

Developing Insecurity: Sorcery, Witchcraft and Melanesian Economic Development



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Introduction

Until recently, development practitioners have paid relatively little attention to the issue of sorcery and witchcraft. At best, secular development practitioners have seen these occult beliefs as totally unfathomable, while at worst, they have disdained them as utterly primitive and, as merely a set of beliefs, of little significance. Melanesians' firm belief that sorcerers or witches are responsible for many of their misfortunes and the grim reprisals that result, however, has required development practitioners to take the issue more seriously. It is, in fact, extremely difficult to understand life in the cultural area of Melanesia (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Papua, New Caledonia and Fiji), without an appreciation of the role and significance of sorcery and witchcraft there.

Long exposure to introduced ideas and practices that challenge these occult beliefs such as biomedicine, Western forms of science and education, and Christianity has not shaken most Melanesians' unreserved belief that humans can cause harm to others through sorcery or witchcraft (Forsyth and Eves 2015).¹ Sorcery and witchcraft discourses continue to be widespread and taken for granted in contemporary Melanesia and provide an explanatory framework that makes sense of events in the world, and especially of illness, death and misfortune of almost all kinds.

There are compelling reasons for development practitioners to see sorcery and witchcraft as a serious human rights issue, particularly when it leads to accusations, torture and killings. However, in this Discussion Paper we argue that development practitioners should also see sorcery and witchcraft as a serious development issue, for the culture of insecurity they create undermines

the goals of poverty reduction and development through inhibiting entrepreneurial efforts, as we explain below.²

Belief in sorcery and witchcraft nurtures fear and mistrust in the community, which is corrosive of the social capital needed for effective and sustainable development. People who are successful in business or other entrepreneurial efforts are fearful of jealous attack by sorcerers or witches and the unsuccessful are likely to attribute this success to the use of sorcery or witchcraft. Some even go so far as to eschew activities that might improve their income out of fear of being attacked. Sorcery and witchcraft accusations impact directly and negatively on development, as they sometimes result in violent conflicts with devastating effects on local economies, through the destruction of livelihoods and local infrastructure, and the displacement of people, who flee accusations and violence.

We do not intend to document the finer details of sorcery and witchcraft beliefs and practices in Melanesia here, as there is a large body of anthropological literature that does this more adequately than we can do in this context.³ It is important, however, to define what we mean by sorcery and witchcraft, since these terms tend to be used rather loosely by development practitioners. Many of the researchers who have written on sorcery in Papua New Guinea and in the broader Melanesian context adopt a distinction first made by the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard: sorcery refers to the intentional use of magical rituals to injure, kill or cause misfortune (or to benefit the sorcerer), while witchcraft refers to an unconscious capacity to harm others (see Eves 2013; Patterson 1974–75; Reay



1987:92; Stephen 1987b:251; Zelenietz 1981). Sorcery techniques and the knowledge connected with them — the types of rituals employed, the spells uttered and the materials used — are obtainable and can be learnt. They can be passed down through the generations, acquired from relatives or friends, or simply purchased for cash.⁴ Witchcraft, on the other hand, does not comprise a set of practices that can be learnt. Rather, it is defined as a form of possession by a ‘witch substance’ or creature which inhabits the body and takes control of the possessed person, residing in a space such as the abdomen, chest, scrotum, vagina, womb, head or armpit. This witch spirit is often called a ‘*spirit no gut*’ (evil spirit) or ‘*dolidoli*’; the latter being a term derived from a child’s doll. As Marie Reay explains, the witch substance ‘takes over the host’s will, impelling him or her to harbour thoughts and perform actions that are not normal to him or her’ (1987:92; 1976:2; see also Newman 1964:259). Witchcraft is also thought to be hereditary and so can be passed on to children. It can also be passed on to people, with or without their consent, through the exchange of commonplace items, like a betel nut, a cigarette or some food.

Illness and death feature most prominently in discussions of sorcery and witchcraft, since they tend to elicit intense responses that may entail violent retribution against those deemed responsible. However, sorcery, and to a lesser extent witchcraft, may be used as explanations for a whole range of misfortunes. These include accidents, such as falling from a tree or being attacked by a pig, shark or crocodile; natural disasters, such as torrential rain or cyclonic winds that destroy crops and other property; and failures — of a business, of crops, at school or university, of a woman to reproduce, male impotence, or the failure of public performances, such as dances, church and school openings or mortuary ceremonies.

What constitutes sorcery and witchcraft and how people respond to them varies across the region. There are places where people hold beliefs both in sorcery and witchcraft and others where there is a belief only in sorcery. In some places, deaths or serious illness believed to be due to sorcery or witchcraft elicit violent responses,

whereas in others the response may be non-violent. The former is especially the case in parts of Papua New Guinea, where there have been hundreds of killings, including some very public attacks in urban centres.⁵ In other parts of Melanesia, such as Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, such killings, while occasional occurrences, are far more uncommon and the more usual response is property destruction and/or banishment (Forsyth 2006; Kanairara and Futaiasi 2015). The sorcery and witchcraft of today are not manifestations of traditions that have continued unchanged for centuries. Rather, these beliefs wax, wane and change with changing circumstances and contexts. Thus, the way that sorcery and witchcraft are manifested in the contemporary situation is very much a product of more recent history, not of timeless tradition.

