COMMENT

Sorcery in New Guinea, 1938 and 1988*

Currently, it is fashionable to speak of 'the re-emergence of sorcery' in Papua New Guinea (PNG),¹ but I believe that sorcery never died away, and is simply more open now. It endured because it is the logical outcome of how Papua New Guineans see events and relationships, and how they describe them to others, including researchers. I illustrate this with examples from the Hagen–Sepik Patrol of 1938–39, and my research on it in 1987–88.

The patrol was the biggest and longest in PNG's history, comprising about 350 people and walking over 3,000 kilometres (Figure 1). It left Mt Hagen in the New Guinea Highlands in March 1938, explored west to the 'Dutch' (now Indonesian) border, and returned to Hagen in June 1939. It set up bases which became the towns of Mt Hagen and Wabag, found at Porgera the world's largest gold deposit outside South Africa, and made sense of the region's geography for the first time. It pioneered the air supply methods used by both sides during World War II. It was Australia's last big exploring journey, and the last of the great European explorations which began with Bartholomew Diaz 450 years before. It was full of challenge and incident, but in the tradition of Australian exploration it returned to scant reward. Its leader's 501 page report was suppressed lest it give information helpful to the Japanese in the coming war. Until my book *The Sky Travellers*, no full account of the patrol was made public.²

The book also tells of journeys of the mind — by its three white officers, Jim Taylor, John Black and Pat Walsh, its 30 New Guinea police, its dozen coastal servants, and its 300 plus Highlands carriers. Although not in like detail for all these people, it outlines what they expected, and how what they encountered changed them. Some were changed little; most were changed much. Similarly, their sudden appearance profoundly shook those they met. Highlanders struggled to fit the patrol into what they knew, deciding sometimes that the travellers were ancestors returning, but most commonly that they were sky people, spirits driven by war or disaster from the sky above to the earth below, and wandering lost, landless and womanless on their ground. The travellers were an earth-shaking conundrum: despite immense ignorance of all around them, they had immense wealth and power. In societies where wealth, power and knowledge were connected, that challenged everything Highlanders believed. The mere presence of the patrol thus raised questions of sorcery. In turn, the patrol illustrates how Highlanders tried to deal with the momentous challenges they faced when Europeans arrived, and how those challenges still confronted them 50 years later. My central proposition is that New Guinean notions of sorcery shaped how they saw things then, and see things now. Being a historian, I begin with a story.

In March 1938, the patrol's second in command, John Black, was exploring near Wabag. One morning, he climbed a tree to scout the country, saw a man, and called and

* This is a transcript of a talk given in Paris in May 2004 and at the Australian National University in March 2005.

¹ 'Sorcery PNG' on the web offers several examples.

² Bill Gammage, *The Sky Travellers: journeys in New Guinea 1938–1939* (Melbourne 1998). Taylor's report is discussed on 212–14.

FIGURE 1: The Hagen-Sepik Patrol of 1938-39.

waved. 'He waved back', Black wrote,

but seemed terribly surprised. I climbed down... a few natives... came up... They seemed nervous, one would almost say fearful... By signs I found that they thought we had alighted from the clouds on to the nearby tree and climbed down... Nothing would convince them that this was not so... One old chap, possibly a sorcerer himself, took a professional interest in us... he excitedly cleared a patch of grass level with the ground and asked us to give them a demonstration of disappearing into thin air...³

The man to whom Black called, Pelo, gave him a pig and, in return, Black gave a loincloth, two mirrors, some shell money, a broken plate and the lid of a .303 cartridge case.

Few of us get to meet somebody who has just climbed down from a tree but, for the people whom Black met, the event was world shaking. Some had seen whites before, but at most twice, and none knew anything about them. Most were certain that they were not human. The common opinion was that they were sky people. What Black did confirmed this. He descended from the clouds, and the vast wealth he gave Pelo proved that he was no man. The plate alone was worth a pig or two when traded on and, 50 years later, people could still recount the wealth Pelo got. The wealth was memorable. It was as though a stranger called out, gave away a fortune and walked off. It was unnatural. Elders gathered every fragment Black's line left, and sacrificed a pig to ward off possible evil influence.

