

# 5. Huli Customary Beliefs and Tribal Laws about Witches and Witch Spirits

John Himugu

## Introduction

While working as an ethnographic research officer at the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, I have carried out detailed research work on sorcery and witchcraft beliefs of the Huli people of Hela Province, as seen from their perspective. I was also on the Working Committee set up by the Constitutional and Law Reform Commission of Papua New Guinea in 2007 to look into sorcery-related killings in the country. I have travelled widely with the committee and met various ethnic groups like the Huli who believe sorcery and witchcraft are very real.

Many public commentators claim sorcery is an outdated belief that is hard to prove and must be outlawed. But sorcery and witchcraft matters are still very serious in Papua New Guinea, as the following media reports illustrate.

*Legion Left Region — Matthew 8.28 (Walters 2006)*

Walters comments on the reality and evilness of sorcery and witchcraft as mentioned in the above Bible verse, which claims 2,000 demons from hell entered human vessels, which they occupied as their homes and terrorised the inhabitants of a region. This highlights that the Bible, the acclaimed Book of Truth on spiritual matters, describes the existence of such body-possessing evil spirits.

*Bribery, Corruption and Witchcraft Rampant: Dusava (Post-Courier 2007)*

The former secretary for the Department of Foreign Affairs, Gabriel Dusava, comments on corruption and 'abuse, bribery, witchcraft and dirty personal attacks' during the 2007 national election campaign in his Yongoru Sausia Open Electorate. This proves the rich and powerful are also using sorcery and witchcraft.

*Exorcise Your Inner Demons (The National 2007)*

Citizen Nick Yambu describes how exorcism can be used to remove evil spirits from alleged witches or sorcerers, without resorting to violence or killings.

*Two Milne Bay Men Sentenced to Death* (Kelola 2007)

The National Court sentenced two men to death for killing a woman they believed was a witch. The men's actions were sanctioned by the village court leaders. This poses the question of whose law is right — tribal law or state law. There is a need to balance laws that complement each other; for example, the Land Disputes Settlement Act, Chapter 45, handles customary land matters based on custom.

*Sanguma — Myth, Belief or Reality* (Weekend Courier 2009)

The Papua New Guinea Constitutional and Law Reform Commission conducts a nationwide investigation into sorcery. This demonstrates we are still looking for answers and examining recommendations at the highest level.

*The Ugly Face of Sorcery* (Poiya 2010)

This article reports a family attacked over sorcery allegations. This incident shows one needs to know all there is to be known about sorcery and witchcraft in order to protect oneself from being falsely framed and accused of being a sorcerer or a witch.

*Killing a Councillor* (Tiamu 2011)

The killing of a councillor, in Munum village, near Lae city, demonstrates that not only the poor and the weak are targeted and killed.

Most sorcery- and witchcraft-related violence and killings in Papua New Guinea are carried out by those who believe the alleged sorcerers or witches have committed a crime but that there is no proper law for prosecution or punishment. A way forward is to come up with a home-grown law with the basic ideas drawn from customary laws on sorcery and witchcraft, which various ethnic groups across the country have been using for generations.

This chapter describes how one ethnic group has built a comprehensive knowledge base on witches and witch spirits and has used that knowledge to form their belief-based rules and trial procedures and effectively prosecuted and punished witches whose witch spirits hurt or kill people.

## **The Huli belief system**

The Huli, numbering some 250,000 people, are divided into about 50 independent tribes called *walihaga* or moiety groups who frequently fight each other. They believe a human being is made up of the body (*dongone*), the mind (*mini*) and spirit (*dinini*), and it is possible to kill a person by killing any of those three components by using invisible forces.

The Huli further believe the world has vast energies of invisible spiritual and cosmic forces and it is possible for human beings to tap into and use those forces to do good or evil. One of their main weapons of defence or attack was the use of poisons (*tomia*), spells (*gamugamu*) or spirits (*dama*) for invoking spiritual powers and forces. These are generally called 'sorcery' in English.

The above three types of sorcery are further broken down and given very specific names. *Tomia* includes the use of any specifically named poisonous herbal, biological, chemical or gaseous substances, mainly to kill. *Gamugamu* includes the use of named spells, rituals and chants, which are recited mainly for invoking a specifically named invisible physical, spiritual or cosmic force to do good or evil. *Dama* includes the use of any specifically named body-possessing or non-body-possessing spirit, which is engaged by conducting a specifically named ritual by their human host (*dama mambo*) to do good or evil.

Of the three, the most dangerous form of sorcery in Huli involves the use of *dama*. These include the ancestral spirits (*homa dinini*), bush spirits (*tagira dama*) and domestic spirits (*andaga dama*). (The supreme spirit called *Datagaliwabe* is considered to be too high to associate with human beings and not used by the Huli, other than to acknowledge his powers to punish arrogant wrongdoers.)

The domestic spirits were further broken down into the guardian bystanders (*haga*); the mates or friends of individuals or clans (*nenege*); and the body-possessing spirits (*gamubiaga*), which travel with or live inside human beings.

The body-possessing spirits known to the Huli include *toro*, *yaboro*, *kebali* and *heyolabe*, who all had human hosts who were usually bachelors. The hosts could call them up to carry out specific tasks for a fee agreed to between the host, the spirit and the customer.

The fifth body-possessing spirit is called *polomo* (witch spirit), and persons who are possessed by this type of spirit are called *polomo he* (witches). In other places, both male and female persons can be possessed by witch spirits, but in Huli only females can be possessed by witch spirits.

