

# Violence and Living Prophetic Dialogue

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Recently at the Melanesian Institute in Goroka, Papua New Guinea, we have been studying the phenomenon of *kumo* witchcraft in the Simbu Province. At one stage, as we spoke about the victims of this phenomenon, we realised that there were diverging opinions as to just who were the “victims”. Some considered the victims to be those who had suffered the direct effect of acts of witchcraft. Most of these victims were dead. Others considered the victims to be those who had been accused of being witches. Most of these had been tortured and many were dead. Others had suffered but survived torture and abuse. Still others had fled their homes and gone to survive in other provinces. The identification of victims in this situation depends on how one understands violence, and also on one’s stance on the reality of witchcraft. After considering these two points, this paper will refer to case studies and statistical data and argue that the Christian response to witchcraft accusations is an important dimension of living prophetic dialogue in parts of PNG today.

## Violence

The English term “violence” connotes aggressive behaviour that is in some way unacceptable and illegitimate. However for the one performing violent acts such an understanding may well be diminished or even absent. The fact that actions which missionaries recognise as violent, may be understood differently in other cultures raises doubts as to whether the term “violence” is perhaps too culturally relative for use as a sociological category. Violence is very much a word of those who witness, or are victims of certain acts, rather than those who perform them (Riches 1986:3).

When the term “violence” is used, it is necessary to note who is labelling a given act as such. In Simbu, the people apprehending, torturing and killing a “witch” are most often considered heroes, who have rid their community of yet another threat. The apparent moral propriety of the act would lead many to consider it acceptable and legitimate. The core purpose is to protect the community from the perceived threat of witchcraft. It is the actions of the witch that are seen as unacceptable and illegitimate, thus calling for radical measures amounting to self-defensive homicide. Whether one considers such actions legitimate or illegitimate depends on how one understands the reality of witchcraft.

## Witchcraft

A number of researchers including John Nilles SVD, Paula Brown, Casper Damien and Franco Zocca SVD have described *kumo* witchcraft in the Simbu province.<sup>1</sup> The reader may

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<sup>1</sup> I would particularly like to thank Casper Damien for his help in the field and in transcribing and translating recorded conversations.

refer to their informative papers and learn how *kumo* refers to a malevolent power or creature with the power to kill or harm people. The *kumo* creature lives in some part of the body of its host, the co-called *kumo*-person or “witch”. The issue in question here is the perceived “reality” of witchcraft.

Belief in and fear of witchcraft are obvious in Simbu. However one must try to distinguish the empirical (verifiable) from non-empirically real (believed), and the real from the imaginary. Some things may be considered real though not verifiable (like the existence of God, or a quality such as love, etc.)

Many aspects of Simbu witchcraft appear to refute empirical verification. For example, it is said that the *kumo* comes in the form of an animal residing in the body of the witch, that the *kumo* kills by eating internal organs of the victim, that there is a “parliament” of witches located within Mt Elimbari in Simbu, and that witches now resort to modern means such as the use of a “*kumo gun*”. It is difficult to subject such beliefs to empirical analysis. The people themselves sometimes look for verification by having the “witch” kill a chicken from a distance. Even in this case there are serious questions about verification. So it seems that witchcraft is real to those who believe in it.

Yet, *kumo* generates much fear and suspicion, and belief in *kumo* has led to the gruesome deaths of many people in Simbu. *Kumo* is certainly “real” in its consequences and to insist on asking whether it is objectively real is to risk missing the reality in favour of the analysis. Academics have proposed various explanations, for example: ideological, psychological, socio-political, and psychic (Zocca 2005:10-14). These explanations may help outsiders (and even insiders) understand the institution; however, ultimately it comes down to a question of belief. At a diocesan meeting early this year (2005), when asked if they believe that *kumo* witchcraft is “real,” the majority of the Simbu national priests answered in the affirmative. They added that they believed that the power of Christ was stronger than the evil power of *kumo*.

One may also ask whether *kumo* is merely a figment of the imagination. For example: I can imagine that the former Simbu politician Imbaki Okuk is still alive. I can imagine that PNG won 10 medals in the Olympics. I can imagine that God is real. I can imagine that *kumo* is real. Which of these is real or true? How can I know? Whether one believes that it is true or not, *kumo* witchcraft is a real institution with a system of beliefs, values, social relations and roles. The reality of the effects of this institution may be shown through statistical data.

