

SORCERY AND WITCHCRAFT OF NEW GUINEA NATIVES

Text of a Talk presented by Marjorie Mary Walker, a
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Trobriand Islands Between 1891-1900. With
corrections and additions by S. B. Fellows.

(Transcribed by Kim Akerman)

What I have to say on sorcery and witchcraft amongst the Kiriwinian Group of Islands is based upon the manuscripts actually written by my father when he lived among these people over 50 years ago (ago). The islands lie to the East of N.G. in the Trobriands and were populated by natives, including some tribes which could be classed as cannibals. They were a carefree people whose only thought was to provide sufficient food for themselves but superstition was part of their very being. Their dread of the evil spirits was very real; to them they were the direct agents and cause of all evil. Their medicine men were simply sorcerers, who themselves appeared to be the dupes of their own cunning and deceit. They believed in two gods, one who created the eyes, ears, mouths and hands of men, and the other who created the land and sea. They did not offer them any worship but conducted rites and ceremonies to appease them.

Sorcery is described as the art of influencing spirits by treating them as if they were actually people, that is to say by appeasing them, reconciling them, intimidating by depriving them of their power and by making them subject to one's will. When necessary, all this was accomplished through the agency of the tribal sorcerers. (who had developed a natural ability 'to put it over' as we say. SBF).

Magic or witchcraft is something else. It does not essentially concern itself with the spirits. It uses means of apparently subjecting processes of nature to the will of man, of protecting individuals against enemies and dangers, giving them the power to injure their enemies. For these purposes, incantations, or charms leaves of plants, parts of fish or animal of one kind or another were used.

Of course the practice of sorcery and magic was part of the life of all native peoples in all parts of the world. The fear of darkness and death and the lack of power to control forces of nature made these natives slaves to superstition. Further they lived in fear of attack or aggression – without themselves giving provocation.

Sorcery practiced by the N.G. natives was of two kinds – One doing evil for the sake of evil – the second making use of benevolent and kindly magic for good only. The evil

sorcerer generally had knowledge of poison in certain plants and fish and very often would use some underhand means of applying it to his victims. In the case of wounds he would smear the injured part with decomposed matter and thus set up blood poisoning ending in tetanus. The so-called magic spear prepared by a sorcerer would kill; merely because the point had been smeared with some poisonous substance... but the warrior believed that the spear was charmed.

The great dread that darkened the life of every native was the fear of the *bogua* or evil spirit. When the chief or any other sorcerer desired to cause sickness or death, he would steal to the house of his unsuspecting victim in the darkness of night, and place near the doorstep a few leaves from a certain tree. These leaves were supposed to contain the mystic power, which the sorcerer by his evil arts had imparted to them. The doomed man, on going out of his house next morning would feel quite well and happy until he saw the leaves – he would then cry out in horror, “the leaves, the leaves” and would be immediately stricken down with some mortal sickness. Internal disease of all kinds was set down to this agency. Their terrible fear would cause internal disorders, their digestion would be upset, and finally they would refuse to eat and so they would die. Fear had killed them.

When the chief was asked – this is how he told the mode of his wizardry – In the dead of night, in the secret recesses of his house he boiled his decoctions, made of numerous ingredients in a special cooking pot on a small fire, and while they were boiling he spoke into them an incantation, known only to a few persons. The bunch of leaves was dipped into this decoction and then it was ready for use. Any person who stepped over these leaves believed they had the mystic power to kill – and so he would just accept the inevitable and die.

The benevolent sorcerers professed to have powers over the elements – they claimed to be rain-makers: to make the harvest bountiful: and the fish plentiful. Their powers which were hereditary – passing from father to son – were really practical knowledge of seasons and soil conditions, but of course this was smothered with charms and incantations with which they used always to mystify their practices.

The chief of the village claimed the sole right to secure a bountiful harvest every year so he directed them where and when to plant their crops of yams, sago etc. When they grew he maintained that it was due to his power.

