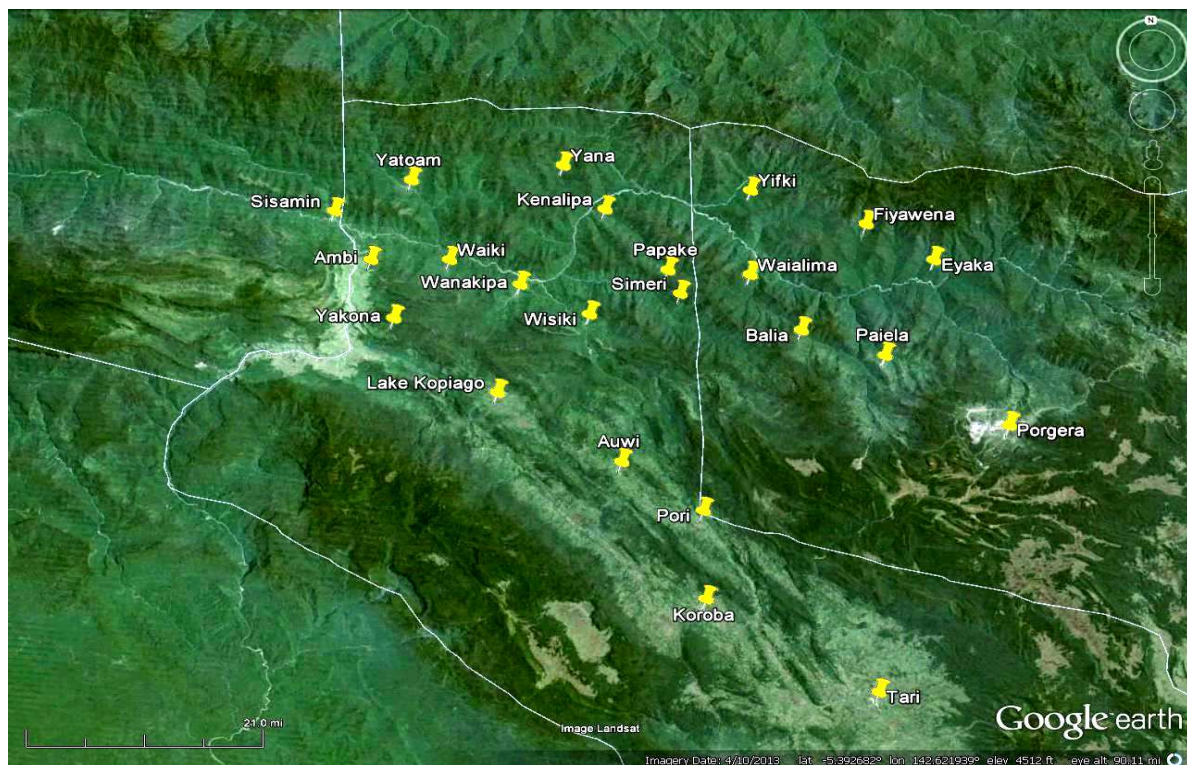


HEWA REPORT
SANGUMA INTERVENTION
Anton Lutz 24.01.15



The Hewa people of Papua New Guinea are a group of clans and tribes scattered across a vast landscape of towering mountains and roaring rivers. While the rest of PNG has moved ahead, the Hewa have remained a very remote people group, cut off from the outside world. With no police presence or regular court services, one community health worker for every 2500 people and two small schools which can't seem to keep a teacher on staff, they feel abandoned and left behind. Many do not even speak Tok Pisin and almost all are illiterate.

The Hewa hunt and practice slash and burn farming on the steep slopes and are plagued by the usual variety of ailments, skin infections and malaria, yaws and too-frequent pregnancies. But the Hewa have a special tragedy all their own. They murder their own women and children at a rate that more than ten times the murder rate of New York City.



