



# State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

Celebrating 20 years of SSGM and 70 years of Pacific studies at The Australian National University

## Developing Community Laws to Address Sorcery and Witchcraft-Related Violence in Papua New Guinea

Richard Eves

In Brief 2017/7

Witchcraft and sorcery-related violence, the focus of much attention in recent years, is seemingly an intractable problem that is impossible to remedy (see Forsyth and Eves 2015). While such pessimism is not without justification, isolated examples of communities that are attempting to address this issue do exist and are worth considering for use in other areas where this kind of violence is a problem. Local responses to perceived acts of witchcraft and sorcery are sometimes led by vigilantes with the result that the accused are brutally tortured and killed (see Eves and Kelly-Hanku 2014). Local responses that try to eschew violence are likely to be informative to efforts to generate effective measures to end such violence. This In Brief examines some community responses to witchcraft and sorcery accusations in Chimbu Province and Jiwaka Province in the Papua New Guinea (PNG) highlands and suggests that there is a potential for these initiatives to be developed in other parts of PNG where this problem exists.

### Community Laws

In some parts of Melanesia, as Miranda Forsyth has observed, communities have begun to develop their own rules and regulations in the form of community laws, by-laws, constitutions or even ordinances (2014:1). She points to the long tradition of colonial authorities codifying the customary law of indigenous people, both in the Pacific and elsewhere, noting that some scholars have criticised this kind of codification because it 'freezes' custom in the present and hence limits its dynamic and flexible quality' (2014:1). However, unlike colonial efforts to codify custom, the development discussed here is driven by the communities themselves.

Community laws have a long genealogy in PNG, with proposals to give communities rule-making and executive powers being canvassed in the late 1940s (Goddard 2009:42). The development of community laws, as a response to some of the social issues and challenges faced by communities, has been encouraged by the Government of Papua New Guinea

and has its legal basis in The Organic Law on Provincial Governments and Local-Level Governments (Consolidated to No 29 of 1998).<sup>1</sup>

Community laws are one way that communities in some parts of the PNG highlands are dealing with witchcraft and sorcery-related violence. Perhaps the most well-known example is the community of Nauro Gor in Chimbu Province which developed their Gor Community Base Laws and Policing in 2006 (Bal 2015). As with the other examples cited below, these laws focus on the defamatory nature of statements directed at the person accused of being a witch or sorcerer (*Mi [sik] Nauro i tok nogat tru long toktok belong sanguma na poison*) and have the effect of curbing the inflammatory gossip that fuels accusations.<sup>2</sup> Where someone has accused another person, the accuser must compensate the defamed person with payment of K500 and three large pigs, and also pay a fine of K200 to the village court.

More recently, similar initiatives have been developed in a number of communities in other parts of the highlands. In Jiwaka, encouraged by the community-based organisation Voice for Change,<sup>3</sup> laws have been instituted to target witchcraft accusations, as well as other socially detrimental issues, such as polygamy, domestic violence, theft, playing cards, swearing at another person and using violence against children. One group, the Dambex Association of Kudjip, refers to their laws as the 'Kuma Community Peace and Security Law' and sets out a list of 30 'laws' those in the community must follow, including two that focus specifically on witchcraft accusations.<sup>4</sup> Law number 9 says that it is forbidden to accuse someone of witchcraft or curse another person (*Tambu long tok sanguma or kesim narapela*). The reference to cursing here probably suggests that belief in the efficacy of this kind of power still exists, because to curse someone is not to accuse them of being a sorcerer but rather is itself considered a form of sorcery. Thus the law forbids the practice of sorcery. Law number 29 is rather similar, but also encompasses other forms

of defamation — drug-taker, drunkard or prostitute (*l tambu tru long tok drug bodi, steam bodi, sanguma or 4 kopi long narapela*). A further law (number 21) pertains to violence more generally and says that it is forbidden to assault or kill another person (*Tambu long pait na kilim narapela*).

Another group in Jiwaka, the JIMA, has an even longer list of 38 laws.<sup>5</sup> Similar to the Dambex Association, the JIMA include a law (number 12) specifically addressing witchcraft (*sanguma*) which says it is forbidden for people to accuse another of witchcraft (*l tambu tru long ol Jima lain i tok sanguma long narapela*). This group also has a law against sorcery (law number 36) which is directed not at those accusing others of sorcery, but at those reputed to practice sorcery (*l tambu tru long wokim poison kaikai*). Much as the reference to cursing in the laws of the Dambex Association, the reference to *poison* indicates that belief in malevolent forms of power remains in the community, even though they are willing to address violence directed at those accused of being witches or sorcerers.

## Conclusion

The community-based initiatives to counter the violence that sometimes accompanies accusations of witchcraft are good news, particularly in light of the continuing widespread belief in witchcraft and sorcery in some highlands provinces. However, because the evidence base to assess the utility and effectiveness of such initiatives is limited, more research is needed. There is a clear need to know more about the processes of formulating these laws (see also Forsyth 2014:2) and whether these processes can be translated to other places where witchcraft and sorcery-related violence is common. We have some knowledge about how the United Nauro Gor community came to develop their community laws (Bal 2015), but it would be useful to know more about the genesis of those in Jiwaka. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, we need to know whether these initiatives have been successful in reducing attacks.

Given the continued focus of the Australian aid program on governance and the need to strive for innovative responses to these often difficult and apparently intractable problems, there is considerable scope to support the expansion of these community-based initiatives to other parts of PNG. This could, in fact, include not only those beset by witchcraft and sorcery-related violence, but other forms of violence, such as violence against women and children.

## Author Notes

Richard Eves is an associate professor with the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program.

## Endnotes

1. It says that 'subject to the Constitution, this Organic Law, and a Provincial Government law, a Local-level Government may make laws on the following subject matters: (h) maintaining peace, good order and law through consultation, mediation, arbitration and community forums'.
2. While the laws in both Chimbu and Jiwaka refer to sorcery, the predominant issue in these provinces is witchcraft-related violence.
3. Voice for Change has received support at various times from the international NGOs — Oxfam and IWDA (International Women's Development Agency).
4. The name Kuma, as one of the reviewers noted, refers to a loose grouping of 10 or 11 'tribes' in South Wahgi area of Jiwaka and is being used by a subgroup of one of these tribes, the Dambngekanem, who have established the Dambex Association.
5. JIMA refers to the Jimale-Mandapa Kanem subtribe of the Kondika tribe at Minj.

## References

- Bal, C. 2015. *Kumo Koimbo: Accounts and Responses to Witchcraft in Gor, Simbu Province*. In M. Forsyth and R. Eves (eds). *Talking it Through: Responses to Sorcery and Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia*. Canberra: ANU Press, 299–307.
- Eves, R. and A. Kelly-Hanku 2014. *Witch-Hunts in Papua New Guinea's Eastern Highlands Province: A Fieldwork Report*. SSGM In Brief 2014/4. Canberra: ANU.
- Forsyth, M. 2014. *The Writing of Community By-Laws and Constitutions in Melanesia: Who? Why? Where? How?* SSGM In Brief 2014/53. Canberra: ANU.
- Forsyth, M. and R. Eves (eds) 2015. *Talking it Through: Responses to Sorcery and Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia*. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Goddard, M. 2009. *Substantial Justice: An Anthropology of Village Courts in Papua New Guinea*. New York: Berghahn Books.