Though too little attention has been given to the impact of sorcery and witchcraft on development in the Melanesian context, a number of important papers have examined the escalation of rumour and speculation about sorcery in the context of social change (Lederman 1981; Nihill 2001; Zelenietz and Lindenbaum 1981) and accusations of witchcraft in the context of epidemics, particularly the HIV epidemic in Papua New Guinea (Haley 2008, 2009, 2010). For direct discussion of the impact that sorcery and witchcraft can have on development, we must turn to the literature on Africa, where several papers have explored the issue (see Ashforth 1998, 2005; Brain 1982; Golooba-Mutebi 2005; Green 2005; Hickel 2014; Kohnert 1996; Leistner 2014; Petrus 2012).⁶

Learning from the African Experience

Although the African beliefs and experiences are not exactly comparable to Melanesia’s, we can, nevertheless, find useful parallels in this literature. Our own deep knowledge of Melanesian cultures, gained through intensive and longstanding research experience, enables us to note powerful resonances with the African case study material.⁷ A number of scholars have suggested that witchcraft is a major impediment to economic development in Africa.⁸ For example, Erich Leistner has argued recently that the belief in the existence of witchcraft is a significant factor retarding Africa’s economic development (2014:70). Indeed,

as we do for Melanesia, he argues that Africa's problems, particularly the reasons for its faltering development, cannot possibly be grasped without considering the role of witchcraft (Leistner 2014:53). Like several other scholars, he points to inequality as a foremost source of tension, suggesting that in the past the living conditions and the social status of ordinary people was more or less uniform, but with immersion in the market economy people are able to differentiate themselves economically from others. In a context where someone 'becomes rich, apparently overnight, witchcraft is the only explanation the neighbours can think of' (ibid.:58). As many Africans have such a narrow economic footing that they barely survive, minute changes in the standard of living of their neighbours can readily engender jealousy and suspicion of witchcraft (ibid.:70). As we show below, similar kinds of explanations are offered in the Melanesian context.

Writing about South Africa, Jason Hickel argues that witchcraft provides a 'moral framework within which people evaluate economic behavior' (2014:108). Here, both success and failure can be seen as a result of witchcraft. South Africans, Hickel says, interpret the failure to prosper economically not as a neutral market outcome or the product of chance, but as something that is orchestrated by specific human agents (ibid.). Those who are accused of orchestrating misfortunes (such as poverty or unemployment) are people who exhibit morally questionable economic behaviour (ibid.). Indeed, some researchers argue that witchcraft is a 'levelling force', since people avoid the accumulation and display of wealth as it might elicit envy and recourse to witchcraft (Fisiy and Geschiere 1991:253). Witchcraft accusations, thus, can 'act as a brake on the pace of economic and social differentiation' (Golooba-Mutebi 2005:943).

Frederick Golooba-Mutebi points to a paradox of poverty reduction strategies: since not 'everyone can be lifted out of poverty at the same time, successful poverty reduction inevitably leads to the growth of economic inequality' (2005:954). He writes further:

In a community where social advancement provokes such deadly reaction, or is believed

to do so, poverty reduction efforts are likely to be frustrated. Witch beliefs, therefore, constitute an obstacle to poverty reduction and to aspirations for social advancement. (Golooba-Mutebi 2005:954)

One of the most comprehensive and insightful discussions of the impact of witchcraft on development is given by Adam Ashworth in his book *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (2005). Ashworth uses the notion of 'spiritual insecurity' to explain the impact produced by belief in witchcraft. The concept of spiritual insecurity, he argues, most adequately describes the dangers, doubts and fears that arise from the sense of being exposed to the particular invisible evil forces deployed by witches (Ashworth 2005:1). For Ashworth, questions of spiritual insecurity, despite remaining a potent feature of people's daily lives, have largely been 'excluded from the public domain and relegated to a sphere designated as "religion" that has to do with matters of "faith" and "belief," which are understood as essentially private and personal, not as matters of public safety' (ibid.:314). While spiritual insecurity is related to other dimensions of insecurity, such as poverty, violence, political oppression and disease — it cannot be reduced to them (ibid.:3). One of the profound consequences of the belief in witchcraft is that it leads people to assume that those around them desire to do them harm. As he explains, 'life in a world of witches must be lived in the light of a presumption of malice: one must assume that anyone with the motive to harm has access to the means and that people *will* cause harm because they can' (ibid.:69). This feeling of insecurity works to inhibit or destroy community solidarity, and this has deleterious effects on economic viability as well as other forms of wellbeing (see section on social capital below).

Sorcery and Witchcraft in Melanesia

Notwithstanding the ethnographic particularities in the region, sorcery and witchcraft contribute to widespread insecurity in Melanesia.⁹ Following Ashworth, we recognise the two dimensions of insecurity — material and spiritual. Spiritual insecurity creates a pervasive sense of suspicion, mistrust and fear. It can also contribute to material

insecurity, especially when the fear of sorcery or witchcraft causes people to curtail activities that could improve their livelihoods and increase their living standards, or when accusations lead to violence and conflict.