This chapter is written about witches and witch spirits because most killings reported in the Papua New Guinea media are on the killing of witches. People who use other types of sorcery including poisons, spells, chants or the spirits mentioned above are usually regarded as free agents. They may kill upon request, usually for a fee, and the main culprits in such cases are those who pay them to do it, and not the sorcerers themselves.

In contrast, witch spirits hurt or kill people of their own accord, without the knowledge or consent of their human hosts or witches (*polomo he*), so witches are sometimes killed by the community in the name of public safety.

However, in Huli, witches are not killed, firstly because the Huli believe the evil witch spirit would escape unhurt while only the innocent human being is killed. Secondly, accusers can have their complaints heard by tribal leaders, and more recently by village courts, and be paid a fair compensation in accordance with their customary beliefs.

## How the witch spirits spread into the Huli area

The witch spirits spread into the Huli area in the late 1950s when new road networks made it possible for women who were unwanted for being witches in their own communities to travel into the Huli area. Some Huli bachelors married the witches. But when local leaders saw that they had married witches, they studied the behaviour of the witches and their witch spirits, gained ideas from other ethnic groups, and made rules for tackling the problem.

It is said that you have to live with a witch in order to understand them properly. I personally saw a witch when I was about nine years old. One of our tribesman returned home with his two wives from another area. The first wife was a witch or had a witch spirit. Sometime later, he chased her out for threatening his second wife and her child. The witch came and lived with my mother for a time. I lived in another house nearby with my father.

Every night, as soon as the woman fell asleep, her witch spirit would fly out with three bursts of whistling sounds (*hoe/pili*) given off at around five minute intervals, or less when she was in a hurry. Then every morning just before dawn, the witch spirit would return with the same three bursts of whistling. The whistling would disappear near the house and the woman could be heard waking up.

Sometimes we would hear the witch spirit killing one of our chickens. We have seen many dead chickens before, but the ones killed by the witch spirit would stink straight away, despite the freezing cold climate.

If told about the dead chickens, she would say, 'We haven't had much to eat lately. Shouldn't happen again!'

If asked to say a prayer before going to bed, she would say, 'Aren't I a child of God too? Why is it that I cannot pray too?' and she would say a prayer that sounded very shallow and without much conviction or depth and abruptly end it with a quick 'Amen'.

Later she was accused of killing the daughter of her husband and his second wife. So she was sent back to her own home area. While there, she and another witch were accused of killing a man. They were brought to the Koroba District

Court and tried for murder by witchcraft. She admitted to the killing. When pressed to give her reason for the killing, she said 'What we got was our normal food. Nobody stops you humans from killing and eating chickens, so why be angry with us?' She was sent to jail and later died in prison.

Apart from this story, I can relate to many others I have seen or heard. When the sorcery- and witchcraft-related killings in Papua New Guinea were becoming a big issue, many people claimed that the sorcery and witchcraft beliefs were fictitious. But I thought it likely they had never seen a real witch or a sorcerer in their lives. So I carried out a research project on the sorcery and witchcraft beliefs among the Huli people of Hela Province to provide information on how sorcery and witchcraft matters are understood and handled. This chapter discusses witches and witch spirits from that project.

## **The four types of witch spirits**

The Huli believe there are four types of witch spirits. The first type do not hurt or kill people or animals. The second type dig up graves only. The third type kills babies, the old and sick or those people who are about to die anyway. The fourth type can kill healthy people and can also form packs with other witch spirits to hurt or kill people.

It is believed one witch can have up to six or seven witch spirits. The more witch spirits she has, the deadlier she becomes. Huli believe there is no skill or craftiness in being a witch, but just plain evil.

The biggest sufferers are the witch's husband, children, relatives and neighbours, who in most cases live in constant fear, and remain at the mercy of her witch spirit or spirits.

## **How a normal person can become a witch**

It was said in the legends that once upon a time there lived four brothers and a sister. One day an evil spirit led the sister to a cliff-face and pushed her off. When her spirit departed from her body with fright, the evil spirit took over her body and landed it safely on the ground. But when her own spirit wanted to return to the body, the evil spirit pushed it out and took ownership of the body. The sister returned home unhurt, but did things very strangely. Later her brothers found out that she had an evil spirit in her and had become a witch.

That is what was said in legends, but today there are about 10 known ways in which witch spirits can enter a normal human being and make them into a witch.

Like in the legend above, a senior witch can pick any girl or woman of her liking and make her climb up and jump off a tree. When her spirit departs from the body with fright, the witch spirit takes possession of the body and lands it safely on the ground. This exercise is repeated over and over until the senior witch is convinced that the trainee is now a fully fledged witch.

Accidental transfers can also happen if a normal woman was sleeping next to a witch and if the witch spirit returns in the morning and enters the other woman by mistake. It is also believed if a group of women and girls are chasing fish or other small bush game, and if a witch is with the chasing team, in the excitement the witch spirit can come out and enter any of the females waiting to catch the escaping animal at the far end of the hunting or fishing ground.

A witch can also have as many as six or seven witch spirits if the original witch spirit invites more witch spirits to join her and occupy the same host. It is also believed if a normal person becomes too friendly to a witch, one of her witch spirits can visit her friend from time to time, and one day it may decide to stay with her permanently and make her into a witch.

It is also believed if a married man killed a witch, the witch spirit can follow him home and make his wife into a witch. It is also believed that when a witch dies, the witch spirit, if it has not found a new host yet, will stay by the gravesite and wait for any suitable female who passes by and make her into a witch.