Showing the main villages of the Hewa languages area.¹ One cannot really talk of one single Hewa language, but of a connected Hewa languages family. Lake Kopiago and places further south are Duna language area where sexualized torture of suspected sangumas is common. Paiela and Porgera are Ipili language area and are also known as a hotbed of sanguma related murders. Kepari Leniata was from Paiela and, accused, fled for her life to Mt Hagen where, some years later, she was famously burnt alive at Warakum Market on February 6th, 2013.

¹ The Hewa people of Papua New Guinea live along the Lagaip River and its tributaries, south of the Central Range. Their territory is about 95km from east to west and 40km from north to south. There are between 3000 - 5000 Hewa people. The nearest roads end at Porgera and Kopiago, respectively. The airstrips (see Fig.01) are at Porgera, Fiyawena, Yifki, Wanakipa, Yatoam, Sisamin, Kopiago, Auwi and Pori. Paiela's airstrip has been closed for many years and Waiki's airstrip is not open yet. There is a health centre run by the Gutnius Lutheran Health Services (based in Wapenamanda, Enga) at Wanakipa. There is a government aid post at Fiyawena. Likewise, there is a Primary School at Wanakipa and an Elementary School at Fiyawena. Otherwise, there are no health or education services being provided to the Hewa people by government, church or mission. Church and mission groups with some presence in the area include Christian Apostolic Fellowship, Gutnius Lutheran, SDA, Catholic and New Tribes Mission, but due to many factors they all struggle to bring an end to the accusations and murders.

Traditional Hewa beliefs include a belief in a spiritual being - 'pisai' - which is believed to inhabit human hosts. They believe this 'pisai' can emerge from the host and move around the village to



cause the deaths of others in the community by causing them to die of malaria, measles, tuberculosis, pneumonia, AIDS, mouth cancer etc. The Hewa believe that the only way to end the deaths is to brutally murder the human host and his/her children who are believed to inherit this 'pisai' or sanguma.²

In one of the first studies done in the Hewa (*Cannibal Witches in the Hewa*, Lyle Steadman, Oceania, XLVI, No.2, December 1975), the researcher found that up to one percent of the population was being murdered every year because of these accusations. During 'colonial times' (1960-1975), several arrests were made and Hewa murderers of alleged pisai- sanguma reportedly spent years in prison at Mendi. Since Independence, there have been no arrests.

² We say **Pisai-Sanguma Meri (Pisai Witch Woman)**, not **Sanguma Meri (Witch Woman)** – This distinction needs to be made because the Tok Pisin term "sanguma" is understood in so many different ways across Papua New Guinea's languages and cultures. In the Hewa languages area, the local word for what is going on is 'pisai' and so we add it to the sanguma term to differentiate a pisai-sanguma from the other kinds of supposed sangumas in PNG.

There is no need to clarify whether the pisai-sanguma women and men are allegedly pisai-sanguma or actually pisai-sanguma, as by definition a pisai-sanguma **can only ever be** alleged. In contrast to some other 'sanguma' in some other parts of PNG, there is no practice, rite, ritual, action or behavior connected with the pisai-sanguma accusation such that a person could ever possibly be 'guilty.' It is more like being infected by an invisible virus against your will and without your knowledge, which can either be contracted or inherited.

Unlike HIV, however, the pisai-sanguma has no effects on the host but rather causes the deaths of people nearby, like a little alien that lives in the women and emerges in the disguise of an animal to kill others. This animal (cassowary, rat, dog, bat) manifestation is called her 'sanguma pikinini' (witch son/daughter) and different pisai-sanguma women are believed to have different 'sanguma pikininis' which, when seen in dreams, can be used to identify which of the pisai-sanguma women are responsible for a recent illness or death. For example, if a dying person speaks of a dream in which they saw a dog, they think that this proves it was Betty who is the pisai-sanguma causing the illness or death because everyone knows her 'sanguma pikinini' is believed to be a dog (based, of course, on interpretations of other dreams and omens, not eyewitness accounts of emergent, shapeshifting puppy imps). They believe pisai-sanguma can be recognized based 1) on interpretations of the last words of the dying and 2) by interpretation of dreams. The other way to find out who is a pisai-sanguma is to get a known pisai-sanguma to point her out. This assessment of others' sanguma status, sometimes called 'glas-man' or 'glas-meri,' is generally done in one or more of three situations: 1) under duress, pressure, torture or threat of death, 2) after bribery, gift or payment or 3) in light of jealousy, spite or other interpersonal conflict. There is no report of the Hewa 'glas-meri' using any divination techniques, special objects or incantations to discover who is pisai-sanguma; she claims she can simply tell by looking at them. More research would have to be done to find out what sociological factors are co-incidental with who gets accused and killed, i.e. to learn what factors are influencing the scapegoating.