## Police Records

Police Records (2000-2004) with the Homicide office in Kundiawa, Simbu record 67 cases of people having died or become seriously ill as a result of witchcraft, and 92 persons accused of being witches and thus having been killed or badly abused. Whether indeed the former group of 67 people did die from malevolent effects of witchcraft could be questioned and

debated. However, that 92 persons were accused of being witches is a fact. Of these people, 60 were killed and 32 escaped death, but often with terrible injuries. The police report that they were beaten, burned, shot or chopped with axes or knives. Of these accused 50 were women and 42 men. Most were older mature or elderly people in the 40-65 age bracket.

## Hospital Records

Hospital Records (1996-2005) with the Kundiawa hospital reveal 49 cases admitted as a result of the injuries suffered after having being accused of witchcraft. Of these people admitted to hospital 3 died. The rest somehow recovered from their terrible injuries. Many were suffering from burns over much of their body and some had deep cuts, to the extent they had to have limbs surgically amputated. 16 (33%) were male and 33 (67%) female. Most were older mature or elderly people in the 40-65 age bracket. For these people the effects of belief in *kumo* witchcraft is very real.

To further understand the reality of *kumo* witchcraft I will briefly consider four cases.

### Case 1

MW is a widowed old woman from Siurre, Kerowagi District in the Simbu province. She has a wheelchair-bound son named P. MW had been seen looking for lice in the hair of a little boy. Later he died, and she was accused of *kumo* witchcraft. Under torture she admitted to participating in killing the boy, but also accused another woman of participating also. In doing so, she was claiming not only to be a witch but also a witch "doctor" who can detect other witches. People did not believe her, so to prove that she was a witch she produced some flesh which she claimed was human flesh taken from a grave. The flesh was sent to Kundiawa hospital for examination, but it seems there were never any conclusive results. She claims that she is a "retired" *kumo* and that in fact she does have a *kumo* in the form of a rat which lives inside her body. Since that time she has gone away from her community and lives in Kundiawa town, spending time at the hospital (with her handicapped son), and with relatives. In an interview at Kerowagi a man referred to the case of MW and independently confirmed the details of her story.

### Case 2

AK and MA, brother and sister, both in their late 50's were accused of *kumo* witchcraft, tortured and killed after the death of a boy named W. AK found that the boy had killed his chick and was eating it. Naturally he was unhappy about this. Shortly afterwards young W got sick and died (W had been visiting his brother in the coastal town of Lae and the medical report says that he died from malaria.) W's relatives accused AK and his sister MA of being responsible for the boy's death. Both were tortured and killed. It seems that AK's sister MA was killed also because people claim that she had done some strange things, such as removing her intestine to clean it in the river. AK's two sons returned home and reported

the matter to the police, who ordered the people to dig up the bodies from the grave so they could be examined and buried again. The accusers did not know that W died of malaria until the report was read out to them later. Upon hearing this they paid compensation of money and pigs to the two sons of the deceased.

### Case 3

AW was a well liked married woman, 39 years old, with three children. She was upset about her husband P going around with other women, and finally she committed suicide by drinking Gramoxine insecticide. After her death some young men, close relatives of the husband claimed that she died of *kumo* witchcraft. These young men then went around accusing and torturing people in a number of families. Some of the families fled to other places and have not returned to their village. Three of those accused and tortured badly were LA and wife MA and their only daughter S. LA was not originally from the village, but came as a pidgin school teacher. Eventually they were chased out of the village and their land and property taken over by some of the young men. Afterwards AW's father's people came and forcefully demanded compensation for AW's death. After some time AW's husband's clan paid K5000.00 and some pigs as compensation to AW's people. There was no compensation for LA, MA and S and others who were abused and fled to other parts.

### Case 4

ED is a widow in her 40's. She has two children, one living in Port Moresby and one, a young man, living with her at Mindima near Mingende. After her husband died her brother-in-law wanted to marry her but she declined, preferring to live alone with her son. Later a young man died, after returning from schooling in Madang. It seems he died from malaria. However relatives of the young man accused ED of causing the death of the student through *kumo* witchcraft, and under severe torture she admitted to being a witch. When interviewed in Kundiawa hospital she regretted having admitted to being a witch. She feels that some people may have been jealous of her for having good productive gardens. Now she may lose those gardens as it is uncertain whether she can return to her husband's land or whether she should go back to her own home village.