Spiritual insecurity haunts people in urban and rural areas of Melanesia, with many people preoccupied with, and concerned about, the potential of others to cause them harm. This was expressed to Richard Eves in the following way in an interview with a man during recent fieldwork in Eastern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea:

We are really afraid of *sanguma* (witches). We fight with our fists or with guns and we don't worry, as we can see who is coming with a gun. When a man comes like this, you can get a gun, an axe or a bow and arrow, but with *sanguma* you will not know how you are being killed. *Sanguma* is another kind of thing.

For this man, the unseen nature of witchcraft means that a person being targeted cannot defend themselves, unlike more conventional forms of violence in which a person can readily respond by arming themselves. This respondent later remarked that it did not matter where you were, whether it was in another province in Papua New Guinea or overseas, the power of *sanguma* could reach you and kill you.

Such fear is exhibited in more mundane ways by the manner in which people are usually careful about throwing away the skins of betel nut or other things that they have been in contact with, lest they be sorcerised.

People can fear those who are close as well as those who are more distant. It is often assumed that people living in close proximity in the same community share the same interests, but this is not necessarily so. Communities that appear to be socially harmonious from the outside, may, in fact, be far from it — fractured by mistrust, suspicion and hatred. This became evident to Eves when he was undertaking fieldwork in Southern Highlands Province in the lead-up to the elections in 2007. Initially, the rural village where he was based appeared to harmonious, with few of the social problems that fracture villages in rural Melanesia. The village leader appeared to be a charismatic

figure who could maintain this harmony. Over the course of his time there, Eves discovered that there had recently been several violent attacks on both men and women who were accused of being witches.

For some scholars, the belief that some people have the power to make ill or kill others through sorcery or witchcraft constitutes 'the dark side of kinship' since it implies 'the frightening realization that there is jealousy and therefore aggression within the family, where there should only be trust and solidarity' (Geschiere 1997:11; see also Leistner 2014:58). Fear that your neighbours, or even close kin, may be trying to bring you down is common, though such doubts will often remain hidden, until an event such as a death or a case of severe illness shatters the trust and brings those fears and suspicions out into the open. Funerals, in particular, become forums where speculation about the death in question is rife and where ill feelings and resentments are transformed into accusations and violence (see Green 2005:259; for Melanesia see Gibbs 2015; McDonnell 2015).

'Geographies of Fear'

The pervasiveness of fear has been highlighted by a number of scholars writing about Melanesia.¹⁰ It emerges clearly in Deborah van Heekeren's research on the Vula'a of Central Province, Papua New Guinea, where she found that fear was not only a mechanism for control but also a pervasive cultural mood that permeated the Vula'a lifeworld, manifesting itself in a number of forms, including fear of those in close proximity, such as neighbours and relatives (2013). Ann Chowning reports similarly that 'big men' used threats of sorcery to intimidate and control subordinates (1987:150). Writing about the Kwoma of the East Sepik in Papua New Guinea, Bowden also remarks that 'sorcery was greatly feared', acting as a social sanction and force of social control by discouraging, through fear of reprisal, behaviour which was socially unacceptable (1987:193). Discussing Ambrym in Vanuatu, Rio reports that people were so afraid of sorcery that they slept with shotguns beside their beds out of fear of nightly attacks, and he and his family were warned not to go outside at night (2002:131).

Fear of sorcery and witchcraft impairs relationships not only with those who are near but also more widely. Shirley Lindenbaum coined the term 'geography of fear' to describe the ways in which fear can be spatially mapped (1979:137) when she documented the situation in Papua New Guinea's Eastern Highlands Province, especially among the Fore (where she undertook fieldwork) and their neighbours. For the Fore, the most acute sense of danger was inspired by the active sorcerers in neighbouring parishes, who were perceived to be preoccupied with a grab for power (Lindenbaum 1979:137). The work of Tobias Schwoerer, who also worked in this part of the highlands, confirms this analysis, arguing that it is 'generally the powerful groups — powerful in terms of numbers, military strength, internal cohesion and economic success — who fear sorcery of the less powerful with whom they maintain social relations' (2013). He suggests that sorcery suspicions should also be viewed in the context of the strategic situation in which groups find themselves. The main suspects, he writes,

are usually those other groups with which the relationship was already strained, and from among these groups, suspicion is mainly directed against groups who are deemed weaker and might thus resort to sorcery as their only chance to gain power or redress an injustice. (Schwoerer 2013)

Deborah van Heekeren (2013) found that the Vula'a also feared those more distant, whether in a nearby village or a distant island, with people often referring to their fear of the superior magic of the neighbouring villages as well as the sorcerers and witches of the more distant Mailu and Milne Bay area. In Vanuatu, John Taylor argues the 'fear of *nakaemas* exacerbates social and economic inequalities, particularly as it contributes to the discouragement of personal achievement or advancement, especially among those already disempowered' (2015:48).