The medicine men or sorcerers who claimed to heal; appeared to take from the patient small sticks and stones, by sleight of hand. This is an example of their methods. A native boy was lying very sick with an attack of pleurisy. His mother came along and wished to take him home but he seemed unable to rise. The medicine man was called, and when he chewed some special bark, and muttered an incantation he spat on both sides of the boy's face. The boy then got up and walked home without help. The sorcerer explained that an evil spirit had thrown some small spears into the boy, and that the food he had put on him was an offering to the spirit of pain, which had taken up his temporary home in the boy's body. The next day the med. Man produced a number of small sticks

and a stone, which he said he had taken from patient. The boy recovered – this is a true case of faith-healing.

Any deformities at birth were attributed to the evil influence of disembodied spirits who inhabit a lower region called *Tuma*

As strangers approach a village the sorcerers came out to meet them and spit chewed bark and leaves over them, with the idea of giving food to any evil spirit they might bring with them.

Then again if a snake entered a house they thought it was a spirit of one of their ancestors and they would be afraid to kill it for fear it would bring disaster upon them. They placed before it articles of wealth and food and then pleaded with it to leave. As they passed it they bowed and bent just as they would do before a chief and would plead again with it to preserve them from danger.

They believed that once a year the spirits of their ancestors visited their native village, after the harvest was gathered. At this time the men performed special dances, and the people openly displayed their valuables; and great feasts were made for the spirits. On the night when the moon was full all the people, men women and children joined in raising a great shout to drive the spirits back to *Tuma*. They would then settle(d) down hoping to have satisfied them. Many peculiar customs prevailed and they wore many charms in their endeavour to appease the spirits of their ancestors. A widow would wear on her breast, suspended by a string round her neck, her late husband's lower jaw, the full set of teeth looking ghastly and grim. The small bones of the arms and legs were taken out soon after death and formed into spoons which were used to put lime into the mouth when eating betel-nut. These and other emblems – actually parts of their former protectors – were believed to ward off dangers which the husband or son would ward off if they were alive. Any failure to have them would result in the fear that the spirits of the departed would be angry and some calamity would overtake them. (Fellows notes – 'I showed you some of those – learning the name of the man they were taken from. KA).

When we read and hear about these things we are inclined to think they are far removed from us: but we are not entirely free from them in some form or other. In fact in our own daily life we have something which approaches sorcery and magic in the Astrology cult with its commercialised horoscopes. Then we have other strange superstitions that we find have quite gripped the minds of many people. Some work on our fears, our prejudices and lack of knowledge. The fact is where ever we have no knowledge of a rational cause we are inclined to invent something mysterious and magical. Indeed witchcraft was practiced in England in some form or another until the end of the 17th century. The burning of witches was not a crime until 1736. And we passed through a time when we thought that lightning and storms were caused by the wrath of God.

Lack of knowledge has always made prey to strange means of warding off disease. In the seventeenth century Sir Kenelm Digby won fame by the cures of wounds wrought by his sympathetic powder. The powder was used to anoint the weapon instead of the wound.

Even to this day in some countries farmers keep the sickle, with which they have cut themselves, free of rust, so that the wound may not fester.

The only way to overcome superstition is to have knowledge, and to realise that many fears of dreams and superstitions are not due to evil influences outside the individual, but to disorders of the mind. Very often they can be traced to what we now call the sub-conscious activities of the mind.

Here is a story how simple knowledge can dissipate fear – On the last day of the year 1899 Enamakala a great chief died, and the last honours were paid to him according to Kiriwinian custom. His wives (he had 31) were divided among the other chiefs and parts of his body were buried in several graves in different villages. The small bones were made into lime spoons, which took his name, and were sacred to his memory.

The skull was cleaned, decorated and preserved as an heirloom. But the chief who performed these last rites was very much distressed because Enamakala's skull burst and the crown fell in, when he was burning the flesh off in the earth oven. He thought a malignant spirit had struck the skull and broken it. There was great consternation and much fearsome discussion among the leading warriors. The news spread and there was rising fear of some great disaster, for they were afraid Enamakala's spirit might take revenge. But all this commotion was at length brought to an end, when after much explanation my father convinced them that the cause was not the evil spirit but the simple fact that the oven in which the skull was heated was too hot.
