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ROBERT GORDON

*The Decline of the Kiapdom and the Re-  
surgence of 'Tribal Fighting' in Enga.* 205

\* ALASTAIR I. McINTOSH

*Sorcery and its Social Effects Amongst  
the Elema of Papua New Guinea.* - 224

VANDA MORAES-GORECKI

*Notes on the Ownership and Utilization of  
Sago, and on Social Change, among the  
Moveave-Toaripi of the Papuan Gulf.* 233

TOM DYE

*Fish and Fishing on Niuatoputapu.* - 242

ROSS CORDY

*Social Stratification in the Mariana  
Islands.* - - - - - 272

SHARON W. TIFFANY

*Customary Land Disputes, Courts, and  
African Models in the Solomon Islands.* 277

LISETTE JOSEPHIDES

*Equal but Different? The Ontology of  
Gender among Kewa.* - - - - 291

REVIEWS - - - - - 308

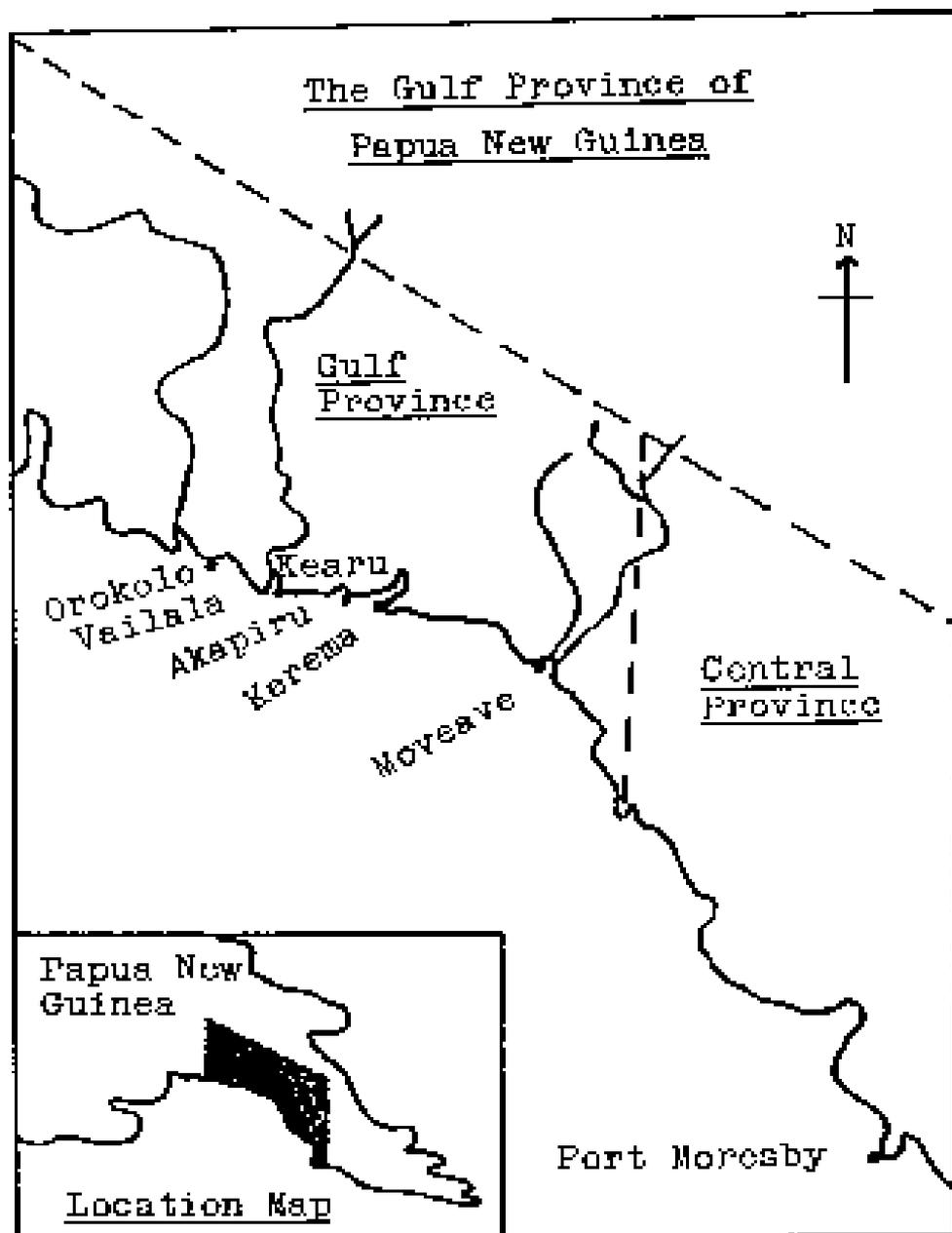
(For contents see inside back cover)