At other times, some women or girls may just want to become a witch and can ask a witch who has witch spirits to give them one. So the witch can easily ask one of her witch spirits to go and live with the new host on a trial basis, then later transfer to her permanently. This is usually the case with girls whose mothers and sisters are all witches.

Some girls can also be persuaded into believing it is wonderful to be a witch when others talk of their adventures and conquests as witches. This talk of wealth and adventure stirs her imagination and makes her want to become a witch like them. She may volunteer to go on trial runs with a witch spirit, which can later be transferred to her permanently. Living an isolated life in an isolated area can also make it possible for witch spirits to go and stay with a lonely woman and over a period of time make her into a witch.

## **The external signs of having a witch spirit**

People in the community can find out if a woman or a girl is a witch by observing several external signs that a person may be a witch.

First, after nightfall and as soon as the witch falls asleep, her witch spirit flies out of the house in the form of a flying fox-like creature, giving off three piercing whistling sounds at regular intervals. The spirit returns just before dawn, making the same whistling sounds. This happens every night and every morning. It disappears when she goes to live elsewhere and returns when she returns.

Another sign is that people may see a dog or a cassowary coming, but when it gets closer, it turns out to be a woman, and not an animal. But after she has passed, the woman disappears and the animal is seen again. The same animal stays with the witch for life.

Furthermore, if a woman is a witch, and if she has sons, they might die in mysterious circumstances, such as by drowning in a shallow creek. Those still alive would look sick and unhealthy, until they too would all die, one by one. In the long term, the witch and all her close family members would have no sons left.

Women with witch spirits usually put on weight when the body of a person she is accused of killing is decaying in the grave. The witch also puts on weight if she takes part in a killing or digging out graves in the neighbourhood with other witches.

Finally, in the event that a witch spirit has entered a woman by mistake, the woman would have bad dreams of herself raiding fresh graves and coming away with body parts. If she keeps having this dream night after night, and if she tells her relatives about it, then her relatives observe her personal behaviour before they organise an expert to remove the witch spirit in her.

## **The internal signs of having a witch spirit**

When the above-mentioned external signs indicate that the person may be a witch, relatives observe closely to see if she really is possessed by a witch and, if so, by what type of witch spirit or spirits.

Firstly, split personality problems are noticed when a woman says something while her witch spirit says something else at the same time over the same matter. This makes her fumble words, or deny having said the very thing she had just said a few seconds back.

When a woman is seen sitting on her own, talking or mumbling to herself, it is believed she is pleading with her witch spirit not to attack someone.

When asked tough questions, she gives evasive answers, or answers the questions indirectly. But when put under pressure with more and more tough questions, the witch usually gives contradicting answers. Experts can detect which answers are coming from herself and which answers are coming from her witch spirit.

When sharing and eating food, especially pork, a witch will eat all her pieces in what looks like a single gulp and sit there staring at others who are still eating their share. It is believed if you don't give her some extra pieces, then her witch spirit can attack anyone in the group at any moment. Witches also stare at beautiful-looking babies or those who are eating or carrying good food and will not take their eyes off them or respond even when you disturb them.

If she comes from a feast, the witch will bring home two separate bags of food, one for sharing with the family and a smaller one for herself. This practice is noticed mostly with the older generation of witches.

The witch spirit can attack the husband of her host at any time. This may happen if he talks to other women or if the witch feels her husband is drinking away all his money. In this case, her witch spirit can go and attack him in the club. His friends would think he has fainted, but he would see his wife coming and plead with her to stop the attack just before he falls down and passes out.

If a woman with a witch spirit is asked to babysit a boy and a girl, the boy would become sick, while the girl would not. If one of the children gets a cut, the woman will stare at the blood and go numb or absentminded for a while.

A woman who has a witch spirit can also appear from nowhere to the bed of a sick person who is about to die, even though no one had seen her coming in through the door. She can also appear from nowhere at the bedside of someone who has just died, or when someone is getting buried. Witches can appear or disappear without a trace at any other place. For example, her husband may see her coming, but when he looks up to talk to her, she disappears. This is because what he saw was her witch spirit, who is her lookalike and not her true self.

When the above personal characteristics are noticed, friends and relatives believe that the person has a witch spirit or spirits. So they learn when, why and how witch spirits hurt or kill other people and take appropriate measures to protect themselves and their families from possible attack.

## Why, when and how witch spirits hurt or kill other people

The Huli believe witch spirits are evil by nature. Firstly, they use some human beings as a conduit to come into the human world. While living inside the body of their human host, they behave and act like hungry wolves and use every opportunity to snatch a desirable or vulnerable life and hurt or kill that person.

### Why witch spirits hurt or kill other people

The main reason why witches kill is to satisfy their lust for good-looking bodies. If a witch sees a beautiful child or a man and likes what she sees, then her witch spirit may kill to satisfy her lust for the good-looking body.

Secondly, if a witch sees someone getting or eating good food, and if it ignites her greed or lust for good food, her witch spirit might strangle the person with the food.

Witches can also attack a person to avenge for any wrong committed against her host. For instance, the witch spirit can attack the ex-boyfriend of her host or his new girlfriend, or both.

The witch spirit of an angry witch can also attack or hurt an innocent child or bystander as a spillover effect of anger, even though the bystander has done nothing wrong.

A witch spirit can also team up and attack other people upon the request of another witch who needs her help to kill a person. This could be to help, for example, make a tree branch fall onto the victim. To do this, the witches who control the wind, rain and clouds would be brought in to assist by playing their parts in staging this type of accident-based killing.