The 'geography of fear' also exists on a much wider level, embracing the spatial and cultural cleavages that mark relations between mountain and coastal peoples or between different islands and provinces. For example, Lindenbaum argued that throughout the highlands of Papua New Guinea there exists a general orientation of fear,

positing that the societies in the mountains fear those below them, but that the pattern is reversed for societies on the coast (1979:140). Richard Eves found a similar situation in Papua New Guinea's New Ireland Province, with the people residing in the mountains on the Lelet Plateau viewing those who lived on the coast as inveterate sorcerers. He was on a number of occasions cautioned against attending events on the coast lest he be sorcerised (Eves 2000:457–8). In some places in Melanesia, certain communities are renowned for possessing powerful sorcery, such as the people from Ambrym Island in Vanuatu. The movement of people from these areas to other places, such as occurs through urban drift, can cause widespread apprehension and tension among the broader community. This was illustrated most dramatically in 2007 when riots broke out in Port Vila, the capital, sparked by accusations of sorcery involving the Ambrym community living there.

Eroding Social Capital

As we remarked earlier, this pervasive fear and mistrust erodes social capital — the value that inheres in relationships within communities and between communities.¹¹ Since the early 1990s the concept of social capital has become a key term in the lexicon of development practitioners such as non-government organisations, international organisations, donor agencies and governments (Harriss and De Renzio 1997:920). Development practitioners have used the term as an analytic concept describing the importance of social relationships and the willingness of people to work for the collective good of the community. 'Unlike other forms of capital, social capital inheres in the structure of relations between persons and among persons' (Coleman 1990:302) with an emphasis on strong interpersonal ties, such as kinship and intimate friendship (Putnam 1993:175). Some scholars have argued that social capital is an important prerequisite of effective sustainable development. Francis Fukuyama, for example, argues in his 'Social Capital and Development: The Coming Agenda', that shared norms and values that promote social cooperation are central to successful development and economic growth. According to Fukuyama, social capital:

directly affects the ability of people to organize for economic ends; it supports the creation of institutions and the rule of law; and is a vital underpinning of democracy, which is the source of legitimacy for the political framework in which development increasingly takes place. (Fukuyama 2002:27)

However, social capital is not without negative dimensions or a 'dark side', with some commentators suggesting that social capital may be eroded or reconstituted when violence exists in the community (McIlwaine and Moser 2001:965).¹² As Colletta and Cullen argue, social capital can carry the seeds of its own destruction: 'social capital can be constructive and support social cohesion and the mitigation of conflict, but it can also be perverted to hasten social fragmentation and the onset of violent conflict' (cited in McIlwaine and Moser 2001:967).¹³ Writing about the situation in Latin America, Cathy McIlwaine and Caroline Moser find that social capital can be inclusive or exclusive in nature, and therefore is not necessarily beneficial for all (2001:967). They suggest that in communities with high levels of violence, fear is a critical factor in understanding social capital (ibid.:980). This is highly pertinent to the Melanesian case we are discussing.

A Time of Envy and Jealousy

Many commentators have observed that sorcery and witchcraft are, at least in part, a response to the new inequalities that have emerged with the advent of capitalist economies and their concomitant issues of inequality, accumulation and the management of sociality. Several scholars writing about Africa indicate that jealousy is considered the chief catalyst of witchcraft accusations (Ashforth 2005:315; Englund 1996:271–2; Geschiere 1997:11; Leistner 2014:65). Leistner's remark that 'The fear of arousing jealousy and being accused of witchcraft causes people to avoid doing anything that will make them stand out by being uncommonly successful or fortunate' (2014:70) indicates that fear is inhibiting development.

In the Melanesian context, the increasingly entrenched inequalities in wealth and social disparity are often cited by local people as prompting the practice of sorcery and witchcraft

from which accusations follow. It is not surprising, then, that as inequality and poverty increase so has the discourse of sorcery and witchcraft, and that there is a widespread perception in a number of Melanesian countries that malign ways of causing illness and death are spreading.

In Papua New Guinea, the phrase *taim bilong jela* is often used to characterise the present as a time of envy and jealousy, when sorcerers and witches attack those who have become rich and visibly display their wealth or epitomise success in other ways (see Jorgensen 2014:278; Sillitoe 1987:124). Several scholars have commented about the alleged motivations of accused sorcerers and witches. Ann Chowning reports that among the Kove of West New Britain, envy and anger are the most common reasons cited for sorcery (1987:157). In Vanuatu, Knut Rio remarks that many people discern that a potential sorcery threat exists in any relationship where there is a reason for envy (2010:186). Franko Zocca, discussing Papua New Guinea, reports that witches are said to be envious of people who are successful (2009b:28). For some, sorcery and witchcraft are a mechanism of levelling, of bringing people down. This was put in the following way by one of Eves' respondents:

Sanguma also prevent a person from progressing in life. Lots ruin a person's life. They want to bring you down to the level of the person in the village so you just survive on sweet potato. If you want to work a little business you will lose money. You think that you are making a profit, but you're not. The money in your pocket just disappears. To give an example, there used to be a small trade store here. How many times have they tried to make a success of it and failed. They tried to sell from their house but didn't make any profit. They wanted to use the money to stock the store again with rice but the money just disappeared.