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED - - 314

Information for Authors - - - 316

**Supplementary Illustrations:**

This map and the photos were not published in the Oceania article, but they show the location, and pictures of a) me with Hearo and he with his marupai, bone arrow and poison bag, b) Hearo with Kopi and another boy, and c) a close-up of one of the marupai.





## **Sorcery and its Social Effects Amongst the Elema of Papua New Guinea** **Alastair I. McIntosh\***

### **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

Throughout 1978 and 1979 I worked as a volunteer teacher and deputy-headmaster of an experimental vocational secondary school in the relatively undeveloped Gulf Province of Papua New Guinea. In this time it became abundantly clear, as a result of day-to-day happenings and discussions with the people, that fear of sorcery still constitutes a barrier to development at the village level. This may be even more formidable than such impediments as disease and the lack of skilled manpower.

As with many cultural groups in Papua New Guinea, the 'Elema' or 'Keremas' as the coastal people of the Gulf Province are known have, for the past century or so, led a way of life marked by a gradual encroachment of European cultural characteristics on the traditional way of life. It is therefore difficult to describe present social, economic and religious structures in brief since traditional and modern aspects are frequently intertwined. As an example, in the same village one man might adhere to a traditional belief that his first ancestors were formed by a cone shell (male) and a cowrie shell (female) developing anthropomorphic characteristics by magic. Another might claim that we are all descendants of Adam and Eve, while a third, influenced by education, might pursue a Darwinian viewpoint.

Villages normally consist of a number of patrilines, but while clan loyalty is often strong the clan will not necessarily live together. Often it will be scattered between a number of villages which will usually lie within about half a day's walking distance of one another. As Williams (1940) has pointed out, the Elema have traditionally been a remarkably democratic people in that most important decisions are taken communally by both men and women. Although certain older men in the villages may be referred to as big men or leaders, this is normally more because of their acknowledged skills in hunting, sorcery, procreation and so on than in the New Guinea highlands context of building up wealth and being in a position to exercise power over others.

The typical village economy is based on subsistence agriculture, sago making, fishing and some hunting. Different types of work may be divided between men and women as with sago making where the palm is cut down by the men but pulped by the women. Imported foods such as rice and tinned mackerel are immensely popular to the extent that villagers often sell their home produce at market only to spend the proceeds on packaged foods at the trade store. While this is mainly due to the ease of storing such produce in a hot climate, taste and the status associated with European food also play a role.

Claims to land ownership are based usually on the grounds of traditional usage, but legend may be invoked to press a claim in cases of dispute.<sup>1</sup> The government assumes ownership over unclaimed land and

\* Edinburgh, Scotland.

<sup>1</sup> For example, Hearo of Akapiru (see below) told me that a disputed piece of land near Kerema known as 'The Bluff' is the property of his clan because an ancestor had won it for them long ago. At one time the Bluff had been the abode of an evil, cannibal woman who had a wicked, ugly daughter and a good, beautiful daughter. The ancestor in question bravely killed the old woman and the ugly daughter then married the beautiful daughter. She gave the Bluff to the clan as a sign of her gratitude and happiness.

through the Lands Tribunal it intermediates in all land transactions. Disputes frequently arise, particularly with regard to compensation claims for road-building.

