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Sorcery Accusation–Related Violence in Papua New Guinea
Part 1: Questions and Methodology

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This In Brief sets out the main research questions and summarises the methodology of a major study into sorcery accusation–related violence (SARV) in Papua New Guinea (PNG). The study began in November 2016 and will run for four years. Funded by the Papua New Guinea – Australia Partnership, the project is a partnership between academics at the Divine Word University and the National Research Institute in PNG and the Australian National University. Local researchers and data collectors are also playing a crucial role in gathering information and analysis. The study will inform the PNG Sorcery National Action Plan. Agreed to by the PNG government in 2015, the action plan has five core areas (see Forsyth 2014), one of which is research.

The main research questions are:
1. Who is being accused of sorcery, where, why, how often, by whom, and how does this change over time? (and why?)
2. Why do accusations lead to violence at times and not at others?
3. What regulatory levers exist to overcome sorcery accusation–related violence, and what is the context necessary for them to work effectively?
4. How is the Sorcery National Action Plan working as a coalition for change network? What are its impacts, failures and challenges?

Current State of Data
The difficulty of obtaining empirical evidence on SARV is widely acknowledged. Back in 2009, the special rapporteur on extrajudicial killings concluded at a global level ‘there is little systematic information available on the numbers of persons so accused, persecuted or killed, nor is there any detailed analysis of the dynamics and patterns of such killings, or of how the killings can be prevented’ (HRC 27/5/2009:13). In PNG, official records are fragmented and often incomplete, and those that do exist are fraught with potential to be misleading. The evidentiary basis of estimates commonly used in United Nations and non-government organisation reports and the media can be opaque or unstated. For example, reporting about SARV in PNG routinely uses the phrase ‘in Simbu Province alone, it is estimated that 150 cases of violence and killings occur each year as a result of witchcraft accusations’ (see, for example, HRC 18/3/2013:9). In fact, this figure comes from an estimate by a single individual, the local bishop in Kundiawa, in 2004 (Zocca 2009a), and says nothing about the differences across provinces and across years. It is also often reported that six times more women than men are accused of sorcery (e.g. Amnesty International 5/2011). This figure, when traced back to its original source, comes from a statement reported in the newspaper by some doctors in Goroka in relation to a funding application they were making (The National 19/6/2003). They were also referring to a particular location rather than the whole of PNG, and no methodological basis is provided for the claim which is cited and re-cited.

Given the seriousness of the harms caused by SARV, there is a clear need to develop a better understanding of the scope of the problem, its gendered dimensions, provincial variations and trends over time. In order to prevent and respond to the problem, it is also vital to have an evidence base on current and promising responses that can inform future efforts to address SARV.

Methodology
This study employs a mixed methods methodology that draws on both qualitative and quantitative sources at national and subnational levels. The main data collection methods are briefly discussed below.

An earlier study used the analysis of national newspaper articles on SARV in PNG over a seven-year period (Urame 2008). A similar but more comprehensive approach was adopted for this project. The dataset comprises articles from two national newspapers — the National and the Post Courier — and national court cases reported on the Pacific Islands
Legal Information Institute database over a 20-year period (1996–2016). It was supplemented by searches of other media through the online FACTIVA database. Most of the unique cases were identified through newspaper articles (n = 418) and when 51 national court cases were added, the total number of SARV unique incidents in the dataset was 452 (some incidents had more than one report). There was an overlap of only 17 cases when comparing these two sources, which speaks to the partiality of the datasets. Statistical analysis was done using SPSS software, and victimisation rates in each province every year from 1998 to 2016 were calculated using population estimates based on the 2000 census.

This newspaper and court case dataset will be supplemented by the creation of a database of incidents of SARV in a number of hotspots (currently Enga, Bougainville and Port Moresby) from 2016 for four years. The database is being built on the basis of forms completed by a network of local data gatherers. The forms are detailed and are designed to capture information on the victims, perpetrators and the state and non-state interventions and responses to the incident.

Semi-structured interviews are also being conducted with a broad range of stakeholders who hold positions or deliver services at a provincial, district or ward level, as well as some survivors. This is complemented by participant observation of training, workshops and other events as opportunities arise. One of the key aims is to document as many local initiatives as possible that prevent or minimise the violence that stems from accusations of sorcery. Participant observation and a series of interviews with key personnel will also help inform the description and assessment of the Sorcery National Action Plan as a coalition for change network. The multilayered and cross-sectoral nature of the plan’s five pillars of activity means that the scope of the research is national, but that particular attention may be paid to specific geographical areas or aspects of SARV.

With such a difficult and complex study, it is important to be open and adaptable to circumstances and shifting priorities, while always being mindful of the ethical responsibilities necessary to minimise the risk to those affected by SARV and those involved in the research.

Limitations

There is much to critique in the methodology. The data is often partial and not necessarily reliable nor replicable. Much is hidden and, where overt, not necessarily recorded with consistency. Detailed in-depth accounts of SARV in geographical areas and among certain cultural-linguistic collectivities of people underline the diversity and specificity of beliefs and practices, and how they change over time (see, for example, Forsyth and Eves 2015, Zocca 2009b). However, informing policy and support for national and more local efforts to address SARV requires evidence that has a wider scope (in time and place) and multiple sources of information. Documenting how we are trying to do this is the first step in being transparent about methods and the tentative conclusions that emerge from the study, so that others can engage with us in debates about the significance and merit of the findings.

Author Notes

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References


