

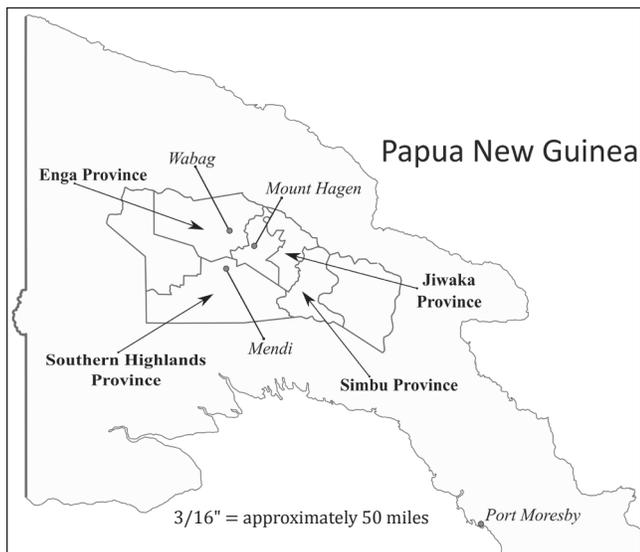
Beyond the Fence: Confronting Witchcraft Accusations in the Papua New Guinea Highlands

Philip Gibbs

Sorcery and witchcraft beliefs and practices are common in Papua New Guinea (PNG), yet differ considerably throughout the country.¹ This article addresses witchcraft-related accusations and violence in the PNG Highlands. I take up a case from the Enga Province, illustrating the complexities of issues raised by people in an Enga faith community. How can I as a missionary for over forty years in this region accompany the Christian community as they try to respond to an outbreak of witchcraft-related violence in their area?

Highlands Sanguma

Witchcraft in the PNG Highlands, called *sanguma*,² involves a malevolent power that is said to take the form of a creature such as a rat, bat, frog, or flying fox, with the power to kill or harm



people.³ The spirit-creature lives within the body of its host, and even without the conscious approval of its host, the spirit-creature can take another form and roam around, eating human waste and searching for human flesh, particularly vital organs like the heart or liver.⁴ Witches are thought to hide vital organs removed from a victim for later consumption.⁵ So when a person (usually a woman) is accused of being a witch and of stealing a victim's heart, her accusers may brutally interrogate and torture her, demanding that she disclose where she has hidden the victim's heart and commanding her to return it so that the victim might be healed or restored to life.



Philip Gibbs, SVD, is a Divine Word missionary, born in New Zealand and working in Papua New Guinea since 1973. At present he is secretary for the Commission for Social Concerns for the Catholic Bishops' Conference for Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands.
—gibbs199@gmail.com

By killing the witch-host, it is presumed that the spirit-creature will die, which is a fundamental belief that leads to the killing of people accused of *sanguma*. Those cruelly killing the accused often think they are doing their duty, in the sense that they feel they have to defend the clan from a malicious power that has killed and could kill again.

Such beliefs are common in the Simbu and Jiwaka Provinces, but in recent times they seem to be spreading to other provinces and to settlements in major towns. There has been a recent diffusion of this belief and associated violence westward, including the Enga Province. Violence is not new in Enga, but previously there was no tradition there of torturing or killing people thought to be possessed by a spirit-creature. With intermarriage and recent frequent travel to and from the Simbu and Jiwaka Provinces, however, some people in Enga now refer to *sanguma* witchcraft that involves magically removing a person's heart and eating the flesh of corpses.⁶

A Case in the Enga Province

There have been several cases in the Enga Province in recent years in which women have been killed (usually burned) or brutally tortured after being accused of practicing witchcraft. In this article I will follow one case in an area where I was formerly parish priest. The Christian community admitted confusion over the issue, and I found myself presented with several choices. Should I treat witchcraft with skepticism, or should I take people's beliefs seriously? How much should I as an outsider intervene with a scientific viewpoint and ideals based on modern principles of human rights? How should I deal with issues of moral causal ontology in which misfortune is due to one's own wrongdoing, or of interpersonal causal ontology, in which malicious persons are understood to cause the misfortune? To what degree should I entertain the reality of demonic powers and theologies of spiritual warfare? As an anthropologist, theologian, and former parish priest, I felt I should intervene, but I was uncertain how to do so in a way that would benefit the Christian community and the accused.