The traditional religion, if that is the right word for it, has been based on showing respect towards the departed spirits of the clan's ancestors as well as to totems such as crocodiles, fish and birds. As one man put it to me, 'If you want to go hunting you call the names of your ancestors who were great hunters to ask for the power which will bring success'. The same also applies to other aspects of life. I found it difficult to make closer inquiries than this because most of those with whom I was in contact considered themselves to be Christians. In practice, however, many operated a dual system of belief which in some respects was encouraged by the churches on the basis that the best aspects of traditional religion lead in the direction of Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

*Puripuri*, as magic is known, is closely associated with traditional religious beliefs. Sometimes it may be used for benign purposes such as making rain or healing but, for the most part, it comprises sorcery which is practised mainly for the purpose of harming adversaries. Writing about the West Elema (with whom we are primarily concerned in this paper), Williams (1940:107-8) has commented:

Belief in, and fear of, sorcery seems to vary somewhat in intensity among different Papuan societies. But it might be difficult to find a place where they were more deeply ingrained than in the villages of Orokolo Bay. . . . It may be safely said that every death is attributed to sorcery by someone or other, and this being the case the relatives of the deceased are deeply concerned to discover who was responsible so that they may pay him back in his own coin.

Although men allege that women may use certain types of magic particularly in trying to attract the affection of men (perhaps a masculine interpretation of love being magic?), the role of sorcerer amongst the Elema is a male one. However, it is not confined to any particular group of men within the village. As far as I could ascertain anyone wishing to learn, and perhaps pay for the privilege, could do so from an adept sorcerer provided he knew one willing to teach him. From frequently listening to my students and others talk about sorcery I came to assume that a sorcerer would not normally attack somebody from within his own clan or even the village if it is a fairly compact one, but whether or not this is always true is a matter I failed to examine fully. Another area I failed to investigate properly was the precise nature of the 'magic words' used in casting magic. I was told that these involved calling on the names of the clan's ancestors and sometimes the spirits of dead sorcery victims to give of their magical power, but I cannot say whether or not such incantations took the form of a set pattern of words as with a spell.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> An example of this may be seen in the form of a mural in the Catholic cathedral of Kerema. Here a traditional portrayal of the first male and female ancestors draws out the similarity between the Judaeo-Christian and one particular indigenous creation myth. Alongside it Christ on the cross is depicted as a Melanesian. In a similar spirit the Protestant United Church organizes traditional (totemic) dancing at their annual gathering in the Gulf.

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to the Editor for having advised me of the importance of these and other matters, but I regret that not being trained in anthropology I have to offer this report in the knowledge that it has some deficiencies from a professional perspective.

### THE FEAR OF SORCERY IN CONTEMPORARY ELEMA SOCIETY

Many young people have complained to me that they are afraid to better their way of life while remaining within the Gulf Province. To do so might cause jealousies to be stirred, and sorcery to be used against them or their kin. Primary school teachers have told me of villages in the Purari delta area (West of Orokolo) which are virtually devoid of their youthful population. This is because sorcery fears are a prime factor precipitating a drift of people towards the cities. Although I am qualified to speak only of the Gulf Province, a similar problem evidently exists elsewhere in the country, as is demonstrated by Ramat Mumus of Wewak who states, ' . . . you ask any East Sepik labourer or any Sepik UPNG or Unitech graduate living in other provinces and they will agree that sorcery is one prime factor which makes it impossible for them to introduce these reforms in their villages' (*Fear of sorcery hampers reform*, letter in *The Post-Courier* newspaper, circa March 1979).

Around Kerema Bay, perhaps the best known anecdote which discourages young people from making a material success of their lives, is that about Papua New Guinea's international boxing champion, James Hila. Amongst others who have told me about James is his brother, Koivi, who was one of my grade eight students. The story is simply that James made too great a success of his career for the liking of an old sorcerer in his home village of Harona. When he came home for a holiday, together with his manager, Australian girlfriend, and ample money, magic was made and within a week he wasted away and died. A memorial now stands to him in Meii Village.

