

# Sorcery and Witchcraft in Papua New Guinea: Problems in Definition



Australian  
National  
University

Richard Eves

IN BRIEF 2013/12

The anthropologist Marie Reay once noted a tendency to lump sorcery and witchcraft together, often under either heading, and this, she felt, had brought a lack clarity to the situation (1987: 90-91). This remains true today for Papua New Guinea, where these terms are frequently fused or used interchangeably, and are rarely conceptually distinguished. This blurring of the two occurs not only in popular accounts in the media but is widely reproduced by NGOs, donor organisations, and government institutions. A new acronym has even been coined — SRK ('sorcery-related killing') (UN, OHCHR 2010) — that perpetuates the definitional lack of clarity, since, as Reay noted, it uses one term, sorcery, to refer to both sorcery and witchcraft.

Some of the confusion in understanding is compounded by the range of terms used — *poison*, *sangguma*, *puripuri*, *blak pawa*, and *wiskrap* — some derived from various places in Papua New Guinea, and some from English. Needless to say, the meanings these borrowed words carry in their original context are often lost in the new context.

The definition of sorcery in the Papua New Guinea's Sorcery Act of 1971 lumps magic and witchcraft together under the umbrella of sorcery, saying for example that, 'sorcerers have extraordinary powers that can be used sometimes for good purposes but more often for bad ones'. This lack of clarity is further reinforced when the definition includes

what is known, in various languages and parts of the country, as witchcraft, magic, enchantment, *puri puri*, *mura mura dikana*, *vada*, *mea mea*, *sanguma* or *malira*, whether or not connected with or related to the supernatural.

To capture the fact that the intent may not be to do harm, the Sorcery Act uses the notion of 'innocent sorcery', which

is protective or curative only, or is not intended to produce, and does not purport to be calculated or able or adapted to produce, any harmful or unlawful result, or to exert any harmful, unlawful or undue influence on any person ...

Similarly, in its 1977 paper on sorcery, the Law Reform Commission of Papua New Guinea adopts some of the definitions of the Sorcery Act — for example, in its use of the term 'innocent sorcery', though it sometimes substitutes this with 'good sorcery', and 'forbidden sorcery' with 'evil sorcery'.

Some language groups in Papua New Guinea make a clear conceptual distinction between magic and sorcery, with separate language terms — magic being considered benevolent, and sorcery malevolent. During the colonial period, some missionaries sought to capture this distinction through referring to sorcery as 'black magic' or 'anti-social magic', which aimed to cause harm, and referring to magic as 'white magic' or 'social magic', which aimed to improve life. However, while magic generally aims to be beneficent, in some cases it can have a negative edge. Thus, while sun magic is employed to help garden crops grow prodigiously, it can also be used to scorch and burn gardens and create famine. Similarly, love magic, which seeks to capture the heart of a woman so that she becomes besotted with a man, can just as easily be used to drive the woman to suicide through madness.

One of the first steps in speaking more accurately about the problems currently arising from sorcery and witchcraft in Papua New Guinea, and perhaps achieving a deeper understanding of them, is to define each word precisely. Many anthropologists who have written on sorcery in the Papua New Guinea and the broader cultural region of Melanesia, myself included, adopt a distinction first made by the anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard. Sorcery, he says, refers to the deliberate use of magical rituals to injure, kill, or cause misfortune, and witchcraft refers to an unconscious capacity to harm others (Glick 1973). This was succinctly put by Glick (1973:182):

A sorcerer's capacity to harm ... depends on his ability to control extrinsic powers; whereas a witch, who can inflict sickness or death on others simply by staring at them or willing evil on them, possesses powers — inherited or acquired — as an intrinsic part of his or her person.

Importantly, sorcery involves the purposeful actions of a person who intends to cause misfortune or harm to others (or to benefit them), and who sets about doing this through ritual means or incantations. In Papua New Guinea, a large range of techniques exist for this and these can be passed down the generations, acquired from relatives or friends, or simply purchased for cash. Probably the most common type is personal leavings sorcery, which involves the sorcerer manipulating the victim's personal exuviae (excreta, hair, fingernails, etc.), or items which the victim has used or touched (such as a discarded betel nut shell or the soil from a footprint). After incanting a spell, the sorcerer wraps the leavings in a parcel and disposes of this in a manner according to the desired effect.

Another type is assault sorcery, in which the sorcerer uses magic to render the victim unconscious and then insert objects such as needles into the body or removes internal organs. Another form is projectile sorcery, that involves 'shooting' things (such as pieces of glass or wire) magically into the body of the victim. Other forms of sorcery considered particularly powerful use 'spirits' of either the dead or the living to attack the victim. Some of the newer types of sorcery do not use any substances but work simply by uttering spells. Some forms of sorcery actually involve the use of poison or other toxic substances (such as battery acid or herbicide), which are either put on to arrows used in conflicts or added to food or water or other items that are consumed.

These descriptions make it clear that for those who believe in the efficacy of sorcery in Papua New Guinea, it is a set of practices that can be learnt and is something a person sets out to do. Witchcraft, on the other hand, does not comprise a set of practices that can be learnt. Rather, it is believed to be a form of possession by the 'witch substance' or creature, which resides in the body (abdomen, chest, scrotum, vagina, womb, head, armpit, etc.) and takes control of the possessed person. As Reay describes this, it 'takes over the host's will, impelling him or her to harbour thoughts and perform actions that are not normal to him or her' (1987:92). As Thomas Strong says, it is best understood 'as a parasite, an

agency or being or substance that infects and inhabits persons' (2013). One consequence of this, according to Strong, is that it may be transmitted from person to person, especially as a kind of inheritance, so that the children and relatives of witches are themselves often suspected of harbouring the witch.

If it were visible, Reay suggests the witch substance or creature 'would look like the foetus of a tree kangaroo', while others have said that they most often take the form of small, quick, highly mobile creatures — rats, cats, bats, birds, frogs, moths, snakes, lizards, grasshoppers, butterflies, cicadas or other insects. Regardless of its form, the witch substance is considered to cause harm and to kill.

### Author Notes

*Richard Eves is an Associate Professor in the State, Society and the Governance in Melanesia Program and an anthropologist by training, who has been researching Papua New Guinea since 1990. He is the author of The Magical Body: Power, Fame and Meaning in a Melanesian Society, as well as several articles on sorcery.*

### References

- Glick, L. 1973. Sorcery and Witchcraft. In I. Hogbin (ed.), *Anthropology in Papua New Guinea*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 182–86.
- Independent State of Papua New Guinea. Sorcery Act 1971. <[www.paclii.org](http://www.paclii.org)>, viewed 20/11/2013.
- Law Reform Commission of Papua New Guinea 1977. Sorcery. *Occasional Paper* No. 4. Port Moresby: Law Reform Commission of Papua New Guinea.
- Reay, M. 1987. The Magico-Religious Foundations of New Guinea Highlands Warfare. In M. Stephen (ed.), *Sorcerer and Witch in Melanesia*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 83–120.
- Strong, T. 2013. Disagreeing with Witchcraft: Steps Toward Making Local Criticisms Heard. Paper presented at the Sorcery and Witchcraft-Related Killings in Melanesia: Culture, Law and Human Rights Perspectives conference, 5–7/6/2013, Canberra.
- UN, OHCHR (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Regional Office for the Pacific) 2010. *Armed Tribal Conflict and Sorcery in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea: Discussion Paper Prepared for the 10th Anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*. Suva: UN OHCHR.

