entire society, including governments, the educational system, and social media, so that PNG may be “free from sorcery and witchcraft-related violence.”⁷¹

⁷¹ The vision of *Sorcery National Action Plan* (or *Sorcery Accusation Related Violence National Action Plan*).

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