

The Catholic Church's view on sorcery and how it is addressing sorcery

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1. Introduction

As a faith community the Church believes not only in God, but also in the existence of evil and of the reality of “evil spirits”. In this paper I will explain the Catholic Church's view on sorcery and witchcraft and how the Catholic Bishops in Papua New Guinea have expressed their concern about a seeming resurgence of sorcery and witchcraft beliefs and practices.¹ I will also give some details on the Church's approach to addressing the issue, including spiritual, communal and justice dimensions. My reflection draws on my experience of working over forty years with the Church in PNG and the privilege I have had to get to know some of the survivors of sorcery and witchcraft related violence.

2. Church belief and practice

The Catholic Church regards sorcery belief and practice as a form of idolatry -- the worship of false gods. Superstition, magic, sorcery and witchcraft come under this category². As a faith community the Church believes not only in God, but also in the existence of evil and of the reality of the spirit of evil, sometimes conceived in terms of “evil spirits”.³ So, while the Church values the knowledge found through science and rational argument, it also holds that there are non-empirical realities that can be perceived only with the “eyes of faith”. People, from philosophers through to the so-called “grass roots” are confronted by the “problem of evil”, which can be stated in terms of “why do bad things happen”. Ultimately it ends up as a religious question, as illustrated in the Book of Job in the Hebrew scriptures.

The Baptism liturgy (which includes a form of exorcism) not only frees the believer from sin, but also liberates from Satan as the instigator of sin. So the sacrament has not only a redemptive role in terms of the conquest of sin but also has a cosmic role, allowing the baptised to participate in Christ's victory over spirits and powers that are not of God. We see this, for example, in Paul's letter to the Colossians where he stresses how Christ has been victorious over what are termed

¹ I use the terms sorcery and witchcraft together here for convenience. I am aware of the distinction made by E.E. Evans Pritchard that the “Azande believe that some people are witches and can injure them, in virtue of an inherent quality. A witch performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicines. An act of witchcraft is a psychic act. They believe also that sorcerers may do ill by performing magic rites with bad medicines. Azande distinguish clearly between witches and sorcerers.” *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande*, London: Oxford, 1937, p. 21. In the Papua New Guinea Highlands the term “sanguma” appears to include both sorcery and witchcraft.

² *To Have Life in All Its Fullness. Catechism for Catholics of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands*. Catholic Bishops Conference of PNG and SI, 2009, #876. The official Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it as follows: “All practices of magic or sorcery, by which one attempts to tame occult powers, so as to place them at one's service and have a supernatural power over others –even if this were for the sake of restoring their health – are gravely contrary to the virtue of religion”. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997. #2117.

³ The Catholic Church regards genuine demonic possession as a very rare phenomenon that is easily confused with natural mental disturbances. Nevertheless, in every diocese the Bishop is supposed to appoint a person who may function officially as exorcist for the diocese.

the “elemental spirits of the universe” (Col 2.20). Such a viewpoint is surely relevant for PNG where many people feel the need for liberation from the perceived threat from the spirit world.⁴

3. Resurgence of belief and practice of sorcery and witchcraft

Today in Papua New Guinea, despite it being labelled a “Christian” country there is an apparent resurgence of belief and practice of sorcery and witchcraft, particularly in the Highlands. In recent months, horrible stories of accusation, and the torture and killing of the accused are coming from places such as the Enga Province and parts of the Southern Highlands where such beliefs and practices are not part of tradition. Irrupting in the midst of church-going communities it appears as a serious spiritual challenge for the Church. One could argue whether it is real or simply illusion, but for those who are accused and threatened with torture and for people who consider themselves Christians seeking revelations from a “glassman” it all comes as a real challenge to the life of faith.

