

Sanguma as Religious: witchcraft in Madang Province PNG as a threshold of dangerous powers

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Abstract

Those identified as witches in PNG are ordinary people in many ways, but the community comes to a judgement that they are extraordinary: 'He is a *sanguma*. We all know that.' Why is this person different? What are their special powers? What is their motivation to kill by remote action? Can they be stopped, blocked, eliminated or at least driven out of the community? The enquiry can be taken to the extremes of interrogation by public torture and execution. At the least they gain the ambivalent reputation of being the terror of the community. Many theoretical viewpoints have been brought forward to explain what is happening with the rise of *sanguma* practices (*Tok Pisin*: witchcraft), with the suffering that makes urban dwellers fear a return to the village, and with a way out of this horrible vigilantism. The Prime Minister of PNG, Peter O'Neill has called it 'nonsense'. The Opposition Leader, Don Polye, calls on Papua New Guineans not to believe in sorcery because it does not exist. 'This is nonsense and backward thinking' (*The National*, 27 May 2015, p.9)

Key words: Witchcraft

Theories about what *sanguma* might be

This paper identifies the religious nature of *sanguma* as responsible for the salience and the entrenched character of recurrent *sanguma*. We will search for a description of this religious nature which is suitable for academic understanding and political deployment. Melanesian Institute in Goroka has done solid academic service in reporting on all the theories about sorcery and witchcraft relevant to Papua New Guinea, drawing up many accounts of *sanguma* (Bartle 2005; Gibbs & Wailoni 2009; Kuman 2011; Schwarz 2011; Zocca 2009; Zocca 2010; Zocca & Urame 2008). Zocca & Urame list many of the usual theories of *sanguma*. They ask whether the matter is clarified by pointing out the village disease aetiology, psychic powers, psychological belief in these powers or social control. They also acknowledge various churches' references to evil spirit possession, the power of Satan, the overlap attribution to the activity of harmful traditional spirits or to the working of fear and faulty science (Zocca & Urame, 2008, pp. 39-55). Australian National University two years ago led a series of three conferences on *sanguma*, in Canberra, Goroka and Port Moresby, ending up with a publication and an action plan under five topics.

There is a feeling expressed in the newspapers that in recent years *sanguma* has been on the rise throughout the country. This has led even to the intervention of the 'big

guns' of Barack Obama (*The National* 30/10/15, p.19) who was quoted by his ambassador as pointing to PNG *sanguma*, because 'no society can be successful when endemic gender-based violence and injustice are prevalent.' The ambassador ventured, in a Mendi conference (2015), on a few explanations of *sanguma*: as an endemic part of traditional culture; a reaction to the dramatic changes and pressures of rapid social transformation; a by-product of extensive drug use; and as proof of imperfect human nature. He rounded off his impression of *sanguma* as a story about ignorance, lack of awareness and weak institutions. Gibbs (2015) presented a view of the religious nature of *sanguma* at the same conference. In the days following, *The National* ran two stories about the torturing and killing of *sanguma* who were suspected of damaging others in Madang. It becomes unclear where the violence starts: with the person believing they have magical power or with the vigilantes who step in to kill and maim the sorcerers.

In the last couple of months (of 2015) various other essays on the sorcery topic have been presented in the newspapers. In the Bogia electorate of Madang there is an organization to create a sorcery-free society set to discourage sorcery and reform it, because it is a hindrance to development, and uses satanic cosmic powers, despite being deeply rooted in the fabric of the local society (*The National* 22/9/15, p.4). An Alotau writer told of being witness to the torture of a *sanguma* in Ramu, Madang, who confessed to him that she was a witch using a familiar in the form of a black butterfly to do harm (*The National* 4/11/15, p.43). A further letter to the editor reported that the increase in sorcery was from entrenched traditional supernatural beliefs granting such powers to a person (*The National* 5/11/15, p.31).