In the case of pisai-sanguma 'expert,' she admitted to lying under pressure and making up the allegations against the four women at Fiyawena. On January 17, 2015, she retracted the allegations and 'turned a stone' to emphatically demonstrate the finality of her choice to no longer bear the sanguma label.



Jonah – *“I am standing here in front of you, just another bastard from the jungle. I have no father and no mother: the government has utterly abandoned me; the church never came to care for me. And this (holding up the skull of his wife Neti, accused of pisai-sanguma and murdered eight years ago) is not my ‘han mak’ – the result of my actions. This is what the Paiela people did to my wife while we were trying to bring the Word of God to them. I asked the police to arrest the men who did this, but they didn’t. How can I find peace?”*

Initial reports from the last fifteen years (1999 to 2014) indicate the situation is an order of magnitude better compared to when Steadman conducted his research (1966-1969). This is perhaps due to the spread of Christianity combined with more frequent contact with the outside world through airstrips at Wanakipa, Fiyawena-Hewa and Yifki. The schools and clinics at Wanakipa and Fiyawena are also new since 2003. There has been a constant trickle of missionaries, health workers and teachers in the area speaking against these and other practices such as female infanticide since the 1970’s.

Yet, the reports show that an average of at least two (2) people are still being murdered every year across the Hewa based on these pisai-sanguma accusations. Once someone has been accused, they are a ‘usual suspect’ and when there is a death from illness or accident in the community, a posse may be formed to attack and kill one or more of the usual suspects. An accusation is an effective death sentence that will, eventually, be carried out. Almost no accused pisai-sanguma die of old age. Unlike other parts of PNG, in the past there has not been a significant history of prolonged torture or sadistic sexualized torture among the Hewa people. Today, the executions are often performed by a group of young men using arrows and/or axes and bushknives. The victims who are blamed and then murdered are mostly women (73%) and children (23%). In the last five years, at least two mothers committed suicide rather than face the assassins. Yet, there are still more than fifty people (more than 1% of the population, i.e. 2-3% of women) who live under the terror of the pisai-sanguma death sentence today.



“When people say ‘sanguma, sanguma,’ they are talking about us. But we are not sanguma. We are normal people. Today, we completely reject the name sanguma.”

Some women who have been accused have survived for many years by paying compensation to their accusers. Other pisai-sanguma accuse other women and incite their murders hoping to remove attention from themselves. Still others flee and become pisai refugees, trying to live a new life and hoping the story never catches up with them.

The Hewa people are aware that killing others is against the law in PNG, but like many other bush people they are also very aware that they live far beyond the reach of the police. These ‘bush’ people use their remoteness as an excuse to conduct not only witch hunts and murder but to extort ‘pik mani’ (literally pigs and money and other compensations) from each other in baseless village court cases.

