



Sorcery among the Plains Arapesh

Philip Gibbs and Josepha Junnie Wailoni

Abstract. – The article describes Plains Arapesh sorcery as it exists today and in doing so critiques and supplements insights of Margaret Mead, particularly her comments on sorcery practices by the Plains Arapesh. It draws upon fieldwork conducted by the writers in 2006 and 2007 in villages West of Yangoru in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea. After describing different forms of sorcery, the elements, and how they are used in sorcery practice, it is noted that sorcery continues today because it is a way of expressing anger and jealousy, a way of gaining wealth, and an explanation for misfortune and death. [*Papua New Guinea, East Sepik, Plains Arapesh, Margaret Mead, sorcery, contagious magic, conflict*]

Philip Gibbs, a member of the Society of the Divine Word, obtained his postgraduate diploma in anthropology from the University of Sydney (1975) and his doctorate in theology from the Gregorian University, Rome (1995). He has done parish work in Papua New Guinea, taught at the seminary in Bomana, has been on the faculty of the Melanesian Institute in Goroka, and at present he is research advisor for Caritas Australia in Papua New Guinea.

Josepha Junnie Wailoni is from Belegel (Yangoru District) in the East Sepik Province. She is a secondary school teacher and is married with three children. She has a diploma in secondary school teaching from Goroka Campus (1992), a diploma in religious studies from the Divine Word University, Madang (2004), and a bachelor degree in education from the University of Goroka.

Introduction

Alitua was a mountaintop village comprising some 30 houses when Margaret Mead and Reo Fortune stayed there for eight months in 1931–32.¹ On visiting the location seventy-five years later in May 2007, we found few houses and only two people visiting from the coastal lowlands. The

place that we were told had been the site of Mead's house is overgrown and marked by the collapsed remains of a corrugated iron dispensary (see Fig. 1). The Japanese occupation and Allied bombardment during World War II, and more recently the attraction of places more accessible to modern services means that Alitua is now a site for gardens, tended by visitors from coastal villages such as Woginara.² Times have changed. Does it mean that the belief in and practice of sorcery have changed also?

This article will describe Plains Arapesh sorcery as it exists today. In doing so, we will critique and supplement insights of Margaret Mead, particularly her comments on sorcery practices by the Plains Arapesh. Our fieldwork was conducted in villages West of Yangoru situated in the foothills of the Prince Alexander Mountains.³ Alitua, where

1 Mead and Fortune had not intended to stay in Alitua. Mead reveals in her autobiography how, "Our carriers left us stranded with all our gear in a village on a mountaintop with no one to move our six months' supplies in either direction – into the interior or back to the coast. So we had no means of reaching the people we had intended to study and no choice but to settle down, build a house, and work with the simple, impoverished Mountain Arapesh, who had little ritual and less art, among whom we now found ourselves" (Mead 1972: 194).

2 Roscoe tells how in the late 1940s and early 1950s the people of Alitua moved down to Woginara village a few miles inland from Dagua, from where a number migrated to oil palm blocks at Cape Hoskins near Kimbe in West New Britain (2002: xxvii f.).

3 The writers stayed for a week on two occasions, in 2006 and 2007, based in Belegel village (home of coresearcher Mrs. Wailoni's mother), visiting other nearby Plains Arapesh villages including Kariru, Dunigi, and Bonahitam.



Fig. 1: The present-day view of the site of M. Mead's dwelling during her research in Alitua.

Mead was based a day's walk from our principal field site.⁴ There are minor cultural differences between the Plains and Mountain Arapesh, for example, variation in interior house design, recognisable differences in songs and dances, differences in the way bride-price is given and compensation paid. Mountain Arapesh still engage in more hunting than Plains Arapesh. Pronunciation differs, for example, the word Arapesh (meaning "men" [pl.]) sounds more like "Elpech" when spoken by people from the Plains.

Mead (1935, 2002) and Fortune (1939, 1942) divided the Mountain Arapesh into three separate subgroups according to cultural differences, which, for the most part, corresponded to their geographical setting. These groups were: Plains, Beach, and Mountain Arapesh. There was an economic interdependency among all three groups based upon the trading skills of the Beach people, the