The distribution and exchange of wealth has long been a topic of great interest to anthropologists working on Melanesia, who generally consider exchange, and especially gift exchange, to be a fundamental part of Melanesian sociality.¹⁴ Indeed, sociality is considered to be an essential component of what it means to be

human, with those eschewing sociality being considered, not merely greedy and selfish, but also not fully human. Sociality nurtures and sustains the bonds — that compose social capital — that weld members of a community together, as well as linking different communities together. Social acts of exchange are usually enmeshed in strict codes of practice by which wealth must be carefully concealed and only strategically revealed and distributed (Eves 2000:466).¹⁵ It is a cultural imperative to participate in acts of sociality, to engage in exchange in everyday and ritual contexts. However, the manner of doing this must be carefully negotiated, since exchange is accompanied by risks and dangers. Thus, if an exchange item is too big and ostentatious, or if it is too small, it is likely to shame the receiver, provoking anger and resentment. There are also risks and dangers in eschewing exchange altogether; a person who eschews exchange in favour of accumulating wealth for him or herself is extremely vulnerable, since he or she is likely to be envied and labelled greedy, and also to be fearful of attack by an envious witch or sorcerer. Rio makes a similar point for Vanuatu when he writes in relation to village court trials that there is often a double moral edge: ‘the accused sorcerer should not have been angry or jealous, but the victim should not have been stingy or selfish either’ (2010:186).

While envy has probably always been considered one of the key motivations for the actions of sorcerers and witches, this has been exacerbated with increasing immersion in the cash and market economy, and the more extreme disparities in wealth that have followed development. Where the accumulation of wealth is seen as desirable and possible, people are less willing, and able, to manage and control the evidence of wealth, and thus envy, as they did in the past. Indeed, it is perhaps one of the paradoxes of the contemporary world that material security may give rise to this kind of spiritual insecurity. Van Heekeren (2013) reports that among the Vula’a, sorcerers are employed to target those who are obviously successful. Those who possess motor vehicles or who make major improvements to houses, or fishermen who are catching more than is considered appropriate, she cites as examples of

the most likely targets. Elsewhere, Eves has written that sorcery is considered a ‘curse’ — an inevitable misfortune brought by modernity. This was starkly expressed by a New Ireland man who remarked that if a man was wealthy enough to buy two vehicles he would almost certainly be killed by sorcery (Eves 2000:456). A similar view was expressed to Eves in Bougainville, when someone remarked that if you ‘build a four-bedroom house, you will become ill’ (*wokim wanpela foapela haus bai yu sik nau*). The fear of being a target of sorcery has the effect of moderating outward signs of success, such as semi-permanent houses; in some parts of Bougainville, people prefer to live in bush-style houses even though they are quite wealthy, out of fear of being attacked by those who are envious of their success. Similar sentiments were expressed to Eves during recent fieldwork. As one respondent commented:

If a person works a good house, a sorcerer or witch will eat you. ... Lots of people are fearful for their lives. Life is a big thing. You won’t be able to get a car even if you have enough money to buy it. You’ll just be able to eat. ... You aren’t able to work a good house. The witch will come and kill you. You can only live as others live. They want you to live as everybody lives and not be successful. If you are successful you will be made to come down again. Witches want you to live on sweet potato and live in a grass thatched hut (*haus kunai*). The person must live like this. This is the way of *sanguma*. They want you to come down to their level. You cannot avoid this and progress (*go antap*). Here, if a man is a witch and his child goes to school with another child until they both graduate and the witch sees that the other child gets ahead, the witch will kill him. As a result we’re reluctant to go to school — we’ll just remain at home. We’ll just stay at home. For you Europeans it isn’t like this, education is a big thing, but for us we just say — forget about it. ... Ok, if you are educated and you buy a car and drive it, it will be involved in an accident with another car and you will die. It is the same with education and we’re tired of school.

Given the emphasis on sociality in Melanesian conceptions of humanity, it is hardly surprising

that those who are singled out as witches are often people who defy social norms by eschewing sociality. People say that witches do not share — they are considered greedy and selfish individuals who forsake the commensal sharing of food to feed themselves at the expense of others. Indeed, more generally, witches are the epitome of the antisocial person, who defies the norms and conventions of everyday life. Among the Kalam discussed by Inge Riebe, a person is liable to be labelled a witch if he or she is sullen, miserly, unfriendly or greedy (1987:214). The Etoro described by Raymond Kelly believe the witch is the epitome of maliciousness and antisocial selfishness (1976:48). For the Kuma described by Marie Reay, witch-like behaviour includes going for solitary walks, eating voraciously on public occasions, eating meat without sharing it, as well as staring wildly and neglecting personal attire (1987:93, 109). Similar explanations are given in Chimbu Province in the highlands of Papua New Guinea where, according to Franco Zocca, it is said that witches ‘stare at people who are eating good food; they are always hungry; they hunger for meat; they hide while eating’ (2009b:24–5).

Discordant Development

The attribution of sorcery and witchcraft to those who are envious or jealous of the success of others extends more broadly to other communities. This comes through in Tobias Schwoerer’s (2013) work in Eastern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea, where uneven economic development and the provision of infrastructure (roads, schools, aid posts) between villages were cited by his informants as the main reason for sorcery, with people blaming envious sorcerers of more remote and economically disadvantaged villages for causing unexplainable deaths.