Fifty years later, in August 1988, I spoke to Gabriel Kanae, who as a boy saw Black come down the tree. We met at what I thought was the site. Gabriel made clear that he still thought he had seen sky people that day. He said the first whites were driven from the sky, had therefore to live on earth, and so were seeking mankind's good regard. At first they were not very good at pretending to be men, having had no practice, but later they got quite good at it, and today might even have become men and women. Despite 50 years of Australian occupation, Gabriel thought whites were probably spirits.

After we had been talking a while, I asked where the tree was that Black descended. Gabriel was surprised. 'This is it here', he replied, indicating a nearby stump, 'that's why I'm talking to you.' That's why I'm talking to you. He meant that's why he was telling me what he was. From politeness he would *talk* to any whites who wanted help, but he would not normally suggest to them that they might be spirits. He knew they laughed at such notions — understandably, if they were pretending to be human. But spirits had decreed our meeting. I had appeared, asked him about Black, and suggested we meet near the very tree to talk about him. In other words, 50 years after that amazing descent a stranger appeared in front of one of the few people alive who had seen it, perhaps the only person alive who had seen it, nominated the right tree, and asked to talk about it. Just because whites say they do not believe in spirits does not mean they are not directed by them. Gabriel took the hint, and told me things about sorcery and the supernatural which it is usually pointless to talk to Europeans about, because they don't believe it.⁴

Black's diary led me to roughly the right location for this meeting, and I respect PNG belief in the power of sorcery and ritual, but beyond that I would call what happened, chance. Had I suggested that to Gabriel he might have replied, as other New Guineans have, 'Yes of course, but who caused that chance?' In PNG, cause is always 'who', never 'what'. Spirits and ghosts are always there and so, therefore, is sorcery. But I did not mention chance, because then Gabriel might have decided that there was no point talking to me about things that really mattered — how the world works — and reverted

³J.R. Black, Diary, 22 Mar. 1938 (Canberra, National Library of Australia, J.R. Black Papers 1933–1988, NLA MS8346); quoted in Gammage, *Sky Travellers*, 55–6.

⁴Talk to Gabriel Kanae of Kaiap, Enga Province, 12 Aug. 1988.

to narratives of events or situations, mere anecdotes, which is what most whites want to talk about. I wondered if he knew how some whites regarded his namesake, the archangel Gabriel. That would have confirmed his belief in spirits, ritual and sky people. I wondered too what he would think had he known that in 1940, at Bogia on the Madang coast, Black was given the nickname *Kanae*, 'white crane', which in New Guinea fashion would pass to his daughter and her daughter. It was also Gabriel's surname.

In beginning *The Sky Travellers* I wrote,

Europeans tend to assume that supernatural beings are largely beyond human control. They divide the world into the known and therefore natural, and the unknown and therefore supernatural. They know so much, they think, that what they do not know is not natural. They consign spirits, fairies, witches and the like to realms outside nature and reason, and thereby beyond believing and control. Except sometimes for God and saints, if supernatural beings exist Europeans can do little to influence them.

Highlanders do not think that. Spirits and ancestral ghosts have great power and sometimes much malevolence, but there is no uncrossable gap between natural and supernatural. Each rightly balances the other; if either fails in a duty the other is bound to offer correction. With the right knowledge most beings can be trammelled.⁵

Let me expand that. To Europeans, sorcery evokes the irrational. People think of witch-doctors boiling strange stews, casting evil spells, and making doubtful medicines, though of course these things are merely sorcery's physical expressions. Because Europeans distinguish between natural and supernatural, they think of sorcery meant to harm people as 'black magic' and to protect people as 'white magic', but sorcery meant to harm spirits as 'white' and to protect spirits as 'black'. In other words they centre on themselves, and call the same sorcery black or white according to its anticipated effect on their interests or well-being.

For New Guineans, the English word 'sorcery', with its connotations simply of the irrational and supernatural, is inadequate. I use it because it assumes the necessity of agency, whereas 'chance' assumes its absence. Sorcery is a means first of understanding the world, and then of influencing the impact of the world on people's lives. Sorcery is either offensive (to control) or defensive (to protect), and it retains its character, whether directed at the natural or the supernatural. It believes that both can be understood and influenced by knowledgeable human intervention. The proper object of every person, and the sorcerer especially, is to work hard to acquire that knowledge, and to learn how to benefit from it. Knowledge closes the gap between natural and supernatural, and how to respond to them. Both under control is proof of successful sorcery. Sorcery is individual; its communal expression is ritual. A world in balance, order and prosperity demonstrates that the correct rituals have been performed.