Witch spirits can also kill those who are about to die anyway (*mo mbedogo*), from illnesses such as AIDS. But the issue here is the sign and symptoms of witch spirit attack. For instance, if a person was hit by a car and dies instantly, the fact that he was going to die anyway from AIDS is not considered — instead, his death will be officially recorded as having been hit and killed by a car.

Finally the Huli believe, in order for a person to live, he or she must have their mind (*mini*), spirit (*dinini*) and body (*dongone*) balanced and in union at all times. Otherwise, the witch spirit can detect and kill any person whose spirit is not in union with his body and mind (*pu he*).

Experts can tell if a person has died a natural death or a witch spirit-induced death. With their gathered evidence, they bring in and question the accused witch to discover her reason for attacking or killing the victim.

## When witch spirits hurt or kill other people

For witch spirits, the desire to attack their victim is ignited only after the witch has made visual contact with the victim or a close relative of the victim. Just before the attack, a tree branch or a twig must be seen or heard getting snapped. A gun can be heard to be cocked, too. Straight after that noise, the witch spirit will attack and within seconds the victim will start to get sick and lose consciousness.

At other times, an animal such as a dog belonging to a particular witch will be sighted in an area just before an attack. But if the witch was watching someone eating food, for example, the attack will be sudden and the victim will clutch his or her throat as if suffering from suffocation or choking, and pass out.

## How witch spirits hurt or kill other people

It is believed in most cases the witch spirit removes the spirit of the victim and holds it captive for some time, usually high up in the branches of a tree. If she does not get caught, the witch spirit uses any credible means available in nature to kill the physical body of the victim. The most common method is by staging what would look like an accident.

Here the wind and rain may be used, to make a tree or a branch fall on the victim, for example. Or the victim may be drowned in a river or lake. In all cases the death would look natural, but some uncertainty would remain. For instance, a closer examination would reveal that the tree branch had fallen in the wrong wind direction, or the water in which the victim drowned was very shallow. Experts who know about such things and observe the details can show whether the incidents or accidents were truly natural or induced by witch spirits.

In attacks over food, witch spirits can cause food or other objects to get stuck in the throat. This may appear natural, but the presence of the witch where the victim was, along with her looks, actions or comments she may make at the time of the incident would link her to that attack.

The most common method for attacking a healthy person is to induce what looks like a heart attack (locally known as removing the heart). First, one might see a strange animal such as a dog that belongs to a witch appearing from nowhere

and staring at the victim. Then all of a sudden something hits the heart of the victim, and he falls down clutching at his chest and passes out. But if the victim is taken to the hospital, doctors find nothing wrong with him.

Sometimes while a witch is cuddling a baby, the baby may start to die in her hands from symptoms that look like strangulation, suffocation or sudden heart failure. The witch would hand the dying baby back to its mother and sneak away. The mother might think her baby was asleep, but when it does not wake up she would realise her baby was dying.

## Signs and symptoms of a witch spirit attack

The first signs and symptoms of a witch spirit attack on the body of a healthy person appear as sudden heart attack, choking, suffocation or an acute malarial attack. The victim would usually put his hand on his neck or chest and pass out. But when the victim is taken to the hospital, doctors find nothing wrong with the person.

Secondly, if the body of the victim turns blue around the chest and below the armpit areas very quickly, this is also a sign of a possible witch spirit attack.

Medical examination of a person who has been attacked by a witch spirit often finds nothing wrong. But after the person dies, the post mortem may reveal foreign material stuck in the victim's throat. However, when and how that foreign object became lodged in the throat would be a mystery. This is also an indication of a possible witch spirit killing.

Some gifted people (including church elders) can tell if the victim has been attacked by a witch spirit and give the exact description of the witch along with details on when, where, why and how the victim was attacked. They may also advise the victim to make peace with the witch, who is often a close relative, in order to get well. This approach usually works.

When a person dies, if relatives want to know whether the person was killed by a witch spirit, they could pay a medium (*halaga biaga*) to call up the spirit of the dead relative to tell them if he or she had been killed by a witch spirit.

Relatives and leaders can also use the *toro* ritual to find out if a person has been killed by a witch spirit, and the reason for the killing. In this ritual, the bones of a dead person are placed on a stretcher. Sticks are placed on the rib bones. 'Yes' and 'no' questions are asked. If the answer is 'yes', the sticks move and float, but if the answer is 'no', the sticks do not move.

Sometimes the victim, before passing out, calls out that he is being attacked by a witch and names her. This type of attack is usually made on husbands or close relatives of the witches themselves.

Experts on witchcraft matters use the type of evidence mentioned above to frame appropriate questions that can force the witch spirit to give one answer while the witch woman gives a different answer. This happens because although witch spirits are sneaky, they are not as clever as human beings. For instance, if asked about her skill and ability to attack, the witch spirit would become boastful and give away more details on how she had carried out the attack, while the witch woman would remain silent, and even deny having said those things. The same person making contradictory statements at the same time is evidence that the witch is guilty, and if she is caught early, she can cure the victim within minutes.

## Traditional first aid methods

It is believed in order to kill a person, the witch spirit first removes the spirit of the victim and holds it captive for some time. Then if she does not get caught, she comes back to kill the physical body of the victim, who would now be very sick. So only aggressive-looking men and boys are chosen to take care of the victim. Some men chop the ground around the victim with a bush knife or axe from time to time to prevent the witch spirit from getting too close to the victim's body. This keeps the victim alive while other men hunt for the accused witch and force her to come and make the victim well.