## Self Defence or Offence?

From the four examples above, one may observe some characteristics typical of most cases where people are accused of *kumo* witchcraft. The accusers, who are usually young men, relatives of the deceased (sometimes aided by a diviner or "glassman" or "mambu man") look for a person who could be held responsible for the death. This is a peculiarity of Simbu, because in most other parts of the PNG Highlands people attribute death to the malevolent work of the spirits of dead relatives, not living ones. The accused are most often people who are weak or marginalised. From police and hospital records it may be seen how the majority of those accused are older women. In the cases above, MW is an older widow with a handi-

capped son, AK and MA were an elderly brother and sister, living alone after their children had left home. LA was an immigrant from another village, and ED is a widow living with her one son.

Social tension is commonplace in any living situation, yet perhaps some tensions such as jealousy are relevant to many cases of *kumo* accusations. The accused can do little to prove his or her innocence. Some are forced to admit their guilt under severe duress and if they survive they are forced to flee the village. Many of those accused had good gardens and plots of coffee, which are taken over by the accusers after the death or banishment of the accused. There is no retaliation for having killed a *kumo* person since most people believe that they have been rid of a threat to the community.

## Church Response

Some churches interpret *kumo* as a form of spirit possession or demonic deception (Bartle 2001: 327, 331; Johns 2003). Zocca points out (2005:16) the evil spirits are seen in the Bible to attack primarily the person possessed, whereas among the Simbu they are said to do harm to others by using the possessed person as a tool. Sometimes, however, recognizing evil power as real may only confirm accusers in their belief and practice. There was an example in 2004 where a Four Square Church pastor allowed a murder to take place on church ground in his presence (*The National*, 2 September 2004, p. 3).

Catholic Bishop Henk te Maarsse SVD, who has been associated with Simbu for over 40 years, claims that since the 1980's there have been an increasing number of *kumo* accusations. He estimates that at present there are 150 *kumo*-related killings a year in the province, with 10-15% of the population having been displaced because of *kumo*-related accusations (Zocca 2005: 8). In response the Kundiawa Diocese has an eight point pastoral plan, with an emphasis on pastoral presence in communities where people have died, and care for the accused. The diocese also has a policy that those who accuse others of being *sanguma*/witches and are involved in abusing, torturing or killing are excluded from the sacraments until they give compensation, are reconciled and restore the good name of the accused.

## Living Prophetic Dialogue

While the pastoral response of the Kundiawa diocese is to be commended, one may ask further questions in relation to the current SVD theme of Living Prophetic Dialogue. The prophet is one who listens to the Word of God and proclaims it. This proclamation includes the condemnation of injustice and the denouncing without fear of all that is opposed to the gospel and the Kingdom of God (SVD –Publication 2001: 28). It involves reaching out and animating others, with a message of what God is doing in our day to transform the world through the witness of God's love (SVD – Document 2005: 10, 18-21).

I offer the following ten suggestions for Prophetic Dialogue and Chimbu witchcraft. I have found helpful here some ideas of a Columban priest working in Fiji (Hoare 2004).

1. Cultural beliefs and values are strong and slow to change. In Simbu evil is understood to have some explanation and to involve mediums (witches) and codes of behaviour. The individual, social, and spiritual worlds are interconnected. Evangelisation aimed at an inculturated faith demands an attitude of dialogue with these cultural realities.
2. Most missionaries are busy with regular services and meetings, or tending to the affairs of their own community, thus often not being free to engage with issues that are of emotional importance to their parishioners, such as witchcraft. Others prefer not to enter into the issue lest they merely magnify the problem. Liturgy that takes community crisis into account can provide an important educational and transformative effect on the community.
3. Death and similar crises are key moments when the community is faced with what they perceive as evil forces. If the missionary respects local idiom and the key values of the society, these are times when they can learn about the deepest beliefs and concerns of parishioners. Death and dying are the least evangelised dimensions of life in Papua New Guinea (See Gibbs 2005).
4. One must work closely and respectfully with wise, mature local Christian leaders. Western education gives priority to a rational and abstract orthodoxy, whereas the local leaders will often pay more attention to the immediate orthopraxis.
5. How to proceed when for the majority of the populace it seems that the Church is supporting a form of communal suicide/homicide?
6. Prophetic Dialogue involves denouncing injustice and speaking words of healing. Where is justice and who needs healing? The community? The victims of the witches? The accused witches? The accusers?
7. Prophetic dialogue means solidarity, respect, reconciliation and love. Where are these values to be found in the situations described?
8. Who are these people? Faith seekers, poor and marginalised, a different culture, different ideology, or all of these?
9. We need to address the legitimacy and acceptability of the kumo institution itself. To what extent is it legitimate, acceptable, or appropriate in today's world?
10. Relate it to the Christian message of God intervening in human history to reconcile and renew the community.

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