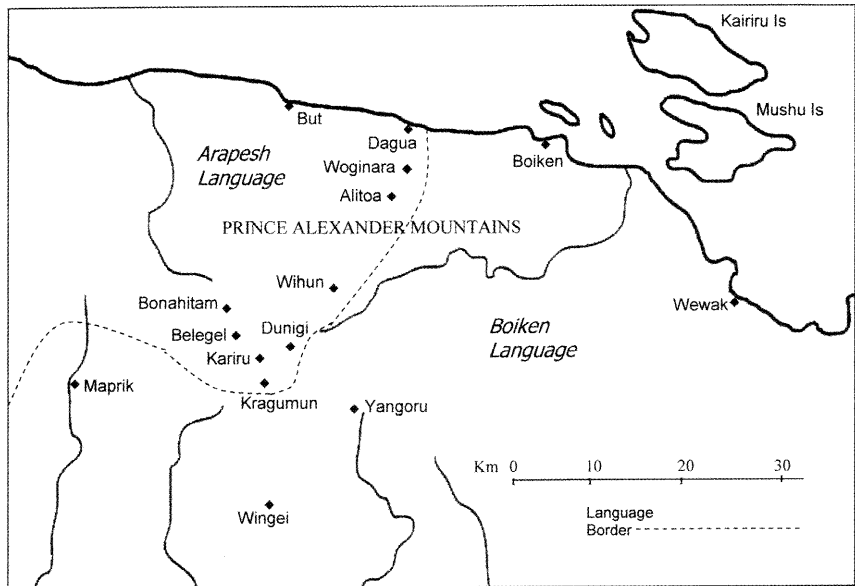
carriage skills of the Mountain people, and upon ring-making and the knowledge of sorcery by the Plainsmen.

Not everyone agrees with Mead's view of the Arapesh. Fortune, her husband at the time of her stay among the Arapesh, criticised her analysis of Arapesh aggression. In his article on "Arapesh Warfare," referring to Mead's theory that Arapesh social culture has selected a "maternal" temperament, placid and domestic in its implications, both for men and women, he writes, "The theory has been applied to the cultural analysis of Arapesh warfare, and has led to conclusions that 'Warfare is practically unknown among the Arapesh – the feeling towards a murderer and that towards a man who kills in battle are not essentially different – abductions of women are not unfriendly acts on the part of the next community.' These conclusions we, of course, must reject on the basis of our preceding evidence" (Fortune 1939: 36). Fortune does not comment on her view of Arapesh sorcery. However, the above comment is relevant to our work since both warfare and sorcery may be considered acts of aggression.

The greatest act of aggression an Arapesh could perform was "to open the door to death, by sending a portion of his neighbor's personality to the sorcerers" (Mead 2002: 242). This was because they attributed the cause of all deaths to the magical spells conducted by sorcerers, except in the cases of young children and for the aged (Mead

We walked through Wihun village (Mountain Arapesh) to Alitua – some 6 hours from Belegel. We wish to acknowledge and thank the many people who offered us hospitality and shared their knowledge and their stories with us. The Melanesian Institute helped with logistics and funding for the research. Br. Maurice McCallum helped with translation.

⁴ Both Plains Arapesh (Kariru village) and Mountain Arapesh (Wihun village) people tell how Margaret Mead (remembered as "Margareta") had visited the Tambaran House at Kariru village (Plains Arapesh), near Belegel – a day's journey from Alitua. Mead records that she did not leave Alitua village. However, Reo Fortune did journey to other villages seeking to document (and buy) art works.



Map: Arapesh and Boiken language division, with site of field-work in Arapesh villages.

2002: 244 f.). Such aggression, according to Mead (2002: 241), was outside the Arapesh maternal temperament that ideally “outlaw[ed] aggression and sexuality and replace[d] them with an asexual parental attitude.” They were able to rationalise this apparent inconsistency because they themselves did not perform the sorcery but hired Plains sorcerers to do the job on their behalf. All deaths, they believed, were caused by the hands of a stranger. This was Mead’s view from the Mountain Arapesh village of Alitua.⁵ We will look at sorcery from the perspective of present-day Plains Arapesh.

There appears to be little missionary writing on West Yangoru sorcery. Fr. Eberhard Limbrock SVD and Fr. Franz Kirschbaum patrolled near our research area in October 1912 (Limbrock 1913), but did not cross into Arapesh-speaking territory. After the First World War, Fr. Andreas Puff SVD (Puff 1926) writes of a 1926 patrol to the place of the “ring grinders” (Ringschleifer). Fr. Andreas Gerstner reported on an expedition in the hinterland of But in 1933, naming the villages that we visited (“Aritoa,” “Vihun,” “Dunigi” and “Balägäl”). He mentions the cult of spirits and

magic, but does not go into the matter in any depth. On their visit to Alitua, one of the elders told the missionary: “The missionaries just lie . . . Which of you has seen the fires of Hell that you’re always telling us about? My village has no further use for this old fairy tale. The Whitemen told us this recently” (in Roscoe 2002: xxii). No doubt the elder was referring to Mead and Fortune. Gerstner comments, “Aritoa will be stony ground for the mission” (Gerstner 1934: 236).⁶ An excellent later paper by Gerstner concentrates more on the sanguuma form of sorcery in the hinterland of Boiken rather than the Arapesh territory further west (Gerstner 1937; cf. 1963).