Levels of economic prosperity are quite variable across Melanesia, with some countries, such as Solomon Islands, highly dependent on foreign aid, while others, such as Papua New Guinea, are experiencing a resource-led boom. Despite this boom, levels of economic inequality and poverty are increasing in Papua New Guinea while services are deteriorating or absent in many parts of the country.

Such discordant development — characterised by deepening inequalities — does not arise in a vacuum (Joseph 2013). Inequality, whether economic or in terms of access to services such as education and health, is the product not only of current failed government policy, but also a consequence of the particular nature of the economy, which inevitably has its roots in colonial history and global capitalism. Increasingly, the distribution of resources is governed by political patronage rather than by policies defined by an independent public service. One example of this are the Papua New Guinea District Service Improvement grants given to politicians, who are each allocated PGK10 million a year to spend on their electorate (Howes et al. 2014). Many members of parliament leave the disbursement to the weeks prior to the next election, and then use it strategically to boost their re-election prospects (Haley and Zubrinch 2013). The material insecurity of such discordant development fuels the fear at the heart of spiritual insecurity and encourages recourse to sorcery and witchcraft as explanatory frameworks for understanding illness and death. Indeed, recourse to sorcery and witchcraft as explanations for misfortune has become routine; many Melanesians cite them as the primary explanation for illness, death and other misfortune. This means that other, wider causes and possible targets for complaint, such as poor policy implementation and declining services, tend to be overlooked. This is apparent in several of the health systems in the countries of Melanesia, which are unable to address preventable diseases, including communicable and non-communicable diseases, leading to extremely poor health outcomes for their populations.

In some instances, sorcery and witchcraft are seen as directly responsible for discordant development. For example, Lawrence Foana’ota, writing about Solomon Islands, observes that:

Delays in the implementation of a number of important projects have been attributed to the effects of sorcery and witchcraft. For instance, the Bina Harbour Development Project that was initiated 30 years ago in 1984, the Suava Bay Fisheries Project, and the Kadabina Industrial Park Project in which

the government and landowners carried out the groundbreaking ceremonies in 2011–2012, are still to be developed before they can start operating. ... People strongly believe that the delays and failures relating to these development projects and companies are caused by the effects of sorcery and witchcraft as a negative force. (Foana'ota 2015:80–1)

In discussing witchcraft in Tanzania, Maia Green also mentions that it is considered a 'routine feature of daily life and is a causal factor in all kinds of misfortune' (2005:259). For Green, the normativity of witchcraft informs expectations about post-funeral behaviour and responses to persistent sickness, legitimating recourse to diviners and ultimately transforming bad feelings into accusations of witchcraft. This, she writes,

contributes to a culture of suspicion and mistrust of kin and neighbours, in which those seeking to establish businesses or succeed in their agricultural activities feel perpetually under threat from those whom they know to be jealous and whom they believe wish them to fail. Failure is interpreted in such terms. (Green 2005:259)

Significantly, Green argues the normativity of witchcraft deflects attention away from consideration of the real causes of high rates of illness and economic crisis in the area. She suggests that poverty and endemic disease are not natural hazards in rural Tanzania but the consequences of successive policy decisions on health, agriculture and the economy (Green 2005:260). Her arguments resonate powerfully with the Melanesian case material presented here, in which entrenched beliefs in sorcery and witchcraft tend to eclipse the fact that much of the illness and death occurring in Melanesia is largely the result of the uneven development we have described above.

From Spiritual Insecurity to Material Insecurity

From a Western, rationalist perspective, sorcery and witchcraft beliefs seem fanciful and not to be taken seriously. However, such beliefs lead people to act in ways that have real and material

consequences for other human beings — sometimes with dreadful consequences. As we have explained, sorcery and witchcraft beliefs also lead people to moderate their own behaviour and sometimes to curtail activities that could improve their livelihoods. This has a damping effect on economic development and traps people in cycles of poverty and material insecurity.

More profoundly, belief in sorcery and witchcraft prompt accusations against alleged sorcerers and witches. Accusations can lead to social isolation, ostracism, and the expulsion of those accused and their families from their homes, land and livelihoods, creating severe material insecurity. This has been a problem in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, and especially Chimbu Province, with the former Catholic Bishop of Kundiawa, Bishop Henk te Maarsse, estimating that 10–15 per cent of the population were displaced because of accusations of witchcraft (Zocca 2009b:29). Many of those displaced end up residing in squatter settlements on the fringes of urban centres where everyday existence is tenuous.

Accusations can also be followed by torture and extreme violence, with many accused being severely injured or killed. For example, in Vanuatu in November 2014 two men were publicly hanged on the island of Akam after being accused of black magic by a local prayer group. Those who do manage to survive these attacks often require lengthy hospitalisation and complex surgery to rectify the terrible injuries they sustain. In many cases, such survivors are unable to engage in productive labour again, and are dependent on others for their livelihoods.