If the victim is a baby, a person could hold it up by the legs and run around the house like a madman. It is believed that shaking the body violently will frighten it, and force its spirit to return and make the baby recover.

Hunting down and threatening the witch with instant death if the victim dies always brings an instant cure. It is believed the witch spirit can release the captured spirit and let it return to its body. When that is done the victim recovers almost instantly.

Some traditional healers can cure a person attacked by witch spirits, but it is very rare. Those who have this skill may have spirits who know how to negotiate with witch spirits at the spirit-to-spirit level to let the victim live.

Some gifted church elders can pray for a person dying from witch spirit attack and cure him. Others with certain gifts, such as a *glasman*, can tell when, why and how a witch spirit had tried to hurt or kill a victim and advise the relatives to make amends with the suspected witch in order to make the victim well.

An effective method is to confront the alleged witch and force her to visit the sick person. When the witch arrives, she will pray or pretend to pray for the victim and recovery is immediate.

In earlier times, witches when caught out would say 'it's not me, maybe it is my sisters out there who may have done it, wait and let me ask them to return the spirit'. Today they usually say 'bring the sick here and let me pray for the poor thing', but in her prayer, one could hear her rebuking her witch spirit for doing a poor job and getting them both caught.

However, after a victim gets well, some witches will sue the victim and his or her relatives for defamation. The witches use the formal court system with police support and win their defamation cases most of the time. This is putting the witches in danger in the long run because if the tribal leaders refuse to hear any more witchcraft cases, the accusers can kill them on the spot without trial.

## **What it is like to be possessed by witch spirits**

The Huli believe that persons who are possessed by witch spirits have no control over what their witch spirits do. They further believe being possessed by a witch spirit is a type of a mental or spiritual illness, and that relatives and the general community have an obligation to seek appropriate traditional or modern exorcism methods to free those who are possessed by evil witch spirits.

## **How to remove a witch spirit from a witch**

The Huli use several methods to suppress or completely remove the evil powers of witch spirits from witches.

Firstly, if a woman who has an evil witch spirit tells everyone that she has an evil spirit in her, the witch spirit will become timid and not kill human beings. Eventually it will leave her completely and the woman will become a normal person again.

It is also believed that if the husband of a witch mixes his urine with tea or water and tricks the witch into drinking it, the witch spirit will leave her and she will become normal again.

The most effective method is the use of bones of giant humans or ogres found in caves.<sup>1</sup> Here the bones are crushed into powder and mixed with drinking

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<sup>1</sup> Some cheeky boys play bad jokes on each other by picking up ogre bones and putting them under the beds of their mates, who get attacked at night by the giant spirits.

water, and a witch is tricked into drinking the mixture. In the night, the fierce-looking ogre spirits come in her dreams and attack her violently. This attack would continue for several days and nights until there were no more ogre bone particles left in her system. It is believed keeping the body awake forces the witch spirit to return to the body every now and again, only to come face-to-face with an ogre spirit. This makes the witch spirit feel her host has become unsuitable to occupy and so the witch spirit leaves.

Church elders who have the gift of driving out evil spirits can drive out witch spirits. To do that, the elders pray for some time and when they feel the power of God is with them, they command the witch spirit to leave the woman. Sometimes the woman will faint or pass out, but when she gets up she is a normal woman again. First the witch herself must ask the church elders to get rid of the witch spirit in her body, otherwise the witch spirit will talk back and refuse to leave. Usually a dog or a cat can be seen leaving the churchyard. If the animal looks back, then an attack will take place later, but if the animal does not look back, there will be no more related problems.

## How to kill a witch or a witch spirit

There are several ways to kill a witch or a witch spirit. The witch's own relatives often denounce her activities and give permission for any offended person to kill her. Also, angry relatives of any of her victims can kill the witch or the witch spirit without permission from anybody, using various methods.

In earlier times, there were men who knew chants that they recited and applied vision-cleansing ginger on the eyes of a selected bachelor. This enabled the bachelor to see the witch spirit at night. He would then hide by a graveside and shoot the witch spirit when it came to the grave. When shot, the host of the witch spirit, who could be several kilometres away, would be accidentally pierced by a piece of stick. It was believed if the killer took the bowstring off, the witch would die, if he left it on, she would live.

It was believed if you saw a bird or an animal by the grave of a person who had just been buried, and if you killed that animal, the witch who was the host of that witch spirit would have an accident at the same time and die.

An accused witch may be murdered by the relatives of a victim, or even by her own relatives who do not want to keep paying compensation for victims her witch spirit keeps hurting or killing. But in Huli, any killing of any human being, regardless of whether she is a witch or not, is regarded as murder. So there is no public killing of witches for being witches, but those who do kill alleged witches, do so with the knowledge that they could be tried for murder.

In Huli, some types of spirits are hired to kill or remove other types of spirits, but they are not hired to kill or remove witch spirits. However, they can pay a witch to provide information against another witch leading to her arrest and trial for an alleged crime.

## **Huli customary protective measures, rules and laws**

The Huli believe it is the responsibility of all human beings who live in areas where there are witches to take appropriate measures to protect themselves and their families from any possible attack. Based on their knowledge of when, why and how witch spirits attack their victims, the Huli have developed various rules to follow or apply for protection.