Schools are by no means exempt from the fear which belief in sorcery induces. Early in 1979 one of our students died from what the hospital took to be pneumonia with complications. As most death is attributed to sorcery, so was Mainoi's, and we permanently lost around twenty students because of the hysteria which resulted.

In the next and main section of this paper, I describe some of the practices in which sorcerers claim to engage to show why sorcery is regarded with such awe. To the best of my knowledge F. E. Williams, anthropologist to the then Australian Administration, is the only person to have carried out a significant amount of work on the Western Elema. Although he was especially interested in beliefs about magic, he seldom goes into such specific detail as I present below.

#### HEARO, THE SORCERER OF AKAPIRU

Most sorcerers are secretive about their profession, partly because it is illegal to practise it in Papua New Guinea, but primarily because they fear attacks from rival sorcerers. As a result, it was not until I had lived with the Elema for eighteen months that one of my brightest students, Kopi Heroe, told me that his grandfather was a sorcerer and might be persuaded to tell me about his abilities.

As it happened I had known the man, Hearo, for quite a long time, but previously only in his capacity as a big man of Akapiru Village in the Kearu region (the stretch of coast West of Kerema bay to the Vailala river). As a young man, he had served for some years in the Papua New Guinea Constabulary. Now, he follows a normal rural life as a subsistence farmer, hunter, and fisherman. He is an enterprising man, having recently opened a village trade store from which to retail basic products such as rice, kerosene, and alcohol, should he be granted a licence for the latter.

At first, Hearo was very reluctant to tell me anything about sorcery. He thought I probably wanted to kill somebody, in which case I should first pay a fee of K50, or perhaps K150 (£30/£100, \$A78/\$A195) in return for his knowledge. As his knowledge came from the ancestors who preceded him, the money would be offered to them by hanging it overnight on a line strung between the coconut palms outside his house. Only after this gesture had been made would he take it for himself the next morning.

Fortunately, by showing him some previous publications bearing my name I was able to impress him that my interest was wholly academic. Although unable to read or to speak very much English, he was excited by the prospect of getting his name into print and being talked about by 'Scottish university people', as he put it. He therefore kindly agreed to waive any fee, though I did make a point of taking him a can of meat each time I visited him thereafter.

In a series of three interviews which followed with Kopi translating as was necessary most of the time, Hearo confirmed in detail much of what I had learned previously about sorcery from second-hand sources. However, in addition to learning about what sorcerers did, he felt it would also be a good idea for me to know some of the history of it and his people. In this context, there were a great many different legends he could tell me, but as time was short he would limit himself to the most important one which tells how his people came to live as they do now and why it is that they learned to use sorcery.

Hearo's term, 'my people', seemed to refer to the Western Elema as a whole rather than to individual clans within it. His tale of their origin would seem to owe much to the biblical Tower of Babylon story and it is not a legend I have heard from anybody else. It goes that at one time all the people in Papua New Guinea lived at a place called Pawpaw, close to Muru in the Vailala area. Even the mountain Kamea (Kuku-kuku) lived there. Everybody was happy and lived in perfect peace. Mutual understanding was assured since they all shared a common language. Nobody ever died in these days and, since heaven was much lower then than it is now, people could change their brains and see into it by 'going mental'.

On looking into heaven — the place where Jesus came from when he descended to make Adam and Eve — people could see spirit beings who had white skins and wings. They were like angels. This is the reason why, in 1908 when Captain Moresby and Captain Cook sailed to Papua New Guinea in a small canoe, the people thought they were spiritual beings from heaven.

Around the time when the first Europeans came the old order started to break up. The people at Pawpaw had embarked upon a project intended to bring them even closer to God in heaven. This was to be achieved by building a great, tall house to reach the sky. Now, that got God worried. He did not want all the people to join him and he realized that with heaven being so low their task would soon be completed unless he stopped them.

God's solution was to give people working on different levels of the house separate languages. When the ones below heard those higher up speaking in a foreign tongue they thought 'bad words' (swearing, etc.) were being spoken about them. Arguments therefore started, and the

end result was that the peoples of Papua New Guinea divided up into many warring groups, each with their own language.

