

SCHOLARS' DAY
REVIEW

VOLUME 3

Papua New Guinea Ignited: Witch Burnings in the Western Highlands

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ABSTRACT

Accounts and reports on the practice of witch burnings in contemporary Papua New Guinea society will be examined and analyzed. Research concerning these deadly witch hunts, particularly in Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea, show that not only women, as a traditionally targeted population, but also children are vulnerable of being accused of sorcery against their people. Such incidents occur not only in the remote tribal areas, but also in the populous towns and cities such as Mount Hagen. Mainstream media has generally overlooked these occurrences, but the public has a right to know that such atrocities are occurring in Papua New Guinea today. Witch burnings are sometimes done in the name of religious beliefs, but many times the burnings happen at the mere implication of practicing witchcraft done by others with ulterior motives, such as seeking personal gain or revenge. Bringing awareness of these tragic happenings can influence much needed change concerning these acts of violence and human right abuses.

MLA Citation

Pfaff, Jennifer. "Papua New Guinea Ignited: Witch Burnings in the Western Highlands." *Scholars' Day Review* 3 (2015): 1-7. Web. Date of access

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On February 5, 2013, a 6-year-old boy succumbed to illness and passed away. His family was convinced a witch had used sorcery against him and caused his death. At 7am Wednesday, February 6th, the family went to their neighbor, Kepari Leniata, and dragged the 20-year-old mother of two from her hut, then stripped her naked and tortured her with white-hot iron rods, fusing her genitals (Morgan, 2013). Afterwards she was dragged to the local garbage dump and doused in gasoline and set on fire. A fire truck had been called to the scene but the crowd that had gathered would not let them through.

In 2009, the body of a girl in her late teens was found in a garbage dump outside the city of Mount Hagan. She had been gagged, tied to a stake, and burned, accused of sorcery (Ahmed, 2009). In spring of 2013, two elderly women were saved by police from being burned at the stake near Kagamuga Airport. A “glassman,” a man who uses his sorcery to find people who use sorcery to work evil, had accused the two women of causing the rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl (news.com.au, 2013). Later that same year, in October, a woman who had been accused of being a witch was tortured with hot rods, stabbed in the chest, and had her left ear cut off. Fortunately for her, she was rescued by police before a mob could set her on fire (Shears, 2013).

The Merep villagers in the Nipa district burned seven people accused of sorcery, as part of an Easter sacrifice. One man escaped but had to leave behind his wives. Komape Lap, one of the accused, stated, “I am seeking justice and protection for my life including others who are alleged to practice sorcery, as our lives are in great danger. Without proof or evidence, we were suspected, tortured and many lives were lost.” His family was targeted before; in 2012 his first wife and daughter were tortured and killed. “Our relatives could not defend us for fear of their lives” he said (Pacific Island News Association, 2013).

Sorcery in Papua New Guinea Society

When people think of witch burnings, usually they imagine the burnings in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, but witch hunts and burnings are not restricted to North American or European histories. Worldwide there are people still being persecuted for practicing sorcery. Most cases are from Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, and Papua New Guinea. There are over six million people in Papua New Guinea belonging to over 700 tribes in rural areas where sorcery is prominent, but there are also cases of witch persecutions occurring in urban areas as well (CIA, 2014; Ridgell, 1995).

The definition of sorcery is ambiguous in Papua New Guinea. With over 832 distinct languages there are many terms and classifications of witchcraft, magic, and sorcery (Kohen, 2006). The most common labels used tend to be the Simbu words “kumo” and “sanguma,” both broader terms for sorcery with malicious intent, but the English *sorcery* serves as a general term to cover all classifications. The people of Papua New Guinea believe sorcery can be used for good or evil purposes and seek out help or blessings from practitioners of the benign magic.

The Sorcery Act of 1971 defines evil and innocent sorcery and gives guidelines for the proof needed for accusations (Office of Legislative Counsel, 1971). The Legislative Counsel realized that much of the magic practiced would not need to be brought to court, but the counsel would have to intervene on occasion. Government officials stated, “some kinds of sorcery are practiced not for evil purposes but for innocent ones and it may not be necessary for the law to interfere with them, and so it is necessary for the law to distinguish between evil sorcery and innocent sorcery” (Office of Legislative Counsel, 1971). In this act of law the government also realized that there might be abuse of accusations and included in the preamble, “there is a danger that any law that deals fully with sorcery may encourage some evil-intentioned people to make baseless or merely spiteful or malicious accusations that their enemies are sorcerers

solely to get them into trouble with other people, and this is a thing that the law should prevent" (Office of Legislative Counsel, 1971). Reading further in the act, one finds guidelines regarding procedure and for providing evidence when accusing a witch, modeling the "innocent until proven guilty" format. The majority of urban areas in Papua New Guinea may not take part in these customs anymore, but it is accepted, even in their legislature as a part of their society. Even though there is social acceptance of sorcery, the general public reaction to the practicing of magic has turned to one of extreme negativity with violent ends in the last decade. [source needed]