Sorcery, Poison, Witchcraft, and Sanguuma

Applying general terms in any cultural complex is problematic. This applies to terms such as “sorcery,” “poison,” “witchcraft,” and the more specialist term – “sanguuma.” Sorcery is the use of

⁵ Having been carried to Alitua in a string hammock slung on a pole “for all the world like a pig” (Mead 1977: 103), Mead with her weak ankle remained at Alitua village for the entire eight months. Hence her knowledge of Plains sorcery must have been based on reports from Reo Fortune who did range more widely, the visits of Plains people as they walked through Alitua on their way to the coast, and the opinions on their Plains neighbours of the Mountain Arapesh themselves.

⁶ Comments indicate a less than positive relationship between missionaries and ethnologists at the time. Mead writes that “the next tribe on one side is badly missionized” (1977: 123). Maybe she had not read Gerstner’s 1934 article when she sees the function of the Tambaran House sacred flutes as scaring women away so that men could secretly consume meat, and comments “Who knows the Catholic fathers ask, what the flutes really mean?” (Mead 1977: 110). Fr. Gerstner had come to the same conclusion as herself about scaring women and children away so that men alone could sit behind the walls of the spirit house for a delicious meal (Gerstner 1934: 259).

magical power to influence events. The Papua New Guinea Sorcery Act (1976) distinguishes between “white” (good) and “black” (bad) magic – sorcery falling into the latter category. In common parlance sorcery is thought to bring about misfortune. However, as we will see below, among the Arapesh, good fortune may be sought also.

Researchers often distinguish between sorcery involving contagious magic and assault sorcery; the former utilizing malevolent actions on the “leavings” of a person, the latter involving direct physical harm to the person. Finer distinctions may be made by using terms from the local language.

The term “poison” also can have several meanings. One, closer to the Standard English use of the term refers to a toxic substance which, if ingested, will cause sickness or death. At other times the term *posin* is used as a Melanesian pidgin expression for sorcery. In pidgin usage in the Sepik today, the term *posin* most often refers to the “leavings” or “specimen” (what Margaret Mead terms “exuviae”) of a person, bound up in a packet of leaves, which will be used in the practice of sorcery (see Fig. 2).

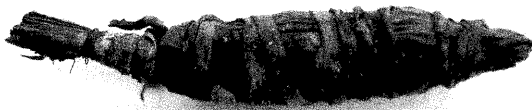


Fig. 2: *Posin* – the magical bundle used for sorcery.

Sanguma is a form of assault sorcery in which the sanguma person may become invisible and force a harmful object or inject a harmful substance into the victim so that they get sick and/or die. In some places the sanguma is thought to take animal form. Mead mentions it under the title of “introduced magic.” Sanguma may possibly be classed under the category of witchcraft in the sense that it employs harm-dealing powers using human agency. In some parts of Papua New Guinea, particularly the Highlands, sanguma is seen as a form of witchcraft, using psychic or occult power to harm, rather than employing physical objects or substances.

The above discussion shows how meanings of these terms may overlap. The Plains Arapesh employ forms of sorcery (which they call *posin*) involving contagious magic on the leavings of a

person. They claim that witchcraft and sanguma are used by their neighbours, not by themselves.

The Death of a Young Woman and Her Uncle

The death of a young woman and her uncle helps illustrate the complexity of sorcery beliefs among the Plains Arapesh. L, a young woman without children, developed sores in her mouth and could not eat. After some days she became so weak that she could hardly move. Her relatives carried her to the nearest health centre where she died three days later. She was buried back in the village. People questioned how the sores had come about. They suspected her uncle O, a reputed sorcerer, and someone remembered him giving her betel nut with mustard and lime a few days before the sores appeared. Her brothers suspected O, so they seized him and questioned him about the death of their sister. O admitted giving L the betel nut, mustard, and lime, but denied that he had meant to harm her. She was his own niece after all, L being the daughter of his own sister. The young men stripped him, tied him to a post, and started beating him with sticks. His sister tried to stop the beating by shielding O’s body with hers, but they flung her away and continued beating him to death. Most people believed that L had died because she was “poisoned” by the sorcerer O, the sores on her mouth being evidence of this. But why should he want to harm his niece? Was he doing it for someone else because they had a grudge against her? It was not as simple as that. People now say that both L and O were victims of sorcery. L was “poisoned” in a way that her fatal illness would lead to O being killed as well. Some people see the fact that O, a strong man, was not able to defend himself as a sign that he was a victim of sorcery. People reason that those responsible for the sorcery were jealous and angry with O who was trying to be a village leader, and upset with L’s mother because of the way she was taking a lead in customary obligations. O’s family believe that those responsible for the sorcery knew that he was protecting his family from sorcerers and wanted him killed so he would not be around to be their guardian any more. The common conclusion was that other people “poisoned” both of them with the intention that both O and his niece L would die.