In olden days, when everybody lived in harmony, there had never been any need for sorcery, but now that things had changed, so sorcery emerged. It happened in 1902 at the village of Vailala East. There a man called Ipavu, who had a reputation for causing trouble, decided to try and acquire the wife of Iko, a good man. Ipavu achieved his aim by making magic to kill Iko. This was the first time sorcery had ever been used and because of this, whenever it is practised today the names of these two ancestors, Ipavu and Iko, should be remembered above all others whose power might be called upon.<sup>4</sup>

Hearo claimed that by using sorcery he could either cure people, or sicken them to the point of death. Curing is effected by calling the names of powerful ancestors, while spitting the chewed-up spicy-tasting bark of a particular tree over the patient's body.

Killing is a far more complex procedure, as it involves the aid of a familiar spirit of a deceased person to which Hearo referred as his 'friend'. A sorcerer may possess several such 'friends'. One way of capturing the power of a person's spirit is to give a funeral feast for somebody who has recently been killed by sorcery. This method can also be used if a sorcerer wishes to transfer a 'friend' to another person: whoever provides for the feast gains the power that the spirit has at its disposal.

More gruesome, a spirit can also be captured by means of a cannibalistic ritual. Usually two or three sorcerers work together and dig up a recently buried corpse from the village graveyard. One serves as the 'doctor sorcerer' and carves flesh from various parts of the body. This is mixed with pork, cooked and eaten. It should be chewed very slowly and cautiously, since the power of the spirit whose body is being consumed would work against the sorcerer and make him seriously ill if he bit his own tongue or cheek during the ritual.<sup>5</sup> After the ceremony this same power will alternate day about with each of the sorcerers who participated; that is to say, the spirit which formerly resided in the corpse concerned is now a captive of the sorcerers and must henceforth serve as a spirit 'friend' whose power the sorcerers can call on when making magic. If, as an example, three sorcerers had partaken of the flesh, Hearo would know that this particular spirit would be at his disposal on every third day: for the other two days it would be with each of the other sorcerers respectively.

Given that a rostering system such as this may apply to certain spirits, it becomes clear why a powerful sorcerer such as Hearo feels the need

<sup>4</sup> The names, Ipavu and Iko, are common amongst the West Elema today. However, nobody else has told me of any link between them and sorcery.

Certain elements of this story may have their origin in the Vailala Madness (see Williams 1976), particularly the mention of Vailala East, the dates given, and the description of how people used to 'see into heaven' by 'going mental'. Williams believed that the Madness was probably an attempt to adapt to the European culture being introduced by missionaries, traders and oil prospectors. This too could be linked with Hearo's notion of the old social order being destroyed.

As he is about fifty, Hearo is not old enough to have remembered the Vailala Madness, but he may have heard much about it.

<sup>5</sup> Here one might suggest that the 'power' takes the form of pathogenic organisms finding an easy means of entry into the bloodstream.

It should be emphasized that the vast majority of Papua New Guineans, including the Elema, would be sickened and repulsed at the thought of such practices.

to have several 'friends' at his command. Furthermore, I have little doubt that without the aid of a calendar most sorcerers would quickly lose track of which friend was with whom on what day, so by having several the law of averages should ensure that there is always at least one friend available.

Just what happens to a friend's spirit when not actually being called on by one sorcerer or another was unclear. At one time Hearo said that during the cannibal ritual, magic is made to banish it permanently to 'the place where Satan lives'. On another occasion he said it would go to the place where Adam and Eve's spirits now abide. When I asked him to be more specific, he replied that since we cannot see the place where spirits live we cannot say what it is like.