Undeniably, there are many human rights problems in Papua New Guinea besides the witch-hunts and burnings, but that doesn't mean they are entirely separate issues. Associate Professor Evangelia Papoutsaki, from Papua New Guinea University of Technology in the Morobe Province, says the country's problem is not sorcery, but gender inequality. She stated that "witchcraft and sorcery is not a problem really, because in the past that was a role you would have in the society" (Dahlström, 2014). Dr. Papoutsaki says, "sorcery has long been a part of this nation's culture, and although the practice of sorcery has not always been linked with bad or evil events, it has always been used to account for unexplained or mysterious events" (Lynch, 2015). Alicia Lynch, a journalist for Seeds Theatre, stated that witch-hunts are a selective practice done with customary law and authorized by the community's elders, which has become distorted and has spiraled out of control. Lynch asserts this is not only due to gender inequality but also from the effects of the country's colonial history, as well as "the rapid economic growth, which created marked social and economic divisions and tensions within Papua New Guinea's neighborhoods and sub-regions" (Lynch, 2015).

Factors Leading to the Recent Violent Surges

These malevolent occurrences have caught the attention of activists and researchers, who are trying to pinpoint the cause of this escalation of violence, but they seem to disagree on the reasons. The Human Rights Watch global organization's 2013 report stresses that human rights conditions in Papua New Guinea remained poor, but the economic development was strong (Human

Rights Watch, 2014). In fact, economic growth has increased in the past decade, after it nearly reached a state of bankruptcy in 2001, while the US dollar per capita income has risen by 150% and is projected to increase further (Batten, 2012). Additionally, the island has profited from its natural resources, mining gold, platinum, copper, and producing petroleum and palm oil (Simoes, n.d.). However, this rapid economic growth hasn't helped the population. Less than 5% of the population are currently able to earn a wage. Villages that host mining operations face unrest as their leaders have low financial literacy and residents disagree with the distribution of mining royalty payments (Batten, 2012). Many believe this unrest is what has fueled the increase in violence in Papua New Guinea. Helen Hakena of the North Bougainville Human Rights Committee in the Rumbali area stated, "people are so jealous of those who are doing well in life, they resort to what our people believe in, sorcery, to kill them, to stop them continuing their own development" (Mintz, 2013).

Residents of the neighboring Vanuatu and Solomon Islands believe in sorcery as well, but neither suffer the violence ravaging Papua New Guinea. However, they haven't had the same economic surge. Hakena believes the accusation against Helen Rumbali, one of the victims in 2013 that spurred media coverage and grass root campaigns against witch hunts, was just an excuse to hurt the family out of jealousy (Mintz, 2013). Rumbali's husband and son both worked for the government and owned a "permanent house" constructed of wood. This is an uncommon possession in rural Papua New Guinea and could have incited envy in their village. Miranda Forsyth, a lawyer at Australian National University has been studying the issue and also believes most attacks are based on jealousy (McGuirk, 2013). Forsyth acknowledged that there is genuine belief in some of the cases, but argues that recent cases in Papua New Guinea don't show a genuine belief in sorcery, but instead are a pretext under which the wealthy can be attacked by poorer neighbors. Kate Scheutze, from Amnesty International, stated, "there is always a reason for the accusation, whether it's jealousy, wanting to access someone else's land, a personal grudge against that person, or a previous land dispute" (McGuirk, 2013).

Scheutze believes it's more than just jealousy or a grudge, arguing, "it is an excuse to perpetuate violence against women," and "if there is an accusation of sorcery,

people are less likely to challenge it than if a woman is abused for other reasons” (MacLean, 2014).

Anthropologist Richard Eves, with the Australian National University, has been researching witchcraft-related violence, and explains that “the cultural belief system about illness, death, and misfortune predisposes people to look for scapegoats for who are responsible [for causing it]” (Neubauer, 2013). Traditional Papua New Guinean beliefs entail that evil spirits reside in the womb, making it seem like women are predisposed to witchcraft. An evil spirit can be passed to children from their time in the womb, and so there have been many cases of children being accused of sorcery. Eves has heard of children as young as four years old as being accused. He feels that better trained and armed police could help, along with standardizing sanctions that discourage accusations, and he reminded reporters that not all of Papua New Guinea’s tribal cultures act so violently (Neubauer, 2013).

Seeds Theatre Group Inc. started a campaign in 2014 called “Women Not Witches” to help reduce the number of witch burnings and other sorcery-related crimes. They did this by having theatrical groups travel to different villages and communities to educate the people on natural causes of death and misfortune. The project also educates boys and young men on human rights (Seeds Theatre Group Inc., 2014). Another group, Highland Women Human Rights Defenders Movement, or HWHRDM, has focused on working in seven Highland provinces to help stem violence against women in tribal warfare, and also to eliminate irrational violence against women. The HWHRDM faces many difficulties in their work, specifying on their website the “ineffective practices of security or support from law enforcement bodies,” and that a large proportion of the youth are addicted to drugs and home brewed alcohol. Another challenge they face is an “increase in lawlessness and conflict associated with rapidly emerging larger patterns of development” (Highland Women Human Rights Defenders Movement, 2013a).