Was O a sorcerer? His wife does not believe so. She says that he would use his reputation as a sorcerer to make money. He tricked people to give him money so that he would come and poison

their enemies, but she claims that in reality he didn't have a clue. It was a way of making money so that he could buy necessities for the family (interview with Matarina Oanim, Almatalibel at Dunigi village, 5 June 2006).

From Alitua, Mead noted how persons, whom she calls *man-o-bush* from the Plains, would march into the village "as bold as brass" demanding food from the women and hinting that if they would not get it, someone later would die (Mead 1977: 126). She had little sympathy for the "threatening sorcerers of the plains who blackmailed our mild-mannered mountain people by promising temporarily not to sorcerize their relatives, providing they were given food and an adequate supply of trade goods" (Mead 1972: 202). Similar inferences are common today. Karen Brison, who did research with the nearby Kwanga people of the Sepik Plains, points out how gossip and rumour are central to shaping and shifting power relations. Kwanga community leaders build reputations by hinting that they are the confidants of sorcerers able to kill those who challenge the authority of male cult initiates. Such talk creates the impression that these individuals are very powerful and to be feared. Ambitious individuals may try to define situations in such a way as to further their own goals and enhance their reputations, but they cannot fully control the impact of their own words. Ultimately, the same men who build reputations through gossip and innuendo find themselves victimized in turn by malicious gossip (Brison 1992: 244 f.). Was this what happened to O?

Sorcery Today

Basic Elements in Plains Arapesh Sorcery

Is sorcery still practiced in West Yangoru today? Police Prosecutor Justin Rame in Yangoru says that he deals with about 30 cases of sorcery as *posin* a year, and that in the year 2005 five sorcerers were convicted and sent to serve prison terms. During the Papua New Guinea national elections in 2007, there was much talk in the East Sepik Province of candidates employing sorcerers to disadvantage their opponents and to influence people in their favour during the voting period.

If sorcery is so common, even today, then how does it work? There are many forms of harmful magical practices among the Arapesh, like, for example, leaving a person's "specimen" in a place thought to be inhabited by malevolent spirits (*masalai*) or in the stem of a wild taro where it

will rot and make the person represented by the specimen unwell. Margaret Mead includes such harmful practices as forms of sorcery (2002: 330 f.). However, for Plains Arapesh, practices such as these are not strictly sorcery. One reason to exclude such magic is that there are no taboos to be observed when applying the spell. The true sorcerer must observe certain taboos for several weeks if his work is to be effective (such taboos are called *sakrifais* in Melanesian Pidgin). He must not bathe or drink water. He doesn't eat food cooked by young unmarried women without children. He also keeps well away from menstruating women and what they cook. If taboos are not observed, the person will become cold (lose power) and the collected specimen will become moist and lose its power. Such taboos are important in the practice of sorcery, but are not necessary for "magic."

There are four basic elements in Plains Arapesh sorcery, or *posin*: 1. a bundled "specimen" (*posin* in Pidgin, *ouluh* in Arapesh); 2. a process of capturing a person's life force, or soul (*michin* in Arapesh); 3. a red-coloured lime called *ahih* in Arapesh, composed principally of ashes from the bones of a dead ancestor; 4. sorcery processes called *wichain* and *atiglineige*. The first three elements are essential to sorcery. The processes in the fourth point are optional, facilitating requests for desired articles or events.

1. Specimens may include the remains of food, articles of clothing, or fluids such as genital fluids. The latter are considered more powerful, but food remains are the most likely items used. Woman's menstrual blood is not used because it is classified as "cold" and can destroy the specimen. Another effective specimen for sorcery is the eggs (*iduglinih*) from a butterfly that deposits them in a bush vine. The vine is cut and the *iduglinih* extracted. This is then squeezed, and the juice is collected and put in the soup or a yam dish. The victim is then given this to eat and the eggshells are kept for sorcery. Another example given to us was where somebody brought cooked fish to the victim – fish to which liquid from a certain spider, had been added. He was given the fish to eat and his enemies kept the actual spider which they used as a specimen in sorcery and that was how they are believed to have killed him. In still another case the specimen came from earth where someone had urinated. So, specimens or leavings may come from various sources, all employing some form of contagious magic.