Sanguma thus becomes another one of those topics of strange events and powers, like cargo cults and initiation cults, which have a capacity to summon up and devour wholesale multiple diverse interpretations and theories from Western researchers. In this paper I wish to establish a useful description of what is religious for the field of *sanguma* studies, with special reference to Madang Province and to present a collection of large scale movements of reciprocal killings in recent times by groups focused on *sanguma* labeling. My own epistemological position is that we come to understand things by making abstractions from experience and seeing connections; and from that we deliberately will or choose what we see to be a good value to follow. Even *sanguma* fits within this framework of human values and choosing, there must be evidence and talking it through brings some understanding (Forsyth & Eves, 2015).

The Experience of the Religious

Following something of a tradition in the field of Religious Studies, we should begin our definition of Religion with Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1917). He takes his start from what people might refer to as religious experience, and uses a traditional description, *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. A first translation of this expression would be that we are talking about an experience that grips you and shakes you, that captivates you and that can be understood and embraced in a successive plurality of ways. For all religion this can be a matter of a mighty earthquake of an experience or it can be the shock of an insight. The person might be engrossed by a knowledge that

is of value to the person one way or the other perhaps to the exclusion of anything else. And this mystery does not lose its power to shake and hold on recurring occasions. The *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* is thus an overwhelming experience of that which is seen as qualitatively Other. Otto characterises this Other as Not Just Good. In the biblical tradition that he works with, the God of Israel is a Father and shepherd, but is referred to as a jealous, punishing and destroying God; and this theme is expressed by the God of Jesus too, who is to be feared because he can kill and destroy a person in hell; he is a destroying fire.

We might direct such a definition to the experience of *sanguma*. Certainly there is a fascination with the accounts of people who are *sanguma*; it is a gripping and shaking thing; and always opens itself up to a new experience of this reality.

There are other definitions of the religious which are pertinent here. Frederik Barth writes of the Baktaman (West Sepik) initiation program of seven steps. Central to this process is the introduction of a significant totemic animal. Step after step the totem is re-introduced and its meaning is 'turned' or transformed each time. The end product is to give the novices the experience that important knowledge is always partial and is always leading on to further discovery which can have a transformative effect. We might call this a view of transcendence which is imparted to the developing men as a lifestyle with a religious nature. A person has to expect transformation beyond his expectations and powers.

In the light of this transcendence, initiation ceremonies also impart the knowledge that dramatic conversions are to be expected as a part of life. 'Paradigm shifts' we might call them (cf. Kuhn 1970). I asked the leaders of an initiation ceremony at the Sepik if they expected the boys to change by all these ceremonies. They said, 'Of course, why else would we do it?' A conversion is a development beyond one's knowledge and abilities, but it is demanded of a person by the society and the ceremonies, even if a person cannot simply do this of himself or for herself.

There is a fourth view of the religious also, and that is the arena presented by spirits, myths, images and rituals. In the large initiation houses of the Sepik there are represented spirits of myth, spirits of the bush and ancestral spirits. One Sepik man was explaining *sanguma* to me, and said that this activity consisted of learned ways of attack and chants, and also of 'religious things'. By this latter he meant the use of ritual and materials known to the individual, his '*skin diwai na tambu long ol kain samting*' (bark of trees or bush materials and the taboos he observes.) The names and images of spirits might seem to be the most obvious form of the religious, but in opposition to this I would say that the most significant meanings of religion are the personal conversion, the transcendent view of life and the experience of the encounter with what is the Wholly Other (not as subject-object, but as discontinuous in nature.)

The Typical Experience of *Sanguma* and its Discernment

Before we return to the Madang Province, I would like to concretise the experience of *sanguma* for this discussion by use of previous research and publication on two related societies, Yangoru and Yamuk, in the East Sepik Province (Gesch 2015). Although Papua New Guinea has recorded a wide variety of events attributed to the killing of *sanguma* (Zocca & Urame 2008: 74-91), I intend at this juncture to restrict the illustration of this to the East Sepik Province. After exposure to *sanguma* events over many years, it seems to me most useful for the sake of understanding to focus on the discernment process, which is a prominent part of Yangoru and Yamuk *sanguma*.