In 2013 a young man died from unspecified causes in Wabag hospital (in Enga Province). Some people said that during his funeral, while people were mourning and his body had not yet been buried, word went around that the dead man had called by mobile phone and named a woman, saying that she had taken his heart and that this had caused his death. Male relatives of the deceased seized two women and proceeded to torture them with heated iron rods and bush knives, demanding to know where they had put his heart and telling them to put it back. The women were brutally assaulted but could not comply with the men's requests. One woman died from her injuries. The other, terribly burned, managed to escape, walking the next day to where she received assistance to get to a hospital in another province. She was seven months pregnant and her baby died, suffering burns while in the uterus.

The survivor was Maria, whom I met in another province shortly after she had been discharged after five months in hospital. Despite the dangers of returning home, she was looking

forward to being reunited with her husband and children, and she wanted to have her innocence declared publically through a court hearing. I decided to go and meet with the church leaders in her home community. They were alarmed and raised several concerns.

Concerns of the Community

Concerns raised by the community included the following:

- They feared further violence and being blamed for being a supporter of the accused.
- They worried, too, that Maria had admitted (under torture) to being a witch, so why try to support such an evil person?
- They were confused, saying that they were Christians, yet they admitted that they believed in witchcraft.

I consider these three points in turn.

Fear of further violence. What if Maria returned and something would go wrong—for example, if someone would get sick and die? In such an instance Maria might be accused again, and then those who had helped her return would also be blamed. Some said that we should get “permission” first from those who had tortured her. Then there would be less likelihood of others being blamed.

Not everyone had been against Maria. Some said that they had tried to help her but were accosted by men armed with axes and bush knives and that they abandoned attempts to help, lest they too be badly injured or even killed. Remembering such violence and the horror of a woman with third-degree burns over 40 percent of her body, people did not want to risk a repeat episode. Why return and risk further violence? Could she not remain elsewhere and let remembrance of the whole incident gradually fade away?

Why support a person who has admitted to being a witch? In many cases I hear people saying that the accused person admitted to being a witch. For example, in the case of Kepari Leniata, a young woman burned alive in February 2013 in Mount Hagen (Western Highlands), most people I have spoken with tell me that they believe she truly was a witch because she had admitted it, and two women from Simbu had corroborated this evidence, saying that they had seen her cook and consume the heart she had stolen from a young man.

In response to such claims, I ask whether the confession was made while the accused was being tortured. In most cases it appears that confession was extracted under extreme torture. People say that they have to torture the truth out of the accused. How reliable is confession under torture? As Nick Schwartz notes in his book *Thinking Critically about Sorcery and Witchcraft*, some people confess their guilt, hoping that their assailants will simply kill them and thus relieve them of the hell of prolonged torture.⁷

David Bosch, writing on the experience of witchcraft in

Africa, asks why people admit to doing things that they could not have done, even in their wildest imagination. He argues that people interiorize the vision and values of their culture and are unable to break out into alternative frameworks. He sounds a warning that “any campaign against witches always results in strengthening people’s fear of witches and consequently their acceptance of the theory.”⁸

Even before a confession, there is a tendency in PNG to presume that the accused is guilty. If a diviner points to a person, that person is automatically presumed guilty. Such persons,



Maria (on left) being welcomed on a return visit to Yampu in 2013

once they have been accused, tortured, or expelled from the community, have little chance of successfully defending their innocence. When Catholic sisters came to intervene in the case of a woman being tortured near Mendi in the Southern Highlands Province in 2012, some people called out, “Sanguma i kam” (witches are coming). Fortunately, even though they were frightened, the sisters were not deterred by such accusations. For most people, however, it is a terrifying thought that, if they defend the accused, people might point to them—and then how would they prove their innocence?