Ruth Kissam, a youth coordinator for the Western Highlands provincial government, also believes many persecutions stem from bored youth, asserting, “... [they] don't have much to do. [and are] probably . . . looking for acceptance within the society or probably they are under the influence of some substances” (MacLean, 2014). Their boredom has led to a change of habits and customs

in their villages. Kissam stresses that “the worst thing is that witchcraft accusations are spreading also in villages where people never believed in the existence of witches, but they are now becoming some of the worst perpetrators throughout the country” (Laccino, 2015). In an interview on Radio Australia, a Lutheran missionary, Anton Lutz, who lives in the eastern part of the Enga province, where there have been no local traditional beliefs about witchcraft, has acknowledged that they are seeing the villager’s views on sorcery change. He told the radio that it is “because of the movement of people ... [and] those who have never believed in these kinds of things before are now hearing these stories and believing in them” (ABCNews, 2014). Dr. Papoutsaki believes this spread is from an increase in conversion to Catholicism among the population. She argues that the Catholic Church promotes the idea that women need to feel shame about their bodies, and this mindset has evolved into traditional Papua New Guinea societies viewing women as objects of shame.

Responses and Action Taken

Recently, the Catholic Church has condemned sorcery-related violence and witch burnings. Father Franco Zocca has stated that only science and education could help with the violence. Similarly, the Catholic Bishop of the Wabag village in the Enga Province, Arnold Orowae, has launched a campaign against persecution of witches. He has threatened excommunication of any Catholics that assist in witch hunts. He stated, “the unethical and unlawful killing of women alleged to be witches must and will be stopped” (Williams, 2014). According to Rueben Mete, the national youth director of his church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea is also taking a stand against individuals who are killing people accused of practicing witchcraft (Williams, 2014). Even so, Dr Papoutsaki feels the church isn’t pursuing the real issues. She asserts, “it’s nonsense that the Catholic Church declares war on witchcraft and sorcery. They should fight for equal treatment for women and [for] gender equality . . . they shouldn’t attack the end result. The issue is not witchcraft, they are approaching it from the wrong perspective” (Dahlström, 2014).

Human rights advocates and foreign governments had been pressuring the Papua New Guinea legislature to

take action and repeal their Sorcery Act. Two months after reintroducing the death penalty, the Papua New Guinea government annulled its 1971 Sorcery Act. Rescinding the act has made the act of killing alleged sorcerers murder, making attackers liable for capital punishment (MacLean, 2014). The revoking of the Sorcery Act has been met with mixed reactions by the people of Papua New Guinea. Villagers who fear sorcery feel betrayed by the government. Anthropologist Dr. Eves says that, "there is a widespread view that the government is not doing enough to protect [communities] from witches and sorcerers. [In] revoking the sorcery act, the government is seen as supporting witches and sorcerers" (MacLean, 2014).

Many human rights organizations have applauded the repeal of the Sorcery Act, however many of these groups feel that it isn't enough to make innocent people feel safe from false accusations. The Highland Women Human Rights Defender Movement is lobbying the government to establish a National Human Rights Commission (Highland Women Human Rights Defender Movement, 2013b). The Seeds Theatre group's campaign, Women Not Witches, has documented reports of saving lives since its start in January 2015. On April 3rd, 2015, the group reported that after Gabriel Bak attended a workshop in Mount Hagen he found a group of boys torturing a young woman by a graveyard. Mr. Bak called upon a fellow attendee, Paul Petrus of the Seeds Theatre workshop, and sent for police to help him save the woman, Josephine Titus. Mr. Petrus recalled, "after the training we'd had with Seeds Theatre Group, [Mr. Bak] warned [the youths] if they burned the woman alive they would be in trouble; he said he'd go and get the police and take the woman to the hospital" (Allison, 2015). Mr. Petrus also announced he would like to set up a Rapid Response Group to help save other women accused of witchcraft (Allison, 2015). The Stop Sorcery Violence organization publishes and reports news of people in Papua New Guinea who take a stand against sorcery accusations or provide assistance to victims and survivors (Stop Sorcery Violence, 2015). They release the stories on social media websites like Facebook and Twitter, bringing attention to cases where people have been saved. Hopefully, these are the stories and cases that will continue to make headlines instead of those telling of innocent teenagers, elderly women, or young women like

Kepari Leniata, who was accused, tortured, and then burned alive.

Discussion

The practice of witchcraft is not what should be fought; accusations stemming from jealousy, shame, fear, or anger are the real problem. It will take time and effort to change Papua New Guinea's new violent mentality. More education about how illness and disasters develop from nature and not ill intent may help. The Stop Sorcery Violence organization needs to continue their reporting on local heroes saving lives to show local citizens that it's okay to stand up against mob mentality and violence. The local police need to be confident in their authority and defend citizens who are being accused and sentenced outside of the legal system. The government tried to stop random accusations with laws, but they aren't enforcing them. Communities need to find constructive ways to entertain bored youths. Villagers need to stop ignoring the problem before it's too late. Ultimately, the goal is to have women in the Western Highlands not live in fear of becoming the next Kepari Leniata.

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