The knowledge needed for successful sorcery is vast — how the natural and spiritual worlds work, how people and spirits think and behave, what can control them. This knowledge assumes an unprovable premise — that the supernatural exists much as New Guineans conceive it — but that is so of most thought systems treating the spiritual. In our society, the Jesuits base rigorously logical analysis on the unprovable premise that God exists, while the Enlightenment based an ideal of society on the unprovable premise that man is naturally good. Given its premise, New Guinea sorcery proceeds logically, using precedent, experiment and signs of favour. People are well aware that they can never know everything, but a good sorcerer strives constantly towards that unattainable end — like Dostoevsky, he or she wants to be there when somebody understands what it has all been for. The more knowledge a person has, the more control. Thus, the best sorcerers are the intelligent, the industrious, the committed, the born leaders. Sorcery is a

⁵ Gammage, *Sky Travellers*, 1–2.

form of leadership, for people and for spirits and ancestors. Spirits and ancestors have the same concerns as people; they make the same efforts to understand and control. Therefore, (1) acts of sorcery are everywhere and ever-present, and (2) cause must be an action — always 'who', never 'what'.

I tried to think in sorcery terms before interviewing anyone about the Hagen–Sepik Patrol. How might sorcery shape the interview? How might what I considered chance influence how I was perceived and what I was told? What should I say or not say because of how it might relate to sorcery? I suggest that any researcher in PNG and like places should be alert to the role of sorcery in what people tell them. The fact that an account is rational and straightforward does not mean that it is not shaped by sorcery, or is complete in PNG eyes. It may merely be that it satisfies Western researchers, because once Westerners find a rational explanation they rarely probe further. They rarely ask the further questions which New Guineans always ask: 'Why is that rational explanation so? Who caused it?'

Another story. In January 1939, a young boy stood gazing into Black's camp north of Telefomin. His name was Nokotep, and his prospects were bleak. His father had been killed in battle, and his godfather had brought him far from home. From inside the camp, a carrier called and gave him food. So he joined the sky people, and next day set forth with them into the unknown. The carrier, his new father, gave him a new name, Suni. Suni stayed throughout the patrol. When it ended Black took him to Rabaul and Madang, and for over two years they fought together behind Japanese lines during World War II. In 1949, Suni became government interpreter at Telefomin, a very powerful position because it controlled what villager and *kiap* (patrol officer) learnt about each other. He was interpreter during the Telefomin uprising in 1953, when two *kiaps* and two police were killed and plans to destroy Telefomin government station were narrowly prevented. The *mastas* (Europeans) accepted that Suni knew nothing of the uprising, and in the white world he became one of the more famous New Guineans of the colonial era. He retired in 1982, back to the village he had been forced to leave when his father died. I spoke to him there in July 1988.

I asked Suni, by chance a Westerner might say, what the name 'Suni' meant. 'I don't know', he replied, 'I got it from my patrol father.' 'Where was he from?' I asked. 'Chimbu', Suni said. I realised that a Chimbu man I spoke to a month before, Nilak, must be Suni's patrol father. He never mentioned his son, but he had told me his own father's name, Suni. I did not guess the connection then. 'Was he Nilak?' I asked Suni. He was. 'He is alive and well', I said, 'with many children and grandchildren. He told me a lot about the patrol.' Suni was amazed and delighted. He asked me to pay his respects to Nilak and to give him gifts.⁶ Later, I visited Nilak and asked if he knew the name Suni. 'It is my father's name', he replied, but he knew what I meant. 'It is also the name I gave my son on the big walk to the Sepik we talked about last time.' I gave him gifts and Suni's greetings and said, 'He still carries your father's name. Everyone calls him Suni.' Nilak too was amazed and delighted. 'He is still my son', he said. I asked why he hadn't mentioned Suni when we met before. 'I told you it was my father's name', he said, 'and you didn't say anything, so I left it.'⁷

This connection influenced what both Suni and Nilak then told me. Suni volunteered quietly that he had known about the Telefomin uprising, but had felt unable to warn anyone about it. Some whites had suspected this, but this was the first time, possibly the only time, Suni ever admitted it. Why he told me was implied when I took his greetings to Nilak. Nilak reminded me that previously I had asked whether the policeman in charge of his section had pulled (abducted) women, or practised sorcery. To both questions he had said no then, but yes now. His policeman did use sorcery but was not very good at it

⁶Talk to Suni of Osobip, Gulf Province, 28 Jul. 1988; Gammage, *Sky Travellers*, 111, 215, 223, 225–6, 232.