4. Significance of language

My reference God and to idolatry is intentionally using theological (faith-based) language. I wish to make the point that it is important to be aware of the genre of language we use when discussing sorcery and witchcraft. We could refer to the issue in terms of social strain using the language of the social sciences, or of the projection of fear onto others using psychological language, or the merits of the Sorcery Act using legal language – to name a few possibilities. This issue of language comes to the fore when using terms such as “victim”. I find that inevitably when in expatriate circles reference to victim applies to the person unjustly accused of being a witch, whereas in most national circles, the “victim” is the person harmed by the witch. Some refer to the “survivor” and the “perpetrator”. In Tok Pisin one resorts to expressions like “husat i sutim tok” in contrast to “husat ol i bin sutim tok long en”. The use of language is fraught with difficulties and needs to be clarified lest we end up with the confusion of talking past one another.

In my opinion, if we are to try to understand what is really going on in people’s minds, hearts and their emotions we must pay close attention to the way people discuss these issues in local languages. What is the range of meanings of the generic term *kumo* in Simbu where these days one hears talk of *kumo* guns and even *kumo* helicopters?⁵ In Enga, where in recent times people are being accused of causing death through eating the heart of the deceased, the accused is referred to as *yama nenge* – literally “spirit that eats”. My point is that the terms we use such as “sorcery” and “witchcraft” are generic terms, useful in discussion in a national level forum such as this, but that to really understand and to influence what is happening we must look at the way people conceptualise the issue at the local level. That is where the Church should play an important role because at the local level one is dealing, not just with concepts, but with beliefs and emotions associated with life and death. It also means that churches must be aware of the

⁴ J. Downey, “Baptism and the Elemental Spirit of the Universe,” *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 12.2, 1996. Pp. 7-23.

⁵ See P. Gibbs, “Engendered Violence and Witch-killing in Simbu,” in M. Jolly, C. Steward and C. Brewer (eds.), *Engendered Violence in Papua New Guinea*, Australian National University Press, 2012, pp. 111, 119.

cultural, historical and theological baggage that comes with borrowed terms such as “Satan”, “territorial spirits” “possession” and “deliverance”.

From the perspective of law and human rights sorcery accusations are based on unfounded rumour, but for the person living in a state of social and spiritual insecurity, a sense of vulnerability might be very real. These different perspectives are brought out well in a page on the *PNG Attitude* blogsite recently (11 Nov. 2016) where writer Raymond Sigimet tries to understand and make sense of the issue of sorcery and witchcraft in PNG today in a debate between three fictional characters: a village man, a believer and a public servant.⁶ Christopher, the believer concludes, “When we put our hearts and minds in something, it will manifest, ... so when we believe in the power of sorcery or witchcraft. This evil power will manifest in our lives and indirectly result in our demise.” We need more believers in PNG who are prepared to seriously debate the issue, rather than resorting to some form of dual belief system akin to what African Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu refers to as a state of “religious schizophrenia”.⁷

5. Catholic Bishops’ Statement

In July 2013 the five Catholic Bishops from Highlands dioceses in Papua New Guinea published a pastoral letter on sorcery and witchcraft to be read and posted in all parishes in the Highlands region.⁸ The letter was to express their deep concern about what they considered a growing problem of sorcery accusations and violence. They state that, “When people following such beliefs get involved in torturing innocent people and even killing them, we have not only a crime against humanity, but a serious betrayal of the Gospel, our faith in the supreme Lordship of Christ, and of the liberating work of the church.” They continue, “When sickness or death come into our community there must be no false allegations such as accusing a person of causing death by stealing the deceased’s heart. We repeat that such allegations are unchristian.” Turning to the practice of consulting diviners or “witch doctors” they say, “We state clearly that this practice of calling on a diviner or “glassman” and accusing someone, puts trust in powers of evil, a trust that runs contrary to our Christian faith, especially when the diviner urges the relatives or supporters of the deceased to acts of violence.” Putting a new twist on the argument they say that “Seeing the fruits of such violence it appears to us that it is actually those who torture and kill innocent people who are the ones succumbing to the forces of evil.” The Bishops are not saying that sorcery or witchcraft is merely an illusion. Rather they acknowledge the existence of forces of evil, pointing out that “The problem comes when people’s faith weakens, they become fearful, and they forget about what it means to be Christian.”