Long-term intervention for the Hewa people is a daunting task. It is a vast and remote area populated by strong people proud of their ancient culture and uneducated about the modern world. Their deeply held traditional beliefs are what are driving them to kill each other, even annihilating whole families or, in one case, the entire village of Fiyentuwa that became known as “sanguma camp.” There must be careful consultation with all relevant stakeholders, government, police, sanguma experts, anthropologists, church leaders, etc, so as to both respect the unique cultures of Papua New Guinea and yet maintain the rule of law across every corner of this nation. The end goal must be ‘gutpela sindaun’ (literally, a “good sit down”, that is, a peaceful, full life) for all and not only revenge against killers. This intervention will probably have to include long-term investment in health and education, law and order, and improved transportation (roads or more airstrips). Hela and Enga Provinces will have to find a way to cooperate as this tragedy continues to unfold in their shared jurisdiction.

Infrastructure development alone will not be enough. While there is no evidence whatsoever of any demonic possession, spells or curses involved, there is certainly a ‘spirit’ which is all-pervasive among the Hewa people. They firmly believe that deaths are usually caused by ‘pisai-sanguma’ and that the right and ethical course of action is to attack and kill her in order to protect themselves. They talk of

two categories of people, the pisai people and of the 'normal people.' Normal people are the ones who do not have the pisai spirit within them but, nevertheless, do possess a 'spirit' of fear and bloodlust. 'Normal people' may, with a clear conscience, shoot their victim so full of arrows that her body is held up off the ground (her name was Koala Rambo, murdered in 2006). 'Normal people' are afraid to weep when their friend or mother has been slaughtered, lest their sorrow be seen as a sign that they too are pisai people. 'Normal' has a whole new meaning among the Hewa, and requires a holistic response which does not only focus on arrest, trial and prison, education and better health care. There must be a turning of hearts, a repentance, until they come as a people to a place where it is not 'normal' to accuse and assassinate anyone, least of all their own women and children, to calm the fears of the tribe. Dare the churches of Papua New Guinea cultivate this empathy and compassion, love and sincere charity? Will the Christians of Papua New Guinea muster the courage to make a concerted effort to make a difference? That question remains unanswered.



"We learn to fear and kill the pisai-sanguma people while we are still young. The practice is in our blood... and though we want to change, maybe some of us won't. We need help to change. Teach us not to fear."

CURRENT SITUATION – In late November 2014, four women and their families were accused of being pisai-sanguma in the particularly violent village of Fiyawena. Up to ten women were suspected of being responsible for the measles deaths that coincided with a measles outbreak. Unable to decide which of the ten ought to die and, hoping to clear their loved ones' names, the leaders at Fiyawena pooled money from the suspects and arranged for a 'sanguma expert' from Wanakipa to travel by plane to Fiyawena to conduct an investigation to 'properly' identify which of the ten possible women were, in fact, sanguma and which were not. This 'expert' had a reputation for pointing out other pisai-sanguma and when she arrived at the distant village of Fiyawena, she was led to the suspects' homes to view them *in situ* and then sequestered until she named four women and their children.

The leaders and village court officials at Fiyawena were glad to have verification of their suspicions and the women and their families – seventeen people – were effectively placed under a death sentence. The expert and her two chaperones hiked back to Wanakipa, a seven day ordeal through thick, uninhabited jungle.

The news of this confronting situation was widely covered by the PNG news cycle, newspapers, online news sources, Facebook forums, Radio Australia and other international news outlets.

Meanwhile, West Hewa students on holidays in their home village of Wanakipa had a copy of The NATIONAL (29.12.14) newspaper in which news of this unfolding tragedy was covered. Using this, together with their education and Christian faith, Nes Mark and the other students began an awareness campaign to end the cycle of accusations and murder in their home area. The 'sanguma expert' who had gone to Fiyawena met with Nes over many days and came to realize she had condemned innocent women to death and decided to retract her accusations in their entirety and confess publicly that she had not only made up the accusations but that she had accepted bribes to do so. She wanted nothing more to do with the name 'sanguma' or the heartache and fear that went with it.