It is important to note that sorcery and witchcraft accusations have consequences even beyond torture and murder, since in some circumstances they can spiral out of control very quickly, generating large-scale intercommunity armed conflict with large numbers of casualties. Tobias Schwoerer (2013), who has carried out research on armed conflicts in Eastern Highlands Province, found that such accusations were dominant triggers for intercommunity armed violence. During his fieldwork between late 2005 and early 2007 in four different villages of the Tairora, Auyana and Fore language groups,

Schwoerer collected details of 37 cases of armed conflict that had occurred between 1975 and 2006, ranging from one-day confrontations to wars lasting several years, and from armed altercations with bows and arrows to the use of homemade or factory-made guns. Of these 37 cases, 22 (59 per cent) were said to be triggered by events connected with sorcery and sorcery accusations. Some of the conflicts were settled quickly before any serious casualties occurred, but others led to devastating wars, with 24 deaths in one war alone. Although it was difficult to establish exact casualty rates for all and each of these conflicts, he conservatively estimated that the approximate death toll from the 37 conflicts was 100 people — men, women and children. For the 22 wars triggered by sorcery accusations, he estimated a death toll of about 60.

A similar situation has been reported elsewhere in Eastern Highlands Province, with the United Nations reporting that in the Henganofi district, 25 of the 31 tribal fights during the period 2005–07 were caused by sorcery. In Kainantu district, for the same period, a total of 11 tribal fights were reported, of which seven were related to sorcery. In Unggai Bena district, all of the seven tribal fight cases from 2002 to 2006 were reported to be related to sorcery (UN OHCHR 2010:4).

Such conflicts are also reported in other parts of the highlands. In the Sugu Valley in Southern Highlands Province, an ongoing conflict between two clans that originated in allegations of sorcery following the death of the former member for the Kagua-Erave electorate, David Basua, has brought widespread destruction and many deaths. In 2013 the violence, which included the use of a hand grenade, saw 14 people (including four women and two children) killed and 600 houses and 12 permanent buildings destroyed by fire (Radio New Zealand 15/11/2013).

While the links between conflict, violence, insecurity and development are very complex, ‘there is little doubt that violence acts as a development disabler’ (Small Arms Survey 2013; see also Denney 2013:1). The Geneva Declaration report *More Violence, Less Development* found that armed violence severely compromises the skills and assets that are essential to living a productive life and shortens planning and investment horizons

(Geneva Declaration 2010:4). Further, it suggests that ‘areas experiencing comparatively high rates of conflict-related and homicidal violence tend to experience declining levels of progress in relation to human development as measured by poverty, income and the achievement of specific MDGs [millennium development goals]’ (ibid.). While violence acts as a development disabler, development also generates tension, violence and insecurity. This is especially the case where it produces inequality, since this often sees a proliferation of sorcery and witchcraft discourses, which in turn see accusations that lead to violence.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to draw explicit links between witchcraft and sorcery practices and beliefs in Melanesia and poor development outcomes. In particular, we have noted four distinct categories of impact. First, the prevalence of these beliefs and practices mean that many are unwilling to engage fully in the cash economy or to exploit their particular skills or opportunities to the maximum, so as to avoid becoming a target of an attack by a sorcerer or witch motivated by envy. Second, the prevalence of sorcery and witchcraft as explanations for misfortunes of all kinds, including lack of development, means that blame and responsibility for these factors are often avoided by the government officials and politicians who in many cases are responsible for them. Third, sorcery and witchcraft accusations and counter-accusations can lead to immediate negative development outcomes through individual acts of violence or by provoking and fuelling large-scale tribal conflicts. Such conflicts often have long-term consequences for food security and housing for individuals, families and sometimes whole villages. Fourth, the climates of distrust and suspicion imparted by sorcery and witchcraft beliefs and fears erode family and communal bonds, undermining community development projects and communal support networks in general.

Given the pervasiveness of fear and mistrust that is haunting many communities in Melanesia, one of the lessons that should be drawn from this Discussion Paper is the need for development practitioners (including governments, non-

government organisations and development organisations) to promote initiatives that seek to restore the social capital that is eroded by that fear and mistrust. The case material presented suggests that it is important for development practitioners to work, not only with communities where relations are obviously strained and where there are antagonisms and competition, but also more widely, as such fear and mistrust may not always be visible. Obviously, given the importance of Christianity in Melanesia, there is an important role for churches in building trust and establishing social capital in communities fractured by fear and mistrust. Such outside facilitators can act as a very useful catalyst in encouraging communities to reflect critically on such beliefs and practices and to search for alternative explanations for misfortune or failure in particular instances (Gibbs 2015).