Firstly, let me take the case of an old man in Yangoru who was incapacitated for a couple of years with a prolapsed bowel. On a number of occasions, the villagers were summoned for a discussion on the old man's continuing suffering. The spine of a sago leaf was stripped and set in the middle of the discussion area. In the spine, small sticks were stood up to represent accusations of those who might be causing the suffering by sorcery or *sanguma* (the difference at this moment of the discussion is not relevant). Disputes of the past were mentioned. In the course of the discussion a man defends himself against the accusations by speaking of his lack of ill will or of his forgiveness and taking out the small stick and laying it nearby. This process continues until a consensus is allowed to form of who might want to kill the old man by special powers. This calls for reconciliation or might leave the suspicion in place even should the old man die.

Secondly, let me take the case of a 16 year old youth brought to me one afternoon in a hysterical condition, crying helplessly and unceasingly. My guess is that some men met him in the bush nearby and frightened him with severe threats. He was taken to a neighbouring village where an old man provided healing magic, but in the course of reflection the youth was reminded of his sexual assault on a school mate. This was a clear case of *sanguma* for Yangoru, a person with special powers intervening to threaten someone with death because of a public offence.

Thirdly, let us look at a case of someone dying by *sanguma* in Yamuk. He was a senior citizen with grown sons and daughters, and became ill over the course of a few years. There was discussion of his illness in the *haus tambaran* (TP: spirit house). This takes the form of oratory over a garamut drum, pacing the speech with *tanket* leaves struck on the drum. Payments were made to some men to remove the curse of the *sanguma*. Those men implicated themselves by accepting these payments (perhaps on behalf of another person as contact and real *sanguma* operative.) These payments were supposed to balance the payments of hatred that had previously been given to have the senior man killed. As he was dying, some constructed symbolic objects were thrown into and around his house. When I asked if there was a big discussion at his death, I was told that it was not necessary, as 'we all know who did the killing.' It was based on a land dispute that had been going on for a long time.

Fourthly, a young adult man in Yamuk was walking from his house to his toilet in the bush when he collapsed with strong spasms of internal pain. Because of the strangeness

of this event in the everyday setting, it was immediately identified as action of a *sanguma*. Villagers say they identify *sanguma* activity by looking for signs. For the rest of the morning, various healers tried their work to heal the man, using spells and emetics. He eventually ejected material into a coconut shell and an expert said he found a one centimetre 'spear' there. He took it out to the toilet to bury it, and the sick man slowly recovered that same day. The victim was said to be continually engaged in fighting and disputes and was suffering either for his own offences or those of his various brothers.

In these cases the community was looking for signs. What was something striking in the occasion – the length of the illness, the hopeless crying, the apparent hatred of the opposition or the suddenness of the call to action? These events stopped the normal flow of life, they indicated a presence of discontinuously harmful agencies, and they possessed the person's life strongly. We can say that the desired outcome each time was a conversion, a coming to good sense. The healing process was done by the community trying to set right relationships or behaviour or proper values. These kinds of identified causes, and healings and accusations are all part of the discernment process which is key to the *sanguma* activity in the village. Of course ostracism and public criticism mean a great deal to a member of the village community, and can drive a person mad if not taken care of.

The reason for pursuing the identification of *sanguma* as religious is to be able to follow the conversation. What do people mean when they identify a death as 'obviously *sanguma*'? Why are some people identified as *sanguma* killers allowed to live and show leadership in the community? Why do people agree that they want *sanguma* eliminated and yet do not often take the action in the Sepik of executing those labelled *sanguma*? In other provinces a reputation for being a *sanguma* can be a pathway to torture and murder, as indicated in the news stories quoted above. In Sepik it usually remains a subject of on-going discernment. I am told it is a matter of the everyday in the village or settlement, whenever sickness is disturbing or misfortune surprises.