Central to the power of sorcerers West of Kerema Bay is a divinatory tool called the *marupai*. It is a small, stunted coconut shell, polished black, but with grooves carved out and whitened with lime to resemble a pig's head. Hearo showed me his two *marupai* and explained that when charged with 'power' they become living entities which fly around during the night. Information concerning events in other villages, people's personal secrets, impending deaths and the activities of rival sorcerers is thus conveyed to him by the *marupai* through dreams or omens. For example, the *marupai* may cause a firefly to behave in a particular manner which Hearo would know how to interpret in a meaningful way. As it moves through the bush, invisible to its owner, it may even 'speak' directly to him, either with a low, whistling tone, or with a clicking sound similar to that made by a gecko. The *marupai* is bestowed with 'power' by placing flesh in its 'mouth': the opening from which the original coconut would have sprouted. Some sorcerers, he said, use animal or bird flesh for this, but human flesh taken during the ritual described above may also be used, especially parts taken from the clitoris or penis. Sometimes too, selected varieties of bark and leaves are mixed with the flesh.<sup>6</sup>

Before setting off to kill somebody, the sorcerer must make himself invisible. This is done by taking sand from a grave, sewing it up in a cloth while reciting 'magic words', then holding it in front of himself as he walks along the beach to find the victim. He takes his two *marupai* with him to warn of any danger. The most important piece of equipment, however, is what Hearo calls his 'bone arrow'. This is a bone taken from the upper arm or thigh of a deceased sorcerer. Hearo's 'bone arrow' is about fifteen centimetres long. As with his *marupai*, he keeps it dusted with lime to bring out the zig-zag patterns carved into it.

As soon as the victim is sighted, the sorcerer makes him *longlong* (mad) by uttering more magic. Then, with a casting motion, he points at him with the bone arrow. The bone itself emits no power: rather, the purpose of this action is so that the sorcerer's spirit friend may clearly see who it is intended to kill. The friend then sets to work using its power to sicken the victim. The effect of this on the victim, as Kopi translated it, is that, 'The next morning you will hear that person crying in his house. By the end of the day he will be dead'.

Ever since my initial interview with him, Hearo had promised that at some suitable time he would dress up to show me what he looked like

<sup>6</sup> Beliefs concerning out-of-the-body experiences are notably less pronounced amongst the Western Elema, who use the *marupai*, than in districts towards the South-East of the country. I would suggest that this might be because the *marupai* performs functions similar to those for which out-of-the-body experiences are said to be needed elsewhere (McIntosh 1980).

when going out to kill. Several times Kopi and I walked the two miles up the beach from our school to his village, but to our disappointment each time he had some reason for not doing it. On one occasion he felt unwell and feared that the power associated with his sorcery tools might make him worse if he took them out. Another time he had visitors staying whom he did not wish to frighten. However, one day shortly before I was due to finish my time working at the school, he agreed that conditions were right. My wife had been conducting her regular Saturday morning clinic in the village. Once it was finished, Hearo went into his house to change into his 'sorcery outfit'. We expected him to emerge dressed as he might be for a traditional dance. Instead, to our surprise, he came out just as he had gone in, except that he had donned a wrist watch (a status symbol), changed his shorts for a better pair, and attired himself with the sorcery equipment which he had previously shown me. Tied to each elbow was a *marupai*. He held the 'bone arrow' in his hand, while round his neck was his bag of poisons, the use of which is described below.

Hearo claims to have killed some ten people in his lifetime. Generally he uses the 'bone arrow' procedure, but he mentioned several other methods which sorcerers have at their disposal — all of which, unlike the bone arrow technique, I have heard described by my school students. Some sorcerers, he said, are adept at operating on people and closing them up again without their knowledge, and without leaving scars. In this way they can kill by removing internal organs, implanting deadly leaves, or inserting a sharp slither of bamboo amongst the intestines so that it gradually causes them damage (cf. Fortune 1932, apropos *vada* surgery).

Hearo, however, said that he was not able to perform this kind of magic. His own preferred method of killing if not using the bone arrow was to take sand from a footprint, some hair, or some other item associated with the victim and mix it with poisonous plants such as those he had in the bag around his neck. While reciting appropriate magic in which he calls on the power of his ancestors, he places the mixture inside a length of bamboo and puts it on a slow fire. As it 'cooks', so the victim sickens and dies.