Even if a formerly accused person were to return, claiming innocence and appearing quite “normal,” this would still be insufficient for some. A health worker gave the example of sleepwalking. He said that persons sleepwalking are not conscious of what they are doing and might have no recall of what they did while sleepwalking. Analogously, the sanguma spirit is believed to leave the body of its host when he or she is sleeping. Later, when such persons awake, they will have no idea what malicious acts the sanguma spirit might have performed while outside of their body.

Confusion over belief in Christianity and in witchcraft. Many Christians admitted that they were confused. The group directly involved in the torture are unchurched, but the surrounding community is predominantly Catholic. They renew their baptismal promises every year during the Easter ceremonies, agreeing to “reject Satan and all his works and empty promises.” In doing so, they reinforce their belief in good and evil and the way good and evil can be personified—good personified in Jesus Christ,

and evil personified in Satan. Like most Papua New Guineans, they believe in the spiritual, supernatural, or nonempirical realm. Outsiders might call it a magical worldview.

The church leaders requested a two-day workshop to clarify issues. In November 2013 I facilitated the workshop for about fifty people from the parish. Several topics were shared during the workshop: points from history on witchcraft in Europe, some linguistic clarifications, issues of cultural identity, and lessons from Scripture.

Participants were alarmed to hear that, before the Enlightenment in Europe, thousands of accused witches had been killed there. This historical information was new to them. The reality of witchcraft was not questioned, but the extent of the horror in Europe between 1450 and 1770 brought the response, “We certainly don’t want that to happen here!”

We clarified linguistic terms. Enga people have a traditional belief in *yama*, which amounts to the personification of the malicious effects of envy. For example, if someone carrying pork or another valued food item meets a person on the way home and is not willing to share, then the resultant ill-feeling (conscious or unconscious) can result in illness or another misfortune for the person or the family of the one carrying the food. People say that experienced elders or a ritual expert might see or hear signs of *yama* (such as a whistling noise), and as a consequence they might recite a spell telling the person with *yama* to come

Participants were alarmed to hear that, before the Enlightenment in Europe, thousands of accused witches had been killed there.

with a recognizable sign, such as clay rubbed around his or her eyes, so as to be given food or some other valuable that had been put aside as an enticement.⁹ Some people in Enga today are reinterpreting *yama* in terms of sanguma sorcery. This is dangerous, since *yama* beliefs have traditionally not been associated with the violent torture and killing related to sanguma. It was important to clarify this point so that people could be clearer in their terminology. The debate on language also led to discussion on cultural identity. Are there ways they can prevent customary beliefs of a neighboring culture group from diffusing into their own?

We selected Bible passages, particularly from the Gospels, and noted how Jesus had dealt mercifully with persons possessed by evil spirits, such as in the healing of what appears to be a boy suffering from epilepsy (Matt. 17:14–21). Participants reported that such passages helped them realize how a Christian response should seek healing and not destructive violence. Also, from a Gospel perspective, could it be that evil lies with the accusers rather than the accused?

Study of healing stories in the Christian Gospels led to the issue of belief and decision-making. Participants put it in terms of a fence. If a fence around a garden is strong and intact, then a pig cannot get inside to destroy the garden. Similarly, they could have a “thought fence” to regulate their minds, which could keep them from being troubled by the stories circulating. There

are two possibilities here. The fence could separate real from unreal, thus allowing a person to say that they do not believe in the power of sorcery. The other possibility is to have the fence separate real powers, keeping the power of witchcraft outside the protective fence. Several participants witnessed that they were no longer afraid of sorcery or witchcraft, and this change left them feeling confident and free—in other words, for them, ideas of sorcery were disempowered. Those Christians who continued to entertain such thoughts about witchcraft stories were allowing them inside the fence and so experienced confusion due to conflicting beliefs. Thus it was not so much a matter of believing or not believing in the reality of evil, but of having one’s faith commitment provide a sense of security in the face of evil power.¹⁰

A Return Visit

After the workshop, one weekend in November 2013 Maria and her husband came with me to Enga. As she approached the area where she had been tortured, she said she was feeling comfortable, but her body language indicated otherwise, as she pulled the hood of her jacket down over her face. Then, as we drove up in the hills, upon seeing her house across the valley, she pointed and spoke just one word, “Home.” There was a moving nostalgia about the expression, for she knew it was still too dangerous to go there. She spent the night elsewhere with her married daughter.