On Friday, 9 January, Nes Mark sought help over the mission radio and made contact with Lutheran missionaries in the Enga Province who began to put together a plan to help 'take back the accusations' before it was too late and more blood was spilled. An intervention trip would also provide opportunity to conduct awareness about the laws of Papua New Guinea and give valuable feedback to the responsible provincial authorities about how to structure long term support for the needed change. When approached about the idea, Mission Aviation Fellowship quickly guaranteed their full support and pledged to provide the two necessary charters at their rate for community work. On 15 January the Provincial Administrator of Enga Province, Dr Samson Amean, pledged K25,000 to the cost of the planned intervention and on 17 January, Deputy Provincial Police Commander Enga, Epenes Nili, was sent to the Hewa villages with a team consisting of former and current missionaries to the Hewa, delegations from other Hewa villages, pastors and a representative from civil service.

The program began at the West Hewa village of Wanakipa where the 'sanguma expert' who had identified the pisai-sanguma women at Fiyawena wanted to make a speech. "When you say 'those sanguma people,' you're talking about me and these people standing here with me. Well, today I say No to that name. I totally reject the sanguma name and I will never wear it again." According to Hewa custom, when a person rejects something, a stone is overturned to prove that the decision is final. "Nau mi tanim ston na mi tok nogat na nogat tru long dispela nem sanguma." She then overturned the stone and stood on it and folded her arms. They brought forward a large stringbag bilum and she revealed to the crowd that these were the very bribe gifts that had been given to her at Fiyawena and that she was now sending them back, as well as the K100 note that she'd kept in her bilum. "I have not spent this; it is blood money. I am sending all of this back to Fiyawena and I am taking back all my accusations. I am not involved. I am not sanguma anymore."

Next three young men came forward. "These are the spears (arrows) our ancestors used to kill their enemies and to murder suspected sanguma. Today we make our promise: Never again. We will not hunt and kill human beings." Then, holding their spears in the air in front of them, they broke them in half and threw them down next to the overturned stone and the K100 note. "We have made our promise and shown it to all of you. We who live at Wanakipa and the surrounding villages will not murder sanguma suspects. We have made our choice."



When faced with systemic evil, anyone can make a personal choice not to participate.

The killers and those believed to have the pisai-sanguma then made an appeal to the people and the visitors: “We have made our choice, but how will we live now?” Someone called out, “You will live by the Word of God!” A pastor presented a Bible to the group and the Council accepted it on behalf of the people. Someone else brought them arrows for hunting pig and birds. “We will hunt for food, but never again for men or women.” In this way, the people of Wanakipa ‘signed their promise with God’ (their words) and pledged to never again accuse, sue or murder the people once accused of pisai-sanguma.

Deputy Police Commander, Enga, Epenes Nili, commended the Wanakipa community for taking a stand and clarified the law of Papua New Guinea. “Let me make one thing clear to you. My government, the government of our Prime Minister, Hon. Peter O’Neill, and the government of our Governor, Hon. Peter Ipatas, has taken a very strong stand against these baseless accusations and senseless murder. Wherever you are, in the towns or in the deepest bush, it will not be tolerated. When you take the law into your own hands and torture and kill a sanguma suspect, that is willful murder. You will face the full force of the law! When you threaten people with imaginary sanguma accusations to get compensation from them, that is extortion! When you hold your so-called ‘sanguma court cases,’ let me be very clear, that is fraud. There is no such thing as ‘sanguma court’ in this nation. If I hear of anyone doing any of these things, I will personally move in and take action. You will get life in prison or the death sentence. This is your first and final warning.”



“Killing your sanguma suspects is willful murder. You will face the consequences!”

The next day at Fiyawena, the delegation from Wanakipa dropped the bilum of returned bribes and gifts in the middle of the gathering. Nes Mark spoke to the Fiyawena people on behalf of the Wanakipa community, including those accused of pisai-sanguma and the 'sanguma expert.' "I used to believe that this pisai-sanguma was real, that pisai was the reason we become sick and die. That is what my grandparents and parents taught me. I thought it was true. But now I am educated. Today I know that there is no such thing as pisai-sanguma that is causing the measles epidemic. It is just measles. I know that there is no such thing as pisai-sanguma that causes people to die of malaria. It is just malaria. You pressured one of us to come and point out who needs to die, and she did that, but she was pressured and bribed. She made it up. You all saw her statement for yourselves on the video. She has turned over the stone and will not accuse anyone again. She is not pisai-sanguma anymore. Here and now we are returning all your gifts and bribes. We retract all the accusations. You have no reason to kill these innocent women."