During meal times, the witch must always be the first to be served food and the last person to get any extra left so that she will feel she is getting the largest portion of food. When sleeping, the witch must be made to sleep near a door or window so that her witch spirit can go out and come in freely and when returning in the morning not get into another person by mistake.

When chasing game animals, women and girls must avoid going out with any known witches, because her spirit could transfer into any one of them. Generally, no females should be left alone with a known witch because she might transfer her witch spirit to her. And a known witch must not be left in the company of other known witches, because they might form a deadly pack and make daring attacks.

Witches must be kept away from possible victims such as children or sick persons. If a known witch arrives into the room while you are looking after a sick person, you must threaten her with death if the patient dies, and chase her out, and if you see a known witch staring at a person, you must tell her to back off immediately.

The witch must be verbally warned of an imminent attack on herself if she stares at you. But if you have food or money that has caught her attention, you have to give her something, but at the same time you must threaten to attack her if anything happens to you later.

When a witch dies, her witch spirit, if it has not yet found a new host, waits by the graveside for the next female who comes by. So when a witch is about to die, only men and boys must take care of her until she dies. When she is being buried, women and girls are not allowed to her burial ceremony or to the burial site afterwards.

If you have a witch living with you or in the neighbourhood, you must always have your family meals before nightfall. This is because, at night, the witch spirit could be watching in the cover of darkness and could attack any of the family members it sees as the most vulnerable.

When you are in a crowd where witches may be present, you must never look sick or tired or else one of them might mark you out as a possible easy target.

When someone is buried, people must light lamps and stay beside the graveyard for at least eight days and nights to prevent witches from digging up the body.

The Huli try to avoid contact with witches or their witch spirits, so those who live in the vicinity of houses where witches live do not stay outdoors during the time the witch spirits usually go out or come in.

The Huli also believe that witch spirits avoid Christians and churches. So if you live in an area where there are many witches, it is best to become a Christian to prevent yourself from any possible attack.

The relatives of witches have a duty to inform neighbours or new visitors to take any of the above protective measures. Otherwise, the relatives of witches may also be held responsible or accountable for any witch attacks.

## Putting an accused witch on trial

When a witch is accused of hurting or killing a person, the leaders first ask the accusers for evidence to show that the accused person is a witch. For example, whether she had been involved in an incident of a similar nature before, or if any visual contact had been made between the witch and the victim before the attack, or if any comments had been made by the accused witch before or after the attack.

If the leaders are satisfied with the evidence given by the accusers, and if they believe it is a strong case, they will bring in the accused witch and tell her about the allegations made against her, and ask her to clear her name. She could be supported at the trial by any interested person, including her friends and relatives.

## Confirmation and confession by the witch

If an accused witch denies everything, it is easy to let her go free because the leaders know exactly how witches talk and react when they are telling the truth.

If there are still some doubts, another witch who is known as a witch leader in the region could be paid to provide information on who hurt or killed the victim. The accused witch usually defends herself by accusing the informer of

other killings the informer herself had been involved in. Then if the accused witch is pressured further by the leaders, she will justify her actions by saying, 'such killings are normal for witches like them'.

The trial proper is held to finally convince the witch to admit her involvement in hurting or killing the victim and, if so, to give her reasons for the attack and cooperate with the leaders to make peace with the victim or his or her relatives. If the victim is still alive, she will ask the leaders to let her see the victim, and to let her pray for him or her. In such a case, it is certain that the victim will get well.

If the victim is dead, the witch will say, 'you have come too late'. And if the leaders ask her to show them the dead body, she will refuse. But other witches will take the leaders to a site and show them a dead frog, or a dead lizard or a grasshopper. It is believed in the eyes of the witch spirits, they see the body of the victim and not insects.<sup>2</sup>

If the witch claims the victim was already cooked and eaten, and if the leaders ask her to show them the *mumu* pit and the leaves and ferns they had used in the cooking, she will refuse. But other witches will lead them to a site where witch spirits are known for congregating. There they will show pieces of wild ferns (*yagua*) and wild ginger (*guayapugunu*) leaves.

Finally, when all the evidence has been pursued, the accused witch fully confesses and gives her reasons for the killing. She will further name all the other witches who had taken various parts of the body. When the leaders ask those named witches to come forward and admit or deny their involvement, most of them will directly or indirectly admit to having been involved. If asked to explain their actions, they will all say it is normal for them, just like good people share good food with family and friends.

## Crime and accountability rules

The Huli believe that allowing oneself to be used as a conduit by evil spirits to cross the forbidden human–spirit barrier is a crime punishable by revenge killing, compensation payments, forced exorcism or exclusion from society.

The specific crimes committed by a witch are for allowing themselves to be used as a conduit by witch spirits to come into the human world and disturb human beings, for not getting rid of the witch spirit, for not living in seclusion, for not preventing the witch spirit from attacking a person, or for the social and economic loss suffered by the victim's relatives.

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<sup>2</sup> The Huli say when you are invited into the world of spirits by spirits, you have to leave your human beliefs and logics behind for the time being.

However, those who live in areas where there are witches but who do not take appropriate measures to protect themselves and their families can be accused of neglect.

## Compensation payable to the witch and her relatives

Tribal leaders may order accusers to pay compensation to the accused witch for defamation if she is wrongfully accused. However, some witches can go to the police station and lodge a complaint for defamation against her accusers and the tribal leaders. The leaders cannot prove that she is a witch in the formal evidence-based court system, so the witches win the defamation cases every time. But in the long run, this could force some communities to kill the witches or chase them away without trial.