Author Notes

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Endnotes

- 1 It should be noted that although Christianity counters such beliefs in some respects, some types of Christian churches and practices, in particular Pentecostal churches, reinforce such beliefs through their emphasis on Satan, evil spirits and ritual exorcism.
- 2 The current Australian development aid policy, enunciated in *Australian Aid: Promoting Prosperity, Reducing Poverty, Enhancing Stability*, continues the focus of previous governments on poverty reduction and the promotion of sustainable development. As Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop states in the preface to the new policy, the government is committed to 'reducing poverty and lifting living standards through sustainable economic growth' (DFAT 2014:iii). Poverty reduction and economic empowerment was notably enshrined in the millennium development goals and especially in MDG 1, which seeks to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
- 3 See, for example, the collections edited by Stephen (1987a), Zelenietz and Lindenbaum (1981) and Zocca (2009a).
- 4 Probably the most common type is personal leavings sorcery, in which the sorcerer uses the victim's personal exuviae (excreta, hair, fingernails etc.), or items the victim has used or touched (such as a discarded betel nut shell or the soil from a footprint). After incanting a spell, the sorcerer wraps the leavings in a parcel and disposes of this in a manner according to the desired effect (see Bowden 1987:187–8; Fortune 1963:175; Lindenbaum 1979:65–6; Patterson 1974–75: 141–2; Schwoerer 2013; Stephen 1987c:72 ; van Heerkeren 2013). Another type is assault sorcery, in which the sorcerer magically renders the victim unconscious and then magically inserts objects such as needles into the body or removes internal organs (Bowden 1987:188). Another form is projectile sorcery, which involves 'shooting' things (such as pieces of glass or wire) magically into the body of the victim (Nihill 2001; Schwoerer 2013). Other forms of sorcery considered particularly powerful use 'spirits' of either the dead or the living to attack the victim (Eves 1995). Some of the newer types of sorcery do not use any substances but work simply by uttering spells (Schwoerer 2013). Some forms of sorcery are not strictly magical but involve the actual use of poison or other toxic substances (such as battery acid or herbicide), which are put onto arrows used in conflicts or added to food, water, or other items to be consumed (Bowden 1987:186; Sillitoe 1987:123), though whether in sufficient quantities to kill is debatable.
- 5 For example, the death of Kepari Leniata in Mt Hagen in February 2013. This young woman, who had been accused of a killing a child through witchcraft, was set upon by a group of vigilantes who burnt her alive before hundreds of onlookers. This shocking incident reverberated around the world, facilitated by the photographs some onlookers uploaded to the internet. Following the outcry over this, the police arrested dozens of people but none has been successfully prosecuted as yet.
- 6 The large literature on witchcraft in the context of modernity includes Ceikawy (1998); Fisiy and Geschiere (2001); Geschiere (1997); Green (2005); Kiernan (2006); Moore and Sanders (2001a, 2001b); Niehaus et al. (2001); Nyamnjoh (2001); Parish (2000); Rutherford (1999); Sanders (2003) and Smith (2005, 2008).
- 7 Eves has been researching in Papua New Guinea since 1990, while Forsyth has been researching in Vanuatu since 2001.

- 8 Given the severe impact of witchcraft on development, Leistner finds it remarkable that the subject is totally ignored in the abundant literature on African development — citing as remiss numerous World Bank studies (2014:70).
- 9 Development practitioners seeking to move beyond the narrow definition of insecurity in security studies recognise that insecurity can take many forms that affect human development in profound ways. For example, the 1994 UNDP *Human Development Report* promoted a human-centred understanding of security, seeing it as a freedom from fear and want:

The concept of human security stresses that people should be able to take care of themselves: all people should have the opportunity to meet their most essential needs and to earn their own living. This will set them free and help ensure that they can make a full contribution to their own development and that of their communities, their countries and the world. Human security is a critical ingredient of participatory development. (UNDP 1994: 24)

This view was also embraced by the World Bank's 2011 *Human Development Report: Conflict, Security and Development*, which says that human security encompasses 'freedom from fear, freedom from want and freedom to live in dignity. By putting the security and prosperity of human beings at the center, human security addresses [a] wide range of threats, both from poverty and from violence, and their interactions' (World Bank 2011:41, 45). There is now considerable discussion on what some call the 'security–development nexus' (see Chandler 2007; Denney 2013:2; McCormack 2011; Reid-Henry 2011; Stepputat 2012; Stern and Öjendal 2011).

- 10 Some critical attention is being paid to the lack of analysis of fear in the development literature. Most recently, Rebecca Clouser argues that discussions of the nuances and implications of the interrelations between fear and development at the local level are often limited (2014:131; see also Geneva Declaration 2010:8).
- 11 The concept of social capital became popular among development practitioners following the publication of Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work* in the early 1990s (Harriss and De Renzio 1997:920). The focus of Putnam's work was on civil engagement and the factors that generated this, but it has wider significance since he viewed civic engagement as producing social capital — the kinds of social organisation, including networks, norms and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (ibid.). Harriss and De Renzio suggest that Putnam's argument struck a responsive chord in the development community as a consequence of the focus on the problems of governance and the role of civil society (ibid.).
- 12 Although it is not couched in the language of social capital, the Report for a White Paper on Australia's Aid Program noted the importance of social cohesion, when it stated: 'Social stability is one of the most important preconditions for sustained growth and poverty reduction' (Duncan et al. 2005:7).
- 13 Some writers use the term 'perverse' social capital to refer to those networks based on the use of force, violence and/or illegal activities, such as criminal gangs (McIlwaine and Moser 2001:968).
- 14 Some scholars are highly critical of the tendency to view Melanesian societies as characterised by gift exchange, in opposition to Western societies as characterised by commodity exchange (see Carrier 1992; Gregory 1982). Carrier, for example, argues that this essentialises Melanesian societies and he says that the Ponam islanders he researched engaged in both commodity and gift exchange (1992:185).
- 15 This has been characterised by Annette Weiner as the 'paradox of keeping-while-giving' (1992).

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