Nes Mark *"I am pure-blood Hewa, your relative, and I appeal to you, do not kill anyone else. This ends today. We made a choice at Wanakipa to walk on a new road. Walk this road with us."*

Josely Wilson Kaipas, acting Council at Wanakipa, presented the Bible that had been used at the Wanakipa ceremony. "Let us together abandon the accusations and murders, let us together follow the way of God! Take this Bible and make the promise with us!" But the Fiyawena spokesperson called forward to receive the Bible as a sign of the pact before God wasn't so sure that was a good idea. "What if I say yes but the people have not said yes in their hearts? They will simply continue as before once you have all left! I won't accept the Bible unless the people themselves agree that this is the path they will follow."



I Won't Promise on their Behalf – The People have to Promise!

Deputy Police Commander Nili had taken time over two days to listen to the background information about the Hewa pisai-sanguma beliefs and how the process of accusation and murder took place. He was shocked to learn that the victims are accused on the basis of the mumblings of dying people and dreams. "Dreams and last words are not a legal basis to kill anyone! You have swallowed the lies of Satan and you think you are doing something good, but you are not! You have brought immense shame on yourselves!"



This money is Blood Money! You people have followed Judas Iscariot and bought and sold the lives of innocent victims. You will go to Hell for this! You will go to prison for this! This is wrong!

Nili went on to explain to the people that because the purported 'sanguma expert' had admitted she lied to them and made up the accusations, there was no basis whatsoever to hurt or kill these women. "You all saw for yourself that she lied to you! You four women who think that you have the pisai-sanguma, well, you do not. You will not be killed. You are free. Today you are free. By my authority under the State of Papua New Guinea and in my right as a pastor of the Church, I set you free. As for the rest of you, if I so much as hear a rumour that you are trying to hurt these four or anyone else, I will return like an avenging angel with gunships and so many bullets. This time we came with compassion to help you; next time we will come in full force. Today you will repent and apologize to your victims. Today you will admit you were wrong and fall on your knees and pray for mercy."

"Furthermore, what is this court you people have out here? Sanguma court? To accuse and decide to murder women and children based on dreams and last words? There is no such court. It is illegitimate and I forbid any such 'courts' in this entire territory. Anyone participating in or instigating or observing such a 'court' will go to prison. I already have the names of two people who have been stealing your money and encouraging you to accuse and kill women. They will be dealt with harshly when we find them."



O Papa God, hear our prayer!

Commander Nili was faced with a difficult decision: to seek retributive justice or to work toward restorative justice. Would he investigate the killings and arrest some murderers? Would he try to convince them to repent and have a change of heart? How could he enforce a change of heart? Realizing that almost every single adult male in the entire tribe has participated in the murders of pisai-sanguma women in the past, Nili opted for a restorative approach. He gathered the entire community – men, women and children – into a group and asked the Christians from Wanakipa and Enga and Yifki to circle around them and pray over them. Nili led the entire group in a prayer of repentance and restoration, leading them to confess their past behavior and pledge to change their lives. Wishful praying? Genuine soul-searching? There is a saying that it is God who searches the hearts of men, and brings peace that passes human understanding. It might be easy to be skeptical, even cynical about the whole event, yet we must remember that change will come for this people - these women and men who are captive to fear and violence - someday, somehow. And when that day dawns, this afternoon prayer will have been part of that journey.