⁷Talk to Nilak of Gon, Simbu Province, 26 Jun. and 17 Aug. 1988.

because he was a bighead (too conceited), and he did pull women, whom he later passed on to his carriers. He gave me examples. I asked why he told me these things now, and not then. 'I am grateful to you for telling me of Suni', he said, 'but also I now think you probably know anyway, and are testing me. You know things.'⁸ You know things. That's what people say about sorcerers. They mean not merely that knowledge is got by ability and industry. It is, but if that were all to it then more people would have more knowledge. Knowledge also depends on having favour with the spirits, and that too requires ability and industry. The chance of my linking Suni and Nilak naturally raised the question why that chance occurred. Nilak's answer was that my knowledge had led his ancestral spirits to direct him to give me the hint which led to that 'chance'. Had I not had favour with the spirits I would have missed his hint — as I nearly did.

Another story. On 13 April 1939, Black's line camped by Lake Iviva, west of Wabag. After warning some local people to keep clear, two police went to the lake to shoot ducks, idly blazing away for half an hour or so. Then men came from the far side of the lake carrying a dead clansman, Maitingi of Sirunki. From a thousand metres a ricochet had hit him between the eyes, exploding his head. Black said he was sorry. It can't be helped, the men said sorrowfully. They left without anger. Black sent compensation after them — axes, knives, shell and cloth. Both sides accepted that Maitingi's death was an accident.⁹

In August 1988, I spoke to a group of Sirunki men led by their pastor, Nicodemus. They told me how Maitingi died. Men 'were standing on the shore, gazing, trying to work out what the noise was on the other side', Nicodemus said,

Maitingi was in the middle. Suddenly he flung out his arms and fell back, like this... Just disappeared, no noise, nothing. We looked down and his head was covered in blood. We had no idea what could have done such a thing. We ran to the sky people for help — they were our friends.

So the men carried Maitingi to Black's camp not because they thought the police had shot him, but because they thought that the sky people might bring him back to life. 'What did you think of the compensation?' I asked. 'What pay?' Nicodemus replied, 'There was no pay. We didn't realise for years that the *kiap* had shot Maitingi. He just collapsed.' I read out Black's payment. Nicodemus talked with his clansmen. 'There was no pay.' More talk. 'At that time the sky people gave a man near the lake many presents. Nobody knew why. Was that our pay?'

Compensation for death is automatic and universal in PNG. The fact that even after 50 years it had not occurred to clansmen to seek compensation from the government for Maitingi's death shows clearly that they never remotely connected it with Black's line. But now Nicodemus spoke to me privately.

'Did the sky people mean to kill Maitingi?'

'No, it was an accident.'

'How did you know about the compensation?'

'The *kiap* wrote it in a book.'

'Was he a *kiap* then, or a sky person?' (Remember Nicodemus is a Christian pastor.)

'He was a *kiap*.'

'Why have you told us these things?'

'I wanted your side of the story.'

'Many *mastas* have come to talk to us, with tape recorders and note books just like you. None asked about Maitingi. None knew where the sky people camped, as you do. This morning I showed you holes made by the sky people's tent poles which we

⁸ Talk to Nilak, 17 Aug. 1988.

⁹ Gamage, *Sky Travellers*, 193.

have preserved from their visit, and you told me who slept in the tent! Do you know any sky people?’

‘No. I have learnt what is written in books, but I have come here to learn more. Before I came I did not know Maitingi’s name or clan.’

‘The sky people also asked many questions. Most people don’t do that.’

‘Ah, I see what you are thinking. I am not a sorcerer. I want to write a book about this story, and I want it to be accurate. When we were talking just now you often discussed points with your clansmen to make sure that the story was correct. I am doing the same thing.’

‘Yes, but it is *our* story. I really don’t know what we should do.’

‘Nothing will happen, only that some day your grandchildren and their grandchildren can read this story.’