Waves of *Sanguma* Killing

With these characteristics of Sepik *sanguma* in mind, let us turn back to events in Madang province, where there have been larger groups of people more or less in warfare over events labelled as *sanguma*. I do not presume an identity in understanding between Sepik and Madang, but Sepiks understand what is being said in Madang about *sanguma*. What is the warfare about and what special character does the title *sanguma* give, in PNG where tribal warfare is still raging in many areas? In four areas of Madang province, these murderous wars have been going ahead. The four areas of the province are Tangu, Gusap, Awar and Amele.

Tangu

The national elections of 2012 brought an episode of killings between two groups at Tangu. Pisai Gumar, a reporter for *The National*, wrote a story on two groups of men in the area. When I visited the community, the villagers claimed that the news report was greatly exaggerated, but there were other members of the community in town who wanted to assure me that they had observed events referred to in the report. The starting point was that the *sanguma* were exercising social control but demanding too much for the remuneration of their work, asking large sums of money, full bags of rice or even sexual favours. This position of course allows a certain legitimacy to the role of the *sanguma* to cause sickness or misfortune to the population as a form of punishing public offences. Another man from the area told me there was a wave of deaths from a severe illness. His wife had died after a visit to a certain person's garden, returning home bleeding from all her orifices, and dying within a day. The husband cared for his wife intimately without contracting the same disease, but he said there had been eight people to die in recent times from such an illness.

The community reported that the *sanguma* had previously gone into an initiation enclosure. A team of men, who trained other men in *sanguma* practices, had run such an enclosure, and when they came out after a couple of months they were looking for someone to kill, to exercise their powers, and they were reported as practising cannibalism. One man of Tangu who had a mixed ancestry, said that he was back home in Tangu at one time when a certain man was accused of being a *sanguma*, having a part to play in the waves of deaths that were taking place. In a confrontation he was speared in a settlement community. He then dragged himself up to the main road, pulled the spear out of himself and speared another man who belonged to the *hausman* group—the ordinary traditional initiation community. He hoisted the *hausman* member with great strength, effectively killing him, before killing someone else and dying in the process. At this stage there was a general warfare between the two initiation groups, *hausman* and *sanguma*. It was reported that cannibalism was happening on both sides. The police were called in, and the *hausman* group were strongly disciplined according to the report given by Pisai Gumar. Yet the sympathies of the police lay with the anti-*sanguma* group and soon they were feeding the *hausman* members, as illustrated by photographs in *The National*. From their side the *hausman* people said that they had a lot of special powers to remove *sanguma*. There was a bush knife which would hover in the air, until a man might reach out and grab it to kill the *sanguma*. I asked my informant about this, and he said that he had seen with his own eyes that the men were manipulating a floating bush knife just with the tips of their fingers.

Eighteen of the *hausman* members of Tangu were put in prison, and only slowly they were finding their bail money and all being released from gaol. Once out, it seems the court case was effectively forgotten. But it did represent a warfare situation, numbers of men being killed on both sides, and victims of the *sanguma* dying of illness at the same time. When I asked about *sanguma* during my visit, I was told, 'We have no *sanguma* in our villages.' The villagers had obviously learned by this time that this battle brought them sharp trouble from the authorities. It might have been ordinary

tribal fighting but it was run by those attributed with special powers and knowledge and the initial killings were a dramatic epidemic – a sure sign that this was not just a set of ordinary human events.

Gusap

In 2014 the same warfare configuration was found at Gusap, 400km to the east, still in Madang Province. This has been described in detail in Gesch & Julius (2015). The hostilities began with the killing of an adult woman by a well-known community figure identified as a *sanguma*. This happened with a dramatic thunder clap and a special mist around the valley of the district. Retaliatory killing from both sides followed and soon bodies were found from day to day, lying around with no one to bury them. Some bodies were decapitated. Others had their brains removed, and generally there was an attempt to mutilate the bodies with gaping knife cuts. There is some dispute as to whether these were somehow ritual killings or just vicious attacks in the course of which a man might die. The community was living in fear, and once again the antagonists were identified as *sanguma* and *hausman*.