Normally, compensation for attacking or killing a known witch cannot be asked for too aggressively by her relatives. This is because the witch's relatives have failed to remove the witch spirit in her and prevent her from killing people in the first place. However, village leaders can still force her killers to pay some compensation and the killers can also be sent to jail for murder.

The killing of a bird or animal that represents a particular witch will also kill the witch. But compensation for this type of killing is not talked about openly because the witch had crossed the forbidden barrier. However, if those who killed the bird or animal boast openly about it, they can be asked to pay compensation for the death of the witch.

## Compensation payable by the witch and her relatives

In Huli, any killing by a witch spirit is treated like every other normal killing. The leaders can bring the accused witch to stand trial and, if found guilty, the main form of punishment is to pay compensation.

The leaders usually order the guilty witch and her relatives to pay compensation based on custom, just like any other type of murder. But the amount set by the victim's relatives is renegotiated if the other party feels it is too high. This can go into second and third rounds of negotiation until it is finally resolved by the leaders whose job is to strike a balance acceptable to both parties. In the end, the leaders witness the transaction and close the matter.

However, witches are usually disowned by their own families, and are in no position to pay compensation. So the tribal leaders may order the witch to be sent to jail, to be exorcised, to live in seclusion, or to be ordered out of the area.

In the eyes of the community, most witches, once cornered, break down very easily and give themselves away. So most community members just feel sorry for them, and chase them away and tell them never to return.

## Other penalties

Huli leaders talk mainly in terms of paying compensation and never about other penalties like the death penalty or revenge killing, exclusion from society, exorcism or imprisonment, even though these options are left to the affected individuals to decide and execute.

For instance, no decision is ever made to put a witch to death, but the Huli believe the witch spirit has already killed the human spirit of her host. So she and her relatives know the witch could be killed by the relatives of any of her victims in revenge killing, or by her own relatives who do not want to keep paying compensation to the relatives of her victims.

In some cases, the witch is poor and her relatives unable to pay the compensation set by the leaders. So the witch is told to live in seclusion from society or forced to go and live elsewhere.

Some witches are deemed to be very dangerous and exorcism the only option, but executing it is a problem. Some men whose wives and daughters were all witches often carried out traditional exorcism bravely on their own. These had to be well planned and well executed.

Today, church elders who have the gift of driving out evil spirits are the most preferred method to use for removing witch spirits from witches and making them into normal human beings again.

## Case studies on accusation and trial

Most of the events described below took place in Port Moresby during the time of my research, and involved Huli people. The details were given by the Huli leaders who were involved in solving the matters.

### Offended wife kills husband with sorcery — Hohola, Port Moresby, July 2008

A young wife helped fund her husband to upgrade his school marks and get into the army. While in the army, he had affairs with other women. The wife asked a woman friend who had spells to help her bring him back, but the spells

failed. So her friend helped her find a Samarai sorcerer. The Samarai sorcerer failed, too. Her friend helped her find a Tolai sorcerer. The Tolai sorcerer failed, so they found a Koiari sorcerer.

Eventually the husband got sick and was about to die because the wife had not followed proper instructions. The leaders questioned the wife, who denied everything. Later one of the leaders told her that she might be killed over this matter, but no one would know her side of the story. So in self-pity she confessed to using sorcery. The Koari sorcerer was found and asked to remove his sorcery, but he just placed his hands on the victim and claimed other sorcerers had worked on him, too, so it was beyond his powers to cure the husband. The husband died.

The leaders and the police saved the wife and her friend from possible revenge killing by locking them up at the Boroko police cell. The leaders then ordered the wife to pay two-thirds of the compensation payable for normal murder. Her friend was ordered to pay the other third.

Her friend was held accountable for helping the wife. But the sorcerers could not be charged as they are free agents under Huli customary law on sorcery.

The matter was closed as a sorcery killing carried out by an aggrieved wife.

## Witch wins a false accusation claim — Tokarara, Port Moresby, 2005

Two angry women were seen arguing with each other at the back of a flat in Tokarara. One of them stormed out of the gate. Suddenly a six-year-old healthy boy who was standing by the gate started to get dizzy and lay down. Within minutes, he had blood oozing from his mouth and ears. His father took him to Port Moresby General Hospital. The doctor said it looked like an acute malarial attack and put the boy on a life support machine.

One of the relatives, however, said it was a witch spirit attack because he claimed one of the women who was arguing at the back of the flat was a known witch. So the father and relatives went to the woman's house and threatened her with instant death if the boy died. The accused woman claimed they were threatening her without evidence. But in the end, she was forcefully taken to the hospital to 'look at the boy herself' they said.

As soon as the woman set her foot on the hospital steps the boy started to get well, so the woman claimed the boy was never sick and she had been accused for nothing. She later laid a formal complaint against the father at Gordons Police

Station. The father, who didn't want trouble, asked the police to negotiate for a fair compensation payment acceptable to her, and paid her 300 kina through police mediation.

The matter was closed as a win-win witchcraft case.

## **Mother kills her own son — Gerehu, Port Moresby, 2007**

A seven-year-old healthy boy died suddenly. The body was placed in the morgue. The leaders questioned the boy's mother, who seemed unnaturally happy in front of all the other grieving relatives. The mother, who was a witch confessed, 'I ate him and it went down very well when washed down with a drink of coke'. Her husband and relatives did not take any action. So the leaders let the matter rest.

The matter was closed as witchcraft killing of a close family member.