‘Is that all? Thank you *masta*. The sky people were always our friends.’¹⁰

I recreate this dialogue from memory not from tape, but it is essentially correct. You can see that Pastor Nicodemus believed not only that Black’s line were sky people, but that I was, or might be, or could influence them. He manoeuvred me into assuring him that no harm would follow what his clansmen had told me and learnt from me, but that very assurance, with its promise about the future, signalled that I had unusual knowledge, and there was only one way to get that — by sorcery. The next day, I spoke to Gabriel who saw Black come down from the tree, and he said outright what Nicodemus hinted at, that those visitors 50 years before were sky people, and at least some Europeans might still be sky people. Saying to Nicodemus and Gabriel that my knowledge came from reading still left them to wonder, ‘Yes, but why? Who determined that you would do this?’ It’s a good question. And many times New Guineans asked, ‘Do you know those people who came?’ It was a loaded question, making either ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ a loaded reply.

One of the people who came was Kobubu Airia, a policeman from the Waria river in Morobe, and one of the two police shooting on Lake Iviva when Maitingi was killed — though of course that was just chance. In 1938, Kobubu was young, just out of Rabaul police training depot. But a relative was Habana, the patrol’s most senior constable after its two sergeants. Habana joined the police in 1920, but alternated his police service with spells at home. He went home to learn sorcery, a craft requiring years of hard work studying human psychology, plant and animal properties and behaviour, climate, politics, geography, medicine and much else. By 1938, he was not only a tough and seasoned policeman but also an outstanding sorcerer, the best on the patrol. He could charm bullets to hit and arrows to miss. His spells and knowledge made others do as he wanted, so that people brought food and women at his call while *mastas* saw nothing, and *kiaps* gave orders which suited his purposes. Police and carriers knew that the patrol’s success and safety depended on his power. He was their guardian, and therefore the one who controlled and decided what happened to them.

In June 1938 the patrol split, and Habana and Kobubu went in Black’s line west towards Telefomin. They met one crisis after another. They were attacked but drove the attackers off. They got into bush with no people, which meant no food, and faced starvation. They came to the mighty Strickland River, the great cultural divide of Highlands New Guinea. It was 70 metres wide, and raced through a steep gorge. They searched upstream and down for a bridge. There was none. A policeman tried to raft across and was swept away by the current. Another policeman swam across, and after many days work the line built a bridge. A flood swept part of it away. The rest held, and after a week they finally crossed. But from the edge of the river a sheer cliff rose over 600 metres high, with soft crumbly stone, no track, and few handholds. After three days they

¹⁰Talk to pastor Nicodemus Yangibe and others of Surunki, Enga Province, 11 Aug. 1988.

found a way up. Black thought it a miracle that no one was killed on the climb. (Who decided on that miracle?) At the top of the cliff, they were attacked but drove the attackers off. They went on, and after an exhausting climb came down into the Tekin valley. A mysterious fever struck, and one carrier after another fell sick. Within a week, 35 carriers and Black himself were sick. So many sick meant that the patrol could not move — there were too few to carry the cargo. Black had no idea what the fever was. He thought it might be malaria, but he had very little quinine. They were trapped.

Black lay sick unaware that a most serious challenge was gathering against him. Habana decided to take charge of the line. Its many trials had convinced him that the spirits did not favour Black. Black had knowledge, ability and industry, but not favour, not command of sorcery. If he continued to lead they were all in danger. As a first-class sorcerer Habana was not used to being a victim. His spells had kept the line safe so far: now he would save it from disaster. Since the Strickland, he had been talking carefully to Black, probing his thinking, seeking his views on discipline, on police work, on sorcery. At the same time, he began building support in the line. The younger police, especially his Waria *wantoks*, were with him. The older police held back. They had most to lose, and some were not convinced that sorcery was so important anyway. But clearly things were not going well. As Black lay sick in his tent, Habana challenged. He sent a young policeman with a fearful message: some police were thinking of leaving the carriers and retreating to Enga (Wabag) — what did Black think of that? If Black agreed, he would lose control of the line. Black was indeed thinking that he might have to take a small party and make a dash for the coast to get medicine. Habana's timing was almost perfect. But Black mocked the idea. 'If we retreat we will be the laughing stock of New Guinea', he said. That night he lay awake on his bed, revolver in hand, ready to shoot anyone who entered.

The police held back, for three reasons. First, only Black knew where they were, so perhaps only he could get them home. Second, although their trials were many and great, Black had overcome them all so far, and that suggested unusual ability and some favour. Third, in crossing the Strickland, one policeman was injured — Habana. He had twisted his knee, and in the Tekin still walked in great pain. That suggested that his sorcery was not strong enough to overcome Black. The police waited.