2. To use a specimen for sorcery, it is wrapped in nettle and *wagun* leaves and bound into a small

parcel using *amab* vines. It is now called *ouh* (sing.), *ouluh* (pl.) and in Pidgin *posin*. Traditionally it was kept in the Tambaran House or the men's house. Today, any place away from women and children will suffice. It must be kept in a very dry place, away from water and away from menstruating women, and plants such as *wamibel* and *nahlibenoh* that would make the specimen "cold." Previously the parcel (*ouh*) would be heated over a fire, but today any means of heat production may be used – such as the exhaust pipes of generators, on solar panels, or placed on a metal roof on a hot day.

There are several ways to test if the *michin* is really captured. The visit of a firefly is an assurance that the specimen has the potential to be used for sorcery. Another indication is the injury of the potential victim in a dispute – for instance, when in a domestic argument one is cut with a knife. This will indicate to the sorcerer that the *ouh* belongs to him and it contains the person's spirit. Another way is to address the specimen and ask if it was that person whose remains were collected. If it is, the specimen will move or produce some kind of noise indicating that the specimen is ready to be used in the actual sorcery. The sorcerer may then swing the specimen around to see if the victim will experience dizziness and fainting spells. When that happens and the sorcerer hears about it, he will know that the specimen is "hot" and has power. Heavy rain and thunder accompanied by lightning when the specimen is tested are also signs of the "hotness" of this specimen.

Aside from collecting specimens as objects used by the victim, there are other ways also to capture the "soul" (*michin*) for use in sorcery. One such way is through the process of sorcery called *atiglineige*. A wild taro stalk or the red coconut tree root *manyiben* is used. This will be placed on a narrow path, and the sorcerer hides in the bushes and waits for the victim to step over it. As soon as the victim does that and is out of sight, the person hiding will come and collect that piece of taro stalk or coconut tree root, and close the end with breadfruit sap or another tree with sap (*mabloh*), thus trapping the *michin*. As the end is tied, the sorcerer recites a spell in which the victim's name and his or her clan name are mentioned. The stalk or root, now containing the victim's "soul," is then put into a bamboo tube and nettle leaves are tied over the opening. It will be stored until needed. This process is not sorcery at this stage but is used to capture the spirit of a person to be used in sorcery rituals.

Another way to use *atiglineige* is to hide the enchanted taro stalk or coconut root under the step leading into a house. The victim is called outside thus stepping over the *atiglineige*. After the person has gone back into the house, the *atiglineige* is removed and taken away to be used in sorcery. People are warned to be careful about coming out of the house if called during the night. We will refer again to *atiglineige* in section 4 below.

3. Another important ingredient – *ahih* – is lime made from burning the leg bones of a powerful man such as a warrior. The *ahih* is made by specialists, mostly from Nimbihu Kragamun villages. It takes on a red colour from being mixed with sap from a bush vine (*ubianih*). Other bush herbs, such as red nettle leaves (*nihigeh*) and vines, are also added. The latter, along with lemon, help make the lime "hot." When it has dried, a red residue is left, and this is mixed together with the ashes as lime. The *ahih*, kept in bamboo tubes (see Fig. 3), is regarded as powerful and dangerous. These days red paint can be bought from the shops to substitute for colouring from the vines.



Fig. 3: *Ahah* – the powder obtained from the burned leg bones of a powerful man.

The *ahih* is made by specialists and has to be paid for. A little boy is brought to carry it after it is purchased. A boy, presumably has not been contaminated by sexual contact with women and also, if there is a river to cross, the little boy will be carried on the shoulders of an older man so

that the cooling effect of the river will not make the *ahih* “cold.”

4. *Wichain* derives its name from a type of grass (sometimes called *nyubut*) that is used with spells to bring about desired effects. At one stage the specimen is heated in a pot, and the *wichain* is swung over the pot in a circular motion and requests made. The sorcerer(s) call(s) a person’s name while willing something happen to them. For instance, if there is a land dispute, a request may be made for one party to leave the village for good. The person’s name or clan name is referred to in a spell as the *wichain* is swung over the pot and the request made for him to leave.

Atiglineige is a process that uses the captured *michin* in a taro stalk or red coconut tree root to bring about misfortune. *Wichain* can have both positive and negative effects, but *atiglineige* is always negative, usually resulting in tragedy or death.