The next day she and her husband attended Sunday mass at the local parish church. At the end of mass a leader addressed the congregation of about 500 people, noting her presence. Afterward, the majority of adults came to her warmly with hugs and many tears. Admittedly these churchgoers had had little to do directly with her accusation and torture. Notably, several people present who had been implicated in the accusations and torture did not come to greet her, but kept their distance. Later that afternoon we traveled several hundred kilometers to another province, where she is currently living. Maria reflected as we drove, saying that her accusers must have been jealous of her because she had a good house and garden and enjoyed a happy marriage. Judging from other cases I have encountered, jealousy seems to be a common motive leading to accusations of a person being a witch.

Some weeks later I spoke with several of those who had tortured Maria. They still were convinced that the charges against Maria were correct and that she was responsible for the deaths of three persons. First, she had killed the young man through sanguma witchcraft. Second, in her fear after being accused she had named another woman, thereby accusing her (the one who eventually died) of being a witch. She was therefore responsible for the death of this other woman. Third, since Maria would not put back the heart of the deceased, she had to be tortured in an effort to make her do so. In the process, her unborn baby was killed, so she was responsible for that death as well. Moreover, the men claimed that Maria could possibly be responsible for a fourth serious problem and that there would be trouble and even violence if she returned intending to stay. As far as they were concerned, the only prudent solution was for Maria to forgive and forget—and to stay away.

The men explained their view of the torture. “The reason for torturing Maria was not to kill her. It was not done as a game or for fun. She was tortured when other people who were living in Mount Hagen or Simbu said that she must have placed the heart in a cool place under a waterfall and she would eat it after

the burial of the deceased.”¹¹ They were hoping that, with the return of his heart, the deceased would be saved and return to life.

Christian Community and Witchcraft Accusations

This account of Maria’s return and the response of the men who had accused her illustrate a number of issues relevant to a mis-siological response to witchcraft. The men who tortured Maria are not just young men with a blood lust or high on marijuana. They are people caught up in conflicting beliefs about life and death. According to the logic of Melanesian cultural tradition, misfortune is caused by someone else who must be identified. Moreover, if the situation is one of life and death, then it is urgent that the person responsible be found out, in order to force her (or him) to reverse the effects of the alleged sorcery. It is so urgent, in fact, that people are prepared to torture “the truth” out of the accused.

How is one to respond as a Christian in this scenario? Participants in the workshop suggested the image of the fence that keeps them safe in a world where unleashed pigs would cause destruction to the garden inside. The image appeals to those for whom personal faith commitment provides a sense of security.

The image is helpful, but I find shortcomings with it because gaps in a personal “fence” (i.e., a personal weakness of faith) could easily promote a moral causal ontology in which misfortune is ascribed to one’s own wrongdoing. Prosperity theology promotes notions of the better off being blessed by God, and the poor and marginalized suffering because of their sinfulness. There is similarity in the logic of such notions with the practice of demonizing other human beings as evil. We must be wary of interpreting suffering, illness, and death as God’s curse, or in terms of the demonic.