So what is the outcome of this trip? Where does this story end? Are Susana and Helen, Mifila and Kontas now truly free? Will the stone overturned at Wanakipa fall back into its old hole? Will new arrows be carved? Who knows. The plane took off on Monday morning and the news media had some nice stories that went to air. Nothing can guarantee, of course, that no harm will come to the accused in the future. The police have pledged to make regular visits to the affected communities. The churches were advised to step up their programs and pay a lot more attention to what is going on. So far so good.

What is truly exciting, however, is that it was Hewa people who took a stand at Wanakipa and at Yifki and brought to Fiyawena the message of hope and the challenge to renounce this form of violence. It was the Engan Provincial Government who recognized the need and allocated the funds. It was an Engan Policeman who brought both the Law of the land and the Good News of hope in Jesus to the people at Fiyawena. The missionaries played a supporting role to these powerful voices as best they could.

The good seed that was planted creates, again, the possibility of positive change for all involved – the accused, the accusers, the surrounding communities, the next generation – to choose a new path and to make different choices. This journey needs timely and targeted support to be a success.

This story is far from over.



Nearby Kulupundu – These people have come down from the high mountain area of Kulupundu and from Fiyawena as survivors of violence, refugees in hope of a new life, to settle at the airstrip at Yifki to hear the word of God, making the choice to give up aspects of their traditional culture such as female infanticide and murdering pisai-sanguma women and children. These people, now living at Yifki, returned to Fiyawena as part of the intervention team and went house to house all through the night, trying to persuade their friends and relatives at Fiyawena to join them in forsaking the life of accusation and murder. “There is a better way to live! We want you to join us and live in the peace that only God can bring!”



Susana was identified as one of the *pisai-sanguma* women responsible for the recent measles outbreak at Fiyawena. Though the witch expert from Wanakipa has retracted the accusation, *Susana* is still afraid for her life. *Susana*'s husband was murdered in public in broad daylight nine years ago (no arrests were made) and she has raised her girls on her own ever since. Now, unsure of whether the public contrition at Fiyawena is genuine or permanent, *Susana* wants to take advantage of her parole and flee for her life. Her inlaws, however, don't want the children to leave with her. If *Susana* decides to run, it will mean leaving her daughters forever and potentially losing contact altogether. She says, "Someday when my beautiful girls are also accused of *pisai-sanguma* and need to flee for their lives... please don't forget where I am hiding. Tell my girls where to find me."

Post Script.

The Banality of ‘Inevitable’ Evil – It is not actually fair to say that “the women have been accused and all the leaders were involved in accusing them.” It is true enough, of course, but the other side of it is that the women themselves ... accuse themselves. They accept and assume the pisai identity, much the way a person who has been tested for HIV at an approved facility will accept the result as factual. There were ten women, possible suspects, at Fiyawena and they and their supportive families were the ones who brought the cash (K600 per suspect) to find out if they were ‘infected’ (pregnant? infested?) with the pisai-sanguma. The ‘sanguma expert’ was not coming from Wanakipa to identify and accuse random women who were oblivious or ignorant of what was going on. Rather, she was summoned **by** the ‘possible patients’ and their concerned families to conduct a careful examination of the ‘patients’ and tell them who was actually ‘infected’ with pisai and who was not. That the determinations were influenced by intimidation and bribery and sanctioned by an outlandish misinterpretation of PNG law seems not to have overly concerned anyone involved, neither the leaders nor the accused.



Mifila, accused of being infected with pisai-sanguma, sitting beside the bribes that were paid to a ‘pisai-sanguma expert’ from distant Wanakipa to confirm her diagnosis, effectively condemning her to death. Here, she has been ordered by the men of the community to “confess” and explain whether or not she was a pisai-sanguma and deserved to die. She didn’t seem sure.

The public ‘confessions’ of the three pisai-sanguma women at Fiyawena on January 18, 2015 reveal the level to which the women assume the reality and inevitability of the pisai-sanguma identity: “I was told I am a pisai-sanguma meri, so I probably am. So, since I have no way to save myself physically or get rid of this pisai thing in me, I think I’ll go sit in a church and try to read the Bible and hope for the best.”