## **Traditional exorcism on wife and two teenage daughters — Pori, Hela Province, 1980**

A man (named) had a wife and two teenage daughters. They were becoming famous throughout the land for being aggressive witches. He knew one of them would get killed or they would one day turn on him. He planned to carry out an exorcism. So he collected a piece of ogre bone from a cave in the mountain and grounded it into fine powder.

He then killed and cooked a pig and invited his wife and daughters to a family feast in their garden by the forest. The drinking place was far away, but the father provided the drinking water fetched in fresh bamboo containers. The three thirsty witches drank the water with the ground-up bone powder without even noticing.

The women could not sleep at night because the giant attacked them each time they tried to go to sleep. The witch spirits may also have seen the giant spirit around the house, which frightened them. This attack went on for several days and nights, until no more bone particles were left inside their bodies. By that time, the witch spirits found the three women to be unsuitable hosts and left for good. The three witches became normal women again from then on.

## Christian exorcism: witch spirit leaves witch — Mount Kare, Hela Province, 1989

Two small boys lay unconscious at the Mount Kare alluvial mining clinic. Some said it was a witch spirit attack and caught the accused young woman who was a known witch. The men built a huge camp fire and heated up iron rods. Others sharpened their axes and bush knives. The woman was made to stand in the centre of a ring of fierce men. Someone brought the local pastor to pray for her parting soul.

But the pastor, who was new in the area, refused to pray for her soul. Instead, he asked her if she was a witch. She replied they were accusing her of being a witch. At that moment the pastor in a vision saw another woman who was her lookalike standing behind her. He also had another vision that the boys' spirits were held on a moss plant growing high up on a tall tree nearby.

The pastor said to the young woman, 'God's spirit shows me that you have a lookalike sister who is standing behind you right now. His spirit also shows me that the boys are not dead and their spirits are held up on the moss plant on that tree over there. The men are sharpening their axes and bush knives here, but not for slaughtering a cow, but since the boys are still alive, you have a decision to make.'

When she hesitated, the pastor said, 'it looks like you are innocent but your lookalike who is standing behind you may have something to say about it. You can choose to keep her with you and die or ask her to go and live.'

In reply, she said, 'I want her to go'.

Then the pastor said to her witch spirit, 'you heard her in the witness of all of us here that she wants you to go'. In reply the witch spirit in her said through the mouth of the witch, 'don't kill her, I will return the boys and go'.

The spirit left quickly. The two boys regained consciousness within an hour. And the young woman became a normal person. Many people started going to the pastor's small church.

This pastor has dealt with many other cases. When asked how he does it, he said, 'the possessed person is the one who makes the decision. We support the decision of the possessed person. One cannot just order a spirit out. They too have rights, and they always stand their ground.'

## Conclusion

Most people do not have enough background information on witches and witch spirits, so they are not in a position to talk about this matter. That might be good, too, because one of the informers said such details should be left to selected leaders only because spirits really love us when they hear us talking about them. So not talking about them at all is the best way to keep them out of our lives.

On the other hand, this lack of information makes most people believe we are the only ones on Earth. But the fact is there are some of us who associate with external forces to do good or bad against other people. These invisible forces include sorcery and witchcraft.

It is believed the witchcraft-related violence and killings in Papua New Guinea are carried out by those who believe the alleged witches have committed a crime, but there is no proper law in place for prosecuting and punishing witches. So the solution is to provide a legal avenue for the accusers to prosecute and punish alleged witches instead of citizens taking the law into their own hands.

The problem in Papua New Guinea is that the criminal laws were adopted from the English Common Law, which has no section for those affected by the belief-based sorcery and witchcraft matters. The *Sorcery Act 1971* did not work simply because it was not drafted properly. For instance, the main culprits in witchcraft cases are the witch spirits, not the witches, and exorcism should have been used as the main form of punishment for convicted witches. While in sorcery cases, the main culprits are those who engage the sorcerers for a fee and not the sorcerers themselves, who are free agents.

Some say there are big differences between the belief systems of the various ethnic groups, but the basic formula will work anywhere because all spirits, such as witch spirits, show similar characteristics.

This chapter on Huli beliefs and tribal laws on witches and witch spirits shows how one ethnic group has developed and used belief-based customary laws for resolving witchcraft-related cases in their communities.

First, the Huli developed a detailed knowledge base on witches and witch spirits. Then using this knowledge, they framed their belief-based rules and trial procedures, and used these to bring to trial and prosecute and punish witches whose witch spirits hurt or killed other people.

This has effectively prevented accusers from injuring or killing alleged witches in their communities. This shows it is possible to understand, analyse and frame belief-based laws and use them effectively for prosecuting and punishing witches whose witch spirits commit a crime.

A suggested way forward is to draft a better home-grown law with the basic ideas drawn from the customary laws on sorcery and witchcraft, which the various ethnic groups in Papua New Guinea have been using effectively for generations. Input from known sorcerers, witches, traditional healers and the Bible could be considered and included.

## Notes — The informants

Gane Abe Mbalo — Had taken part in many traditional rituals and ceremonies.

Ala Arapa — Had lived among many witches.

Pastor Dondoli — Had carried out exorcism on witches and settled disputes.

Joe Kayuria — Had his son attacked, then was sued by the witch for defamation.

Duliya Maeyago — Community leader who handled many witch-related cases.

Philip Pugulabe — Contact man who can find sorcerers, healers and gifted persons.

Ben Mindiria — A local preacher gifted in driving out bad spirits from persons, houses or areas.

Many others who told stories of personal encounters with witches.

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