In the PNG context an interpersonal or communal understanding of the causes of evil is more appropriate. Disciplines such as anthropology explain outbreaks of witchcraft accusations in terms of frustration following social disintegration and modernization.¹² Social science treats witchcraft in terms of social processes. Christians refer to sin. Theologians call it the problem of evil. One can view the fence from a communal perspective. But this can lead to abuse if the faithful view themselves as a community virtuously united against a single evil scapegoat.¹³

Conscious of always being a visitor in their presence, I think

it is important to listen to people. Still, I challenged them to think beyond the fence. Christians may shelter behind a fence of security, but does not the witness of the Gospels urge us to help people change their interpretive framework, to turn from returning evil for evil, and to take responsibility personally or communally for what is going wrong in society—outside the fence? Misfortune need not come from Satan; it can arise from our own injustice. The Gospel teaches us to help the weakest and most vulnerable members of society—the orphans and widows, who are often the very target for witchcraft accusations. Leaving ontological questions about reality aside, we cannot ignore that there is a commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.” Is not the Christian community urged to find alternatives to the violence

We must be wary of interpreting suffering, illness, and death as God’s curse, or in terms of the demonic.

associated with witchcraft accusations? People have terms in their own language for envy and jealousy. Can we not name envy for what it is? Would this mean deliverance from selfishness rather than spiritual warfare?

Most people prefer the security of the fence, but some have responded in ways that go beyond faith as security. Following the workshop and Maria’s visit, some people in the parish have committed themselves to making sure that witchcraft accusations and torture will not recur in their area. Health workers are expending extra effort to offer a biomedical explanation for illness. The local Legion of Mary group has invited several women suspected of being witches into their Legion group, where they will be protected. Others promise to remind the community that violence has legal consequences and that they will support Maria if she takes her assailants to court. The context here is that of the community trying to find ways to protect potential victims, while interacting with the invisible forces associated with the fundamental issue of insecurity and the uncertainties of life.

Notes

1. See Franco Zocca, ed., *Sanguma in Paradise: Sorcery, Witchcraft, and Christianity in Papua New Guinea* (Goroka, PNG: Melanesian Institute, 2009). Also see Philip Gibbs, “Engendered Violence and Witch-Killing in Simbu,” in *Engendering Violence in Papua New Guinea*, ed. Margaret Jolly, Christine Stewart, and Caroline Brewer (Canberra: Australian National Univ. E-Press, 2012), 107–36.
2. The term is similar to the term “sangoma” used in Africa for diviners or traditional healers. See P. Maurice McCallum, “‘Sanguma’—Tracking Down a Word,” *Catalyst* 36, no. 2 (2006): 183–207.
3. In recent times people have come to view the spirit creature also in other forms, even as a helicopter or a computer virus (Bishop Anton Bal in an address to a clergy conference in Mount Hagen, July 24, 2013).
4. Casper Damien, “The Myth of Kumo: Knowing the Truth about Sanguma in Simbu Province,” *Catalyst* 35, no. 2 (2005): 128. Nowadays in Simbu, bodies are buried in graves lined with concrete to prevent sangumas from accessing and eating the corpse.
5. The term “victim” can be used in different senses. Most local people refer to the victim as the person made ill or killed by the sanguma. Most outsiders refer to the victim as the person accused of being a witch (sanguma).
6. Talk of this new type of sorcery puts the blame on women, saying that Enga women who had gone to Simbu to buy magic for restraining unfaithful husbands had mistakenly brought back sanguma as well.
7. Nick Schwartz, *Thinking Critically about Sorcery and Witchcraft* (Goroka, PNG: Melanesian Institute, 2011), 51.
8. David Bosch, “The Problem of Evil in Africa: A Survey of African Views on Witchcraft and of the Response of the Christian Church,” in *Like a Roaring Lion*, ed. Pieter de Villiers (Pretoria: Univ. of South Africa, C. B. Powell Bible Centre, 1987), 48–49.
9. There is an expression for this presentation in Enga: *yama nenge yukingi* (literally: pulling out the yama teeth).
10. The issue of security, including “spiritual security,” is an important point raised in Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005).
11. Interview with male relative at Tieliposa, March 22, 2014.
12. Mary Douglas, “Sorcery Accusations Unleashed: The Lele Revisited,” *Africa* 69, no. 2 (1999): 187.
13. Robert Priest, “Witches and the Problem of Evil,” *Books and Culture* 15, no. 6 (2009): 32.