Margaret Mead had heard of these ingredients through informants who were familiar with Plains Arapesh sorcery practice, and she describes this in a short section in “The Mountain Arapesh” (Mead 2002: 333 f.).⁷ However, she seems not to have been told about *atiglineige*. Moreover she does not provide a detailed description of the ingredients or a systematic account of their use. Her overall concern appears to be more for the network of paths Plains sorcerers used in the trade of “exuviae” for shells, sea water, and other valuables, and the way the “net of sorcery fear” such sorcerers produced among the Mountain people, influenced their lives, particularly their parental roles (Mead 2002: 184). The use of *wichain*, for example, is seen as a form of “black magic” operating at the level of social structure, through relationships between communities and the close tie between a person and his or her “exuviae” (Mead 2002: 245). We found, however, that the use of *wichain* today is thought to bring about both bad and good fortune, and that the link with “exuviae” and the person impacted by the *wichain* can be so distant both geographically and otherwise as to make the relationships practically irrelevant. Their world is no longer merely the Plains, Mountains, and Beach. People gave us examples in which they believed *wichain* could cause a person in Port Moresby to win money or to be successful in national elections.

7 Mead notes however, “These should be regarded, I believe, as data on Mountain culture, not as reliable evidence about the Plains” (2002: 333, fn. 8).

Sorcery Practice

How are the elements described above used to practice sorcery? Mead’s brief description of Plains Arapesh sorcery practice corresponds substantially with our recent findings (Mead 2002: 333 f.). However we will expand on Mead’s short description. Sorcery is usually performed in a hidden location such as a cave or a small hut built in the bush for that purpose. During the practice of sorcery sago thorns are dipped into the *ahih* powder and inserted into the *ouluh* packet. (Today a sewing needle or a sharp piece of coconut broom may be used.) The mixing of *ahih* with the *ouluh* is likened to connecting a battery to a car. As a battery supplies the power to start a car, likewise, once the *ahih* is introduced to the *ouluh*, the specimen is empowered. The sorcerer will take a piece of strong wood (*bulwiteh*), lay the tied specimen on another piece of timber, and hit it repeatedly. As he hammers the specimen, he will call the clan name and the *masalai* name of the victim.⁸ The specimen is hammered and thrown into a pot. A wild taro leaf is used to cover the specimen(s) in the pot. This is removed after two days or so to see if the released *michin* will reappear in the form of an animal somewhere in the vicinity of the fireplace. The number of animals that appear should equal the number of specimens in the pot. If the sorcerer wants the victims dead, these animals will then be killed and thrown also into the pot.

The victim’s spirit represented by an animal, such as a snake or lizard (*ubabel*), is attracted to the place of the specimen. Sorcerers will call the name of the victim and ask this snake or lizard if it is this person and place a bamboo tube nearby for it to creep into. If they name the victim correctly, the creature is said to enter the conveniently placed bamboo tube without hesitation. Thus the *michin* becomes trapped in the bamboo tube. When the *michin* is trapped and “killed” (beaten or cut), the victim will die.⁹ If the sorcerer decides not to kill the person, then the *michin* in the form of the creature may be released from the bamboo and

8 Each person has a *masalai* or secret name associated with his/her life force or *michin*. It is called a *masalai* name because it would be used when people are in the forest so that when they return to the village and their “normal” name is used, the *masalai* spirits will not recognise the person and so not harm them.

9 One informant said that the person dies when the taro leaf over the saucepan is pierced so as to release the steam from inside, symbolising the breath escaping from the victim (interview with Christopher Baniani at Kariru, 3 January 2007).

let go. The *ouluh* may then be put in a cold place such as a stream of water so that it no longer has power over the person's spirit. It seems that the first time the *michin* is caught in the specimen is symbolic, and a real animal has to be enticed the second time so that it can be physically killed to demonstrate the actual death.¹⁰

Once the *ouluh* is heated and sorcery performed, word can be spread to others to come and put in their "requests." While the *michin* is captured and is alive, those who have grievances against the victim would also come to pay for him or her to be killed. The captured *michin* can entertain any request. Everybody who is involved may ask for the sorcery to affect others and they will observe possible victims for some signs of illness or misfortune. If anyone of them falls sick, then it is the confirmation that the power of the specimen is producing some effect. Word will be sent out to others especially the elderly men or leaders who are responsible for the process. That evening or the next, they will come together and discuss what they would want to be done.

When the *wichain* grass is rotated over the pot, it is powered by the specimen that is being heated in it. The *wichain* will respond to the spoken words and use the power emanating from the specimen to fulfil the requests. The main power from the specimen is actually coming from the *ahih* lime made from bones of dead ancestors.

At this point the *atiglineige* process may be applied. People who wish misfortune to befall someone will bring along a captured *michin* and this is added to the pot containing the specimen(s). The *atiglineige* process may occur with or without the *wichain*.