In addressing sorcery and witchcraft in Papua New Guinea today, the Catholic Church tries to take a comprehensive approach. Spiritually the Church seeks to confront evil with prayer and other forms of spiritual support. At the communal level there are awareness workshops at the Diocesan and parish levels, provision of temporary safe-houses for accused and specific strategies such as the five-point plan of the Diocese of Kundiawa.

⁶ http://asopa.typepad.com/asopa_people/2016/11/three-friends-debate-sorcery.html

⁷ John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, Eerdmans Publishing, 1995, p. 14.

⁸ <https://tokstret.com/2013/07/27/social-concerns-notes-july-2013/>

6. Five-Point Plan⁹

Because of the tradition of sorcery-related accusations and violence in Simbu, the Catholic Church in Simbu has developed a strategy with five related components.

1. *Help broaden people's understanding of the causes of illness and death*

The question 'who caused the death', frequently leads to accusations of sorcery or witchcraft. Parish priests and other leaders are urged to ask questions such as 'what caused the death'. Such questions are more likely to lead to biomedical explanations. If an explanation such as cancer, pneumonia or AIDS is accepted by the family they will more likely mourn and bury the deceased with little or no talk of sorcery. This is not always the case because some will ask a further question, such as 'why did my uncle get cancer'?

2. *Early intervention before or during a funeral*

Whenever there is news of a death, the parish priest, catechist or a prominent church leader is to go to visit the family and be a pastoral presence there. Bishop Te Maarsen gives the example of a time when a parish councillor invited him to come for a funeral and celebrate Mass for the dead person at the grave to stop talk about sorcery. He noticed how some of the young men were annoyed and caused disturbance on the edge of the crowd, but the strong Christian presence helped prevent them from initiating accusations of sorcery.¹⁰

3. *Immediate family members taking ownership and promoting peace*

With extended families in PNG there is a wide choice as to which family member takes ownership of the situation. The Christian community tries to support a person promoting peace and harmony and not one stirring up ideas of sorcery. Unfortunately, divisions in the family can come to the fore at such a stressful time and this can be used as an excuse by troublemakers such as alienated young men in the wider community.

4. *Promote respect for law and order*

The Nauro Gor community in Simbu provides an example of a community that has established a community law that forbids accusing another of sorcery or harming another suspected of sorcery. Offenders will be fined and if they do not pay the fine, will be sent to jail. Community policing discourages alcohol and drug abuse, which runs counter to law and order. Such efforts to maintain law and order are supported by churches, particularly the Catholic Church.

5. *Fostering faith to influence attitudes and emotions*

One of the biggest challenges for churches in PNG is to deepen people's faith commitment in a way that Christian faith can provide an alternative to the traditional worldview when it comes to misfortune and death. People with deep Christian faith are called to believe that God is the author of life and that God permits sickness and death. Various churches have different approaches to praying for the dead. The Catholic approach at a funeral is to say, 'Pray and thank

⁹ See P. Gibbs, "Practical Church Interventions on Sorcery and Witchcraft Violence in the Papua New Guinea Highlands" in M. Forsyth and R. Eves (eds.) *Talking it Through. Responses to Sorcery and Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia*, Australian National University Press, 2015, pp. 309-327. The Five-point plan is outlined and discussed on pp. 311-316 of that chapter.

¹⁰

God for the gift of his or her life, and if you are really sorry then pray for him or her and for us'. This requires a shift from blame for death to thanksgiving for life.

The five-point plan in the diocese of Kundiawa has not stopped sorcery and witchcraft accusations and violence in Simbu,¹¹ However, many would agree that it has had a helpful effect with many examples of where accusations of sorcery or witchcraft might have been made and where the situation might have got out of hand, but did not.

7. Practical Measures

I will outline briefly nine other practical measures by the Catholic Church in addressing sorcery and witchcraft accusation violence, particularly in the Highlands.

1. The prayer life of the church community serves to promote good and reject evil. Prayer for healing and to some extent, deliverance, are common practices within the Catholic charismatic movement. Devotions like the (Archangel) St Michael prayer after mass are designed to recognise the reality of a personal evil but the capacity of the faithful to defeat it.