The *sanguma* were identified in this case as ordinary community members, but people with a history. They were said to be people who had been war refugees from an earlier time. They had come to the village of Gomumu and other such villages in the Nahu Rawa Local Level Government for protection. Although settled and living amongst the community for more than a generation, they were beginning to feel themselves to be short of resources. They needed more land, and one explanation of the *sanguma*'s doing killing was that they wanted to eliminate the original landowners so as to gain access to their land, and they took steps by religious means, '*skin diwai na religion bilong ol*'. In this case the 'religion' meant magical spells they had learned and all the observances they might follow, such as fasting from various things. By way of retaliation, the long-standing members of the community held a *hausman* initiation in a small hamlet, to learn the ways of killing *sanguma*.

The '*sanguma* suspects' as they were called, were forced to move down into the Gusap valley and live in a village, Sakiko. In a climactic decision, the Nahu Rawa people formed a battle group, and 200 strong, blackened their faces and with a variety of weapons, marched some hours down the mountain to kill people at Sakiko. Police were nearby, but eight people, including two children, were killed and a set of brains was loaded into a *bilum* (shoulder bag). The police then persuaded the crowd of men to surrender at the police station. From there, 120 men were taken to Beon Gaol and 65 boys were sent back to school. A court case finally put the bail at K500 for each man. By November 2015, about half had come out of gaol and returned to the community as they found the bail money. There was a feeling that the court case was thus ended. While the *hausman* group were in gaol, the *sanguma* suspects took the liberty of burning down much of their property back in Nahu Rawa. The police attempted to establish reconciliation procedures, and the then Governor of the Province, Jim Kas, tried to follow these events by visiting the remote area.

Again, the *sanguma* label was applied because of the signs given out at the killings. It seems the barbarity of the killings was shared on both sides. Perhaps it is worth noting that, after the killing of the first woman, female members of the community were not identified as the cause of *sanguma* events. I attended a court hearing in Beon Gaol and the *hausman* group of 120 were tidied up and sitting demurely with no guards in the classroom. They were ordinary people led to do extraordinary things.

Awar

About 60km west of Tangu, down on the coast of Bogia District, there is one village, Awar, who had the services of a *sanguma* hunter. For years the village had experienced a series of deaths and attacks from snakes and crocodiles which were attributed to *sanguma*. One 'victim' recounted going with her little brother to a backwater one night to have a wash. There was some splashing unaccounted for on the opposite side of the water. When she wanted to come out of the water, she experienced strong scratching down her leg and she was paralysed from this, yet there was no sign of an animal in the water. She managed to get home and took days to recover. Villagers thought it was obviously a *sanguma*-crocodile attack. Such unaccounted-for attacks and the appearance of strange lights happened over a series of twenty years, until a couple of men decided to pursue the matter relentlessly. Eventually when the son of one big man died unexpectedly, that big man revealed that he knew it to be the *kukurai* (TP local: hereditary leader) who was doing this. The *kukurai* in turn revealed that the first big man was also guilty of taking payment for witchcraft attacks. The *sanguma* hunter wanted to announce to the world that he had succeeded in uncovering these *sanguma* witches. Other villages of the same area came to him and asked him to come to do the same work for them. When I met these big men, they appeared to me as ordinary senior citizens, and they made the customary statement made to outsiders, 'We have no *sanguma* in our village.' These were two sets of men at war with each other, said to be intent on killing, and pursued by a *sanguma* hunter at the same time, who himself felt very vulnerable to attack.

Based on his fieldwork in the 1920s, E.E. Evans-Pritchard reflected on beliefs in witchcraft among the Azande of South Sudan:

In Zandeland sometimes an old granary collapses ... it may happen that there are people sitting beneath the granary when it collapses and they are injured ... Now why should these particular people have been sitting under this particular granary at the particular moment when it collapsed? That it should collapse is easily intelligible, but why should it have collapsed at the particular moment when these particular people were sitting beneath it? (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p. 22).

... it is death that answers the riddle of mystical beliefs (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p. 222).

For the Awar people of Madang, the snake bites and the crocodile attacks on this person at this particular time were explained by witchcraft. This could be investigated as a sign.