The same specimen that is meant to be "killed" may be used at the same time to achieve good fortune. While the specimen is heated and the victim has fallen ill, the same specimen is used with different words to achieve other results. Many other requests both good and bad can be made at this time. For example, if someone wants to attract a young woman, he can put some money and request for this at this time. He has to pay first, then the woman's name will be included in a spell and it is presumed that she will come.

Sorcery is suspected when a sick person is taken to hospital, and the medical personnel are unable to diagnose any recognisable illness, or if the sick person does not respond to medication.

Back in the village, a traditional way to find out if a sick person is victim of sorcery (while they are alive) is to collect red and black ants (*karakum*) and to mix them together with red yams, yellow taro, and pawpaw. The mixture is put into leaves and tied into separate bundles representing each family of possible sorcerers. Each family's parcel is identified with their name and these are then put into the ground oven pit. Once baked, each parcel is opened and checked. The parcels with cooked food or those that are completely burnt are blameless. The parcel with the uncooked food and live ants shows that the sorcerer is from that particular family. If the sorcerer can be identified, the sorcerised specimen (*ouluh*) can be neutralised and the sick person becomes well again. We were told that this form of discernment is not common nowadays. People tend to take a short cut by "just blaming each other."

Mead says how at a funeral any suspect may give food to the widow and mourning children and if they vomit, he is guilty and that this is symbolic of a complete break in relationship ties (2002/I: 242). We found Plains Arapesh belief and practice to be quite different. It has nothing to do with a suspect giving food. Rather, if a suspect visits a sick person, they might hiccup or vomit in the sorcerer's presence. Thus vomiting is not a sign of rejection but rather points to the suspect so that counteraction may be taken. Sorcerers usually try to stay away from a funeral or mourning site lest a firefly or some other sign indicate that they are responsible.

Mead mentions precautions against sorcery (such as not provoking anger), but gives little indication of ways to counter it once it is in force. The most common antidotes are leaves from the *wamileb* (plural form of *wamibel*) tree, which have the power to make sorcery "cold." Branches of the *wamileb* can be burnt to produce smoke around the place where it is believed that the sorcery practice is taking place. At times, *wamileb* leaves are boiled and betel nut or mustard is dipped in the juice and given to the suspected sorcerer(s) to chew. It is believed that once this gets into the sorcerer's system, he will lose his power over the specimen.

After everything is over the sorcerer must go through a purification ritual to remove the spirit(s) of the person killed by the sorcery. This involves going through a clump of bamboo (*mahlagas*) as the spirits or ghosts will not follow the person because they fear the bamboo barbs and so will stay on the other side and so a person is freed. After that a person enters a river and dives under water. One can also go around a *Ficus* tree (*uluh*)

10 Cyndi Banks, however, says that the captured animal symbolises the victim's soul and "without his soul, the victim would fall ill and die" (1993: 92).

or wild palm trees (*waboh*). The *Ficus* tree is a place associated with the dwelling place of *masalai*, so the spirits will remain there if one goes around it. The *waboh* is a heavier palm, and so the ghosts and spirits will be weighted down by going around it and will stay in that place. The sorcerer will then take samples of the above vines or trees, put them on his head, and swim into the river. As he swims these things become loose and are swallowed by the river and taken away. Only after this will the sorcerer relax the taboos and start to eat and relate normally.

Continuance of Sorcery

Life has not always been easy for West Yangoru sorcerers. In 1993 John Jaminan, the member of parliament for Yangoru Sausia, procured a police vehicle and had the police go from village to village to find out who the sorcerers were. As a consequence many sorcerers were brought to the police for questioning. Subsequently many of them were also beaten and items of sorcery, such as specimen bundles, lime, ginger, and other items, were surrendered. He brought the police mobile squad to Belegel because he was fed up with what he saw, namely, people dying from sorcery. About twenty men were called forward as suspects, and they had to present suspicious implements in their possession. In addition to that, they were also told to hold up the implements and publicly declare that they were sorcerers in front of the women, children, and other spectators. People from other Plains villages came as witnesses to this event. Each suspected sorcerer identified himself by name and village and announced that he would not indulge in the practice anymore. They were also slapped, hit, and ridiculed by the police. The incident was demeaning because the village leaders and other elders were insulted. Jaminan saw it as a way of protecting the lives of people against sorcery (interview with J. Jaminan at Nimbihu Kragumun, 3 May 2007). Jaminan does not believe that this action led to his losing in the next (1997) elections, but many people do, and they say that the police have not returned because *wichain* put a stop to it.¹¹

¹¹ Robert Dunna who was the driver for John Jaminan at that time (1993) claims that Jaminan also told the policemen to mix menstrual blood and *wamileb* leaves with tea and gave it to the sorcerers to drink. The men were scared of the police hitting them and so drank the tea. They didn't know that menstrual blood was also used to make them *kol*.