2. The first measure when learning of a serious accusation is to try to ensure the safety of the accused. Human Rights Defenders and Oxfam have been at the fore in this around Goroka, Simbu and Jiwaka. In the Western Highlands, Enga, Southern Highlands and Hela the response is not as well organised. In many cases it is the Catholic sisters who have taken the initiative and provided temporary safe quarters in Health facilities or in the sisters' houses. Hopefully the establishment of active Family and Sexual Violence Action Committees with the police will take some strain off the sisters.

3. Bishops have organised workshops and forums on the issue in their dioceses. An example of this is the forum in Mendi in November 2015. Over 100 people attended, including the United States Ambassador Walter North. Bishop Lippert of Mendi played a part with the police in the rescue in October this year of a number of men accused, held and tortured, at village near Kagua in the Southern Highlands¹².

4. I have been leading a research project in Central Enga over the past two years in which twenty men in strategic positions were trained to report on deaths using a template and SMS texts. These were deaths from any cause. We received data on over 650 deaths during that time, of which less than 10 deaths involved serious accusations of sorcery or witchcraft. That research, supported by Caritas Australia, continues.¹³

¹¹ Kundiawa hospital deals with approximately one case a month of witchcraft accusation violence. The rate is reported to be relatively steady over the last few years. Personal Communication with chief surgeon, Dr Jaworski, 12 November, 2016.

¹² <http://www.pireport.org/articles/2016/10/11/png-men-held-over-sorcery-allegations-surrounding-death-former-mp>

¹³ See S. Logan and P. Gibbs, "Using Mobile Phones to Track anti-Witchcraft Violence in Papua New Guinea." <http://ssgm.bellschool.anu.edu.au/experts-publications/publications/1245/using-mobile-phones-track-anti-witchcraft-violence-papua-new>

5. The Archdiocese of Mt Hagen has church workers forming a response team that works closely with the Police Commander. On occasion diocesan facilities are used to shelter, feed and provide medical care for survivors, for example, when seven women were accused and had to be evacuated from the community near Baisu jail late in 2015.

6. The Diocese of Wabag has formed a response team. There was a situation in October this year where a woman had been accused and badly burned over much of her body. After her recovery the response team formed a group of fifteen leaders including magistrates to accompany her back to her village and to impress on the community that there must be no more ill treatment in this case.¹⁴ Bishop Orowae has made it clear that anyone taking part in sorcery or witchcraft accusation violence automatically excommunicates themselves from the Church. They will have to undergo a lengthy process of reconciliation before returning to be in communion with the Church.

7. The Church through various church agencies with observer status at the United Nations made a submission on sorcery and witchcraft violence for the PNG Periodic Review in June this year. The submission is referred to in the report from the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva.¹⁵

8. A team at Divine Word University has produced a film, *Countering Sorcery Accusation Related Violence in Papua New Guinea*, on stopping sorcery accusation violence (<https://youtu.be/4iCufsfiek4>). The film was screened at the PNG Human Rights Film Festival in Port Moresby on 22 October this year

9. The Catholic Church has been cooperating in many ways with the formation and implementation of the Sorcery National Action Plan here in PNG, particularly in working closely with officers of DJAG.

8. Conclusion

A lot is being done, but there is an immense need for more. Church solutions do not work in a vacuum and have to contend with cultural or many other factors. For example, with a history of witchcraft beliefs in Simbu, people there have developed cultural ways of understanding it and responding to it. However, in a province such as Enga, except for some fringe areas, there was no such tradition, hence, the diffusion of these new beliefs into Enga Province in recent years is equivalent to a disease such as measles entering a community with no history of the disease and consequently little resistance to it. In Enga, people are having to construct cultural mechanisms of resistance to deal with the confusion of accusations of sorcery and witchcraft. This is where the Church, if it can rise above the confusion, can play an important role, in dialogue with emerging cultural, and socio-political solutions to what comes down to the perennial problem of evil (why do bad things happen?).

¹⁴ See <https://tokstret.com/2016/10/27/social-concerns-notes-october-2016/>

¹⁵ See <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G16/017/50/PDF/G1601750.pdf?OpenElement>. The submission is coded JS2 in the summary report.