The Black Jesus of Amele

In the 2010s there were many killings in the villages south of Madang town that were not publically attributed to *sanguma*, but yet which showed traits of *sanguma* movements as we are describing here. A village man with a history as a Church worker, Steven Tari, began to identify himself as a Jesus figure for the black people. Stories spread around Madang by the national newspapers saying that the 'Black Jesus' was taking a troupe of young women to himself, having ritualised sex with them, then killing them and cannibalising them and he wandered around the bush with white flowing garments and red drape. One mother distinguished herself by bringing her daughters to Steven Tari. A church pastor investigating the matter observed Tari in a hieratic pose, preaching to 600 followers. He was said to have 400 young women at his bidding. After being arrested and taken to gaol on a number of occasions, he was finally aided to escape after being convicted of murder but not cannibalism. I met him in prison and found him a simple, forward person, claiming for himself the title of 'Black Jesus'. But the villages of the area were strongly divided about giving support to him. On his way to gaol at one time, he was bashed up and photographed, making a rather dismal figure. On the final occasion he was beheaded, castrated and strung up from a tree. Obviously he stirred up as much opposition as support. This is an area which has seen a number of low level cult leaders, aspiring to lead their followers to revelations of secrets in the tradition of Yali Singina, the main character in *Road Belong Cargo* (Lawrence, 1964).

Although the term *sanguma* seems to have been found redundant here, this movement occurs in the same period of time and in the same village 'warfare' environment as the movements described above. In 2014 the Provincial Police Commander came into possession of photos of hacked bodies in the same Amele region. Their brains had been removed, apparently as part of a cult in the same area as Black Jesus had been active. The brutality of these matters is horrifying. (It is matched by the CCTV footage posted on Facebook of the hacking to death of a Chinese man outside the Bank of South Pacific in Madang in November 2015.)

Conclusion: the aspect of religious dialogue

Sanguma remains a matter of daily conversation in Papua New Guinea in many areas. A sudden death by accident or sickness, a long enduring illness, a physical misfortune might all be rapidly identified as the work of a *sanguma*. At the time of writing an old lady of my acquaintance was suddenly identified as being a *sanguma*. Her sons recognised that there is nothing quaint or amusing about this charge and trumpeted loudly throughout the settlement that such accusers should bring the dead body of a victim forward to prove their charges.

Sanguma is grim and serious. Zocca and Urame (2008) list many suggestions from many sources about how to end this institution and they list the evil effects that flow in many ways from this belief. It is no defence of the problem for me to say that we must recall that it is a religious matter. Religion has become a very prominent issue in

recent times since the reporting of the terrorism of the ISIS and the killings in Paris and other European nations. With the growing indifference of Western countries to the religious viewpoint, comes the rise in conflicts in various nations that might be based on tribalism, but which are prominently religious in nature. Any attempt to leave religion out of the picture is doomed to miss an adequate understanding. Any attempt to approach these different viewpoints must be on the basis of the principles of religious dialogue. Religious people do not understand each other's motivation very well; they seek to understand their own beliefs and seek an attitude of total commitment. Religious dialogue demands a radical respect and tolerance for each other, a willingness to live and let live, despite the turn of some adherents to kill and destroy in the name of those beliefs.

Sanguma is a form of terrorism. It is deeply unsettling in the societies where it rises as an issue and a series of events. Simple responses such as, 'stop the nonsense', 'wait for the effects of education to set in', 'treat them as murderers before the law' are not misguided but they are not approaching the reality of the matter. *Sanguma* must be well described as a religious matter, a deep conviction, a view of the world and of humanity. *Sanguma* is an example of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*; it is the sign of a conversion in your life to recognise extraordinary powers in men and women; it is a transcendent matter and aligned with the spirits of the earth. A dialogue with *sanguma* beliefs does not imply sharing the belief, but it is a way of understanding how people are deeply moved, as part of their lifestyle to believe in the extraordinary powers that are given to some persons. Viewing this belief, it becomes possible to see how reasonable people become deeply disturbed with their perceptions of *sanguma*, and work out how to deal with such things, not once but again and again in an environment seeking this reality.

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