Belief in sorcery continues today. During an interview in 2007, Jaminan said,

Last year, fifteen bundles of *posin* were collected from the village just down the road. Fifteen people were going to be killed. When I heard about it, I complained to the police at Yangoru. The village magistrate from here went to get the auxiliary police at Yangoru to get these men. The Yangoru police then sent some auxiliary policemen to round up these men. They escaped, otherwise they could have been jailed for fifteen or twenty years. Fifteen lives were saved. Later we forced them to speak out and they admitted that they were paid to do that. Most of the intended victims were from here and some were from the coast. This is an act of the devil and now that it is election time, some will have the money to do it (interview with J. Jaminan at Nimbihu Kragumun, 3 May 2007).

Most people say that though sorcery is declining, it is still practiced. There are various reasons for this. Firstly, there is little to take its place. Warfare and open violence are actively discouraged by law enforcement agencies, so sorcery can be an "underground" way of solving conflict (interview with Christopher Baniani at Kariru Village, 3 January 2007). If one holds a knife or spear in public, then everybody knows and one can be taken to court, but sorcery, which is performed in secret, is hard to prove. Christianity discourages sorcery, but this has only a limited effect. One community leader expressed his experience as follows:

I believe that there is a God but there is also a god of these things. When I was a committed Christian, I did not really believe in it but now I am back to the old way of life and I do believe that there is another powerful force. I have witnessed sorcery being practised and things have happened. Timo and I were together in one instance. I was scared and wondered who was going to die that afternoon. At the same time we requested for some of our worries to be solved. I was to observe the sky to see if it would turn red that afternoon. If it did, then it was a good sign. I did see that and I believed (interview with Andrew Dunna at Kariru village, 3 January 2007).

Other factors encourage the continuance of sorcery. It is a way of expressing anger and jealousy. It is also a way of gaining wealth because *posin* men can make large amounts of money for their services. The threat of sorcery is said to help maintain law and order, though not so effectively these days considering the crimes that some people get away with. Sorcery also continues to be an explanation for misfortune and death. In the case of the young woman and her uncle given above, people explain the tragedy in terms of sorcery.

One of our interviewees spoke about both good and bad effects of sorcery (interview at Belegel, 30 May 2006). He said that he favours the good effects when it helps to bring about *gutpela sindaun* (peace and prosperity). Other interviewees said that sorcery is desirable because it was and still is a means of income. If someone contributed a specimen, they would be paid and an important person's specimen is worth a good deal. The money would then be distributed according to the roles performed. Sorcery was and is still a means of earning money, especially for those who don't have sisters because otherwise they would have no way of getting money from bride-price payments. Sorcery may also be used when buying pigs. The *michin* of a victim is invoked to help determine the price of the pig, especially to convince the owner of the pig to accept a cheap offer and sell it willingly. Thus, sorcery is not for killing only. It serves other purposes as well such as winning court cases or cancelling them. It is also used in bride-price collection whereby through the power of the *michin*, people can come and contribute willingly so that bride-price can be paid (interview with Lucas Yakumum at Bonahitam, 29 May 2006).

It is debatable how much sorcery comes from within or without. Mead was writing from a Mountain Arapesh perspective where specimens for sorcery were traded rather than used in sorcery. Sorcery was blamed on the Plains people. Plains people have a proverb: *Paia bilong yu yet bai kukim yu sapos yu no lukaut – i no paia bilong narapela man*. ("It is your own fire which will burn you if you are not careful and not somebody else's fire.") The Plains person who is angry with a family member may give his/her specimen to known sorcerers within the Plains. Sorcery is a group event and if some people of the group are related to the victim, they will give permission to kill their own people by sorcery. In the case given above, both uncle and niece would surely have been sorcerised by rivals from within the community. The story of their death helps illustrate the complexity of Arapesh sorcery.

Margaret Mead, from her Mountain Arapesh experience says (2002: 334) that with the Arapesh "all social relationships are best described in individual terms" so that sorcery may best be described as vulnerability of the individual rather than a sanction used by the community. What does she mean by this? From the Plains perspective, this would mean that sorcery is a sanction used by individuals in the community who take it upon themselves to right the wrong for the good of the

whole community. Despite what Mead says about the Arapesh maternal temperament, Arapesh men and women do quarrel and become violent, but they try to resolve the problem quickly so as not to open the door to sorcery. Sorcerers within the community take it as their duty to apply sanctions if conflicts are not resolved. The action taken results from the decision of a network of sorcerers. Afterwards the wider community may agree and say that the person deserved to be sorcerised.

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