

# Foreword: Sorcery- and Witchcraft-Related Killings in Papua New Guinea

Gairo Onagi

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is no exception when it comes to the practices of witchcraft and sorcery. Different names are used to describe these practices. Some call them *sanguma*; others call them *puri puri* and *malira*. Whatever the names used for these practices that are dubbed as evil and antisocial, such behaviour exists in many countries throughout the world and is particularly associated with social stress and dislocation. I believe that this volume forms part of a constructive dialogue to develop practical and workable solutions to the negative societal issues posed by the problems of sorcery- and witchcraft-related social ills and, in particular, the horrendous killings that are so frequently experienced now in PNG.

Our women, when accused of sorcery, are blamed and branded as witches with horrific and traumatic consequences. The PNG and global media have taken a big interest in this matter and we are widely known for these brutal murders of innocent people, especially women. When people die, especially men, people start asking, 'Who is behind this?'. In PNG, we view sorcery or witchcraft as causes for sickness or death before medical reasons are considered. This is a commonly held belief across PNG, even among educated PNG citizens. Thus, the belief in sorcery and witchcraft is embedded in the fabric of PNG society.

Respect for the rule of law and the rights of others are pillars of modern democracy, and we would like to think that PNG falls in this category. But this is not the case. We hear stories of witchcraft used in the general elections. We hear stories of sorcery used in sporting competitions to win games. We hear stories about witchcraft used in negotiations and job interviews.

One rural person, when asked about sorcery said:

Why take my *puri puri* away. I use my *puri puri* to catch fish to feed my family. Why take my *puri puri* away from me? I use it for planting to get good harvest. Why take it away from me when I use it for health ... I make people well. Why take it away when I use it for love? Why outlaw it? Go get the murders [and] killers [and] put them behind bars, not me.

Those who harm people are the ones the law should deal with. My good *puri puri* is my sacred knowledge. My ancestors passed it to me. It is my heritage. Don't outlaw my sacred knowledge.

Different perceptions are held as to the nature of sorcery and witchcraft. This perception begs an important question: how widespread will be the laws that will be created to help a stable and harmonious society without sorcery? Enacting laws and penalties against certain behaviour is easy to do. But executing these laws relating to sorcery and witchcraft is another matter. Village courts were set up for the purpose of dealing with village issues and one of them is sorcery. Evidence has shown that we have not been successful. Moreover, our parliament passed a law on capital punishment to deter sorcerers from killing. The courts have not sentenced a single person to death yet. And so, we the citizens carry out the punishment ourselves. The state is not helping at all and must do more to protect innocent lives.

People, including perpetrators, are 'taking the law into their own hands'. They become the judge and jury, simultaneously carry out acts of justice, sentencing and punishing outside the courts. In doing so, they create more injustices to the society because innocent lives are affected. Moreover, the most affected are women who are being brutally murdered outside the state laws. The gendered nature of sorcery and witchcraft assumes that females are the best hosts for such practices. The female anatomy is depicted as the pathway for possible transformation and existence of these practices. There is little evidence to back this but traditional beliefs have strong indications and so women face gross physical abuses, injuries and death.

We all know the phrase 'innocent until proven guilty'. If we go by that then we have a challenge. Sorcery and witchcraft are spiritual matters. In many cases, the eyes will not see nor the ears hear. How will the evidence be collected to charge and subsequently sentence an alleged practitioner? This is a big challenge. In many cases alleged practitioners have been innocent yet they are jailed or inhumanely treated. Kepari Leniata's brutal murder is an example of high suspicion and speculation, yet she was publicly humiliated, doused in petrol and torched! In many instances, the accusers are not dealt with. So I am posing this question: where is the law to protect the citizens? The killings are continuing!

Will the state laws relating to sorcery and witchcraft protect its citizens? The laws, in my mind, do not govern the rural people. Traditional norms and practices in tribal societies still rule over our rural people. Sorcery and witchcraft are deeply embedded in the lives of our people. More than 129 years of Christianity has not eradicated this so-called evil. We ask ourselves 'WHY?'. It could be the methods used that must be reviewed.

Churches in PNG must work collaboratively and address the issue through collective approaches with other stakeholders. This is a spiritual matter and must be addressed through spiritual approaches, with the backing of the law. Human bodies can be possessed by such evil spirits. I have witnessed reformation of sorcery/witchcraft practitioners through spiritual means. I have heard stories of two schools that were rid of sorcery and witchcraft effects. Churches also operate in locations that see little of government representatives and are well placed to understand the local situations, and can utilise local knowledge to provide pathways to educate people on impacts of sorcery and witchcraft. Further, I strongly call for the government and relevant stakeholders to work closely with churches.

Many innocent lives have fallen victim to sorcery- and witchcraft-related killings. The brutal case of the burning of Kepari Leniata in Mount Hagen in 2013 sparked domestic and global outrage. This challenges the establishment and application of PNG laws to punish offenders. It also challenges the context whether people in our rural societies fully understand, can adhere to, and comply with the laws respectfully.

Belief systems cannot be simply erased from people's minds. In modern times the nature of sorcery and witchcraft is associated with money. Practitioners ply their wares for money. They are likened to 'hired killers'. With a certain fee, they can fulfil the sponsor's request. Thus, sorcery and witchcraft practitioners are now assuming respectable positions as power wielders and brokers. Reports and evidence indicate sorcery and witchcraft as growing industries in certain areas of PNG.

Sorcery-related violence will continue unless we educate our people on the negative impacts of sorcery and witchcraft beliefs. Heinous murders of innocent lives on suspicions of sorcery or witchcraft will continue to rise. So what are the best holistic approaches that we can use to arrest this issue? One way is to focus on local conditions by using anthropological and sociological pathways to understand people's beliefs and practices. Another approach that I have strong conviction in is through churches' input. Revisiting established laws that govern offences and penalties relating to the practices are vital. International conventions on human rights abuses in all forms have taken a strong foothold in our country's adoption, practice and application of the relevant laws.

The way forward for us is to develop national plans and policies to address sorcery and witchcraft, delivered through different mechanisms and approaches.

## Acknowledgements

The editors would like to acknowledge the efforts of all those who contributed to, and participated in, the two conferences that this book is based upon. Particular thanks are due to Ume Wainetti, who initiated the Goroka conference and who was a key driver in it, Donald Gumbis and his colleagues at the University of Goroka, who did such an amazing coordinating job in Goroka, and other members of the coordinating committee including Josephine Advent, Isi Oru, Jack Urame, Winifred Oraka, Roselyne Kenneth, Susan Ferguson, Rudolph Lies, Father Philip Gibbs and Nicole Haley. We also acknowledge the support of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and The Australian National University's Research School of Asia and the Pacific. Finally we would like to thank all the contributing authors and also Tracy Harwood for her outstanding copyediting work.

This text is taken from *Talking it Through: Responses to Sorcery and Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia*, edited by Miranda Forsyth and Richard Eves, published 2015 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.