A more tangible technique was one he described involving the use of nitric acid. This, he said, could be stolen from either the high school laboratory or the hospital pharmacy. To use it, appropriate 'magic words' must be spoken as always, and the acid poured on the nostrils or mouth of a sleeping victim. Presumably in this way it would be inhaled. Hearo said that this is a rapid way of killing, although he now fears using it because the acid's power is so great. Once he accidentally spilt some on his hands. Such was the effect of it burning his skin, that for three days he lay in the house and feared that he would die as a result.

Missionary activity has taken place amongst the Elema for over a hundred years now. It started in 1879 with James Chalmers' first canoe excursion to the Gulf, a journey during which he mentioned Hearo's Kearu district and wrote that, 'The inhabitants are said to be bad and treacherous, and we were strongly advised to have nothing whatever to do with them' (Lennox 1902, pp. 73-74). As previously noted, it was interesting to observe how Hearo often confused Christian and traditional ideas. He said that before killing a person the sorcerer has a duty to lay on a small feast for him or her. The reason he gave for this was that:

'Jesus didn't die for nothing. He had his feast, the Last Supper, and only then did they kill him'.

Similarly, on another occasion, he identified himself with the role Judas played in the killing of Christ. Should I have wanted somebody killed, it would have been wrong for him to do it for me. Rather he would have made me a 'bone arrow', transferred a spirit 'friend' to me at a small ceremonial feast, and taught me how to use them in return for the fee which would be strung between the palm trees. It should be done in this way because Judas himself did not kill Christ but merely betrayed him for thirty pieces of silver.

Finally, Hearo emphasized that sorcery has its own moral code in so far as one may not kill without justification. It is for the sorcerer to decide whether or not his client (apprentice) has a sufficiently strong case against an adversary to warrant the use of the Black Art. The types of wrong which may be so revenged range from murder, theft, and adultery to matters as vague as behaving in a way which might displease the clan's ancestors. An example I have encountered of the latter type involved a young man from a different Province 'trespassing' on a waterway which was 'owned' by two ancestral spirits. Whether or not a similar charge could be upheld against a clan member is, as I have previously noted, a question which I did not investigate. As if to reassure me, however, Hearo did point out that only a 'rascal sorcerer' would try to harm a European.

#### CONCLUSION

In a country where it is common for people to die suddenly from pneumonia, food poisoning and various tropical diseases, it is easy to understand how belief in sorcery has been built up and sustained. Fear drums it into the minds of children from an early age, and the grotesque practices in which sorcerers claim to engage do nothing to alleviate that terror. As German (1979) has suggested, the cerebral effects of malnutrition and certain tropical diseases may be a further important contributory factor towards predisposing the peoples of tropical countries to believing in a supernatural world of spirits and magical forces. In my experience, the only people to have largely overcome their superstitions are those who have something to put in its place, such as a strong Christian faith. Some critics might argue that this is merely a matter of replacing one superstition with another, but that is an argument which goes beyond the scope of this paper. If it is true, then at least it might be said that the Christian approach is less conducive to fear than the traditional.

As Williams has commented, 'Despite a belief in their own magic it remains obvious that sorcerers are to a very large extent imposters, trading on the superstition of their fellows' (1940, p. 109). In the past such superstition may have been a stabilizing force, allowing the sorcerer to fulfil the policeman's role of handing out rough justice, sustaining the *status quo* and ensuring that egalitarian principles were upheld. Now, however, the need for it is being superseded. As Papua New Guinea is gradually weaned from the harsher aspects of traditional life the future lies in the hands of educated young people such as Kopi. He, and most like him, believe that no more should youths go to their elders to learn sorcery.

But of course, the odd exception might be made for the benefit of eccentric 'Scottish university people'.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I must thank Hearo and Kopi for all their help. While I cannot condone what Hearo claims to do, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to record what he told me.

Thanks are also due to my friends, Rod and Pru Anderson. This is both for the many stimulating discussions we had about sorcery, and for having introduced me at their home to Dr George Nurse of the Institute of Medical Research at Goroka, Papua New Guinea. He gave helpful advice and encouragement while I was collecting the data for this paper. For this I am most grateful.

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