After a month the mysterious disease went away. Black headed west and, after many trials in hungry bush, reached Telefomin. There he built an airstrip and radioed for supplies. When the plane came he sent out only one man — Habana. To Black, this was because it was agony for Habana to walk; to the line, it was clear evidence of Black's superior ability as a sorcerer. They saw that, almost as soon as Habana had decided to challenge, Black had twisted Habana's knee, causing him weeks of pain, then removed him from the patrol by bringing a plane deep into the bush. Black was never challenged again, and he was told things about the patrol, about other white men, about New Guinean life in the towns on the coast, that amazed him and opened his eyes to a new world. He was being respected as an expert sorcerer.

Yet, he did not know that he had fought a deadly duel with Habana. He knew that the police were watching him closely, that he was being tested. He knew that sorcery was the father of chance, but such was Habana's skill that he got no hint that Habana even supported the proposal in the Tekin to abandon the carriers, let alone sent it. In 1986, it still had not occurred to him that notions of sorcery, not chance, had saved him. That came out in 1987.

In September 1987, I flew to the Waria valley to talk to Kobubu. He lived by the edge of Aro airstrip, but when my plane got there the pilot refused to land. 'Too wet', he shouted, 'I'll take you to Garaina.' To him that made sense. Garaina is five minutes from Aro by air. But the walk back was muddy and hilly, and I was wearing thongs. At Garaina, they lasted one boggy step. We padded along barefoot, my guides pointing out forest birds and insects and recalling the Waria's old-time police. Kobubu, Habana and a third policeman, Kamuna, were all on the Hagen–Sepik Patrol, and 30 years later ran

the first Waria Local Government Council. 'Were they good sorcerers?' I asked. 'Ask Kobubu', they said.

Kobubu last saw a white man barefoot when Black's boots gave out on the Hagen–Sepik Patrol. 'You've come over the mountains to talk to me, *masta*? Sit down sir, have some coffee. My wife is at the gardens, but my daughter will get it. My sons will come later.' We hit it off at once. He stops saying 'sir', dropping a lifetime habit, and we become pupil and teacher. Kobubu asks, 'How is *masta* Black?' 'He is well. He sends you his greetings.' Kobubu is surprised, pleased and thoughtful. I continue, 'We are writing the story of the big walk to the Sepik... Your house is just like his at Telefomin.' 'True! It's an exact copy. I built it from memory. Alright, we'll talk tonight. Night is the time for talking. Now I'll put my uniform on, and you photograph me.' Soon he stands at attention, medals shining. 'Send me the picture', he instructs.

At night, children and grandchildren gather. Kobubu speaks as though giving evidence. 'I, Kobubu Airia, would like to tell how I went with *masta* Jim Taylor and number two *masta* Black to the Sepik...' His family know his tale: the youngsters wait eagerly for highlights, and laugh in delight when they come. Grandfather had some adventures alright. I ask questions. Murmured surprise. 'How does he know that?' 'Before the patrol Habana came home and got spells and charms to protect everyone. Was he a good sorcerer?' 'He was very good.' 'Did he use it much on the patrol?' Kobubu studies me sharply. Does this barefoot white man believe in sorcery? Has some power told *masta* Black to send him? 'Kamuna died four days ago. You passed his grave by the track.' 'I saw it. I didn't know it was his.' Kobubu changes the subject. The grandchildren fall asleep.

'Turn the tape off', Kobubu orders. 'I can talk of what we did with sorcery, but not of the actual spells. For that we would have to go to a special place near Garaina.' He tells how Habana's spells protected the patrol and made it successful, and how Habana's power and personality steadily gained control. By degrees, we move to whether Habana challenged Black for leadership. He did, but Black's sorcery was too strong. It still was, obviously, or I wouldn't be there, and he wouldn't be talking, or more exactly saying what he was. We discuss whether people can shape their destiny, and how it becomes them to try. 'Some things are just chance', I venture. 'Yes, but who decides what things?' Kobubu replies, as I expect. He knows now that I do not believe in sorcery, but that doesn't mean I'm not directed by it. At 3am he tells three sons to guide me back to Garaina. 'You tell our story', he says in farewell, 'of how we were mighty men in those days, defeating the bush kanakas. All of us, *masta* Taylor, *masta* Black, Habana, all the rest, and me.' 'I'll try', I promise. 'Oh you will do it', he declares, 'I know that already.' On the track his eldest son, Jim Taylor, stops near Kamuna's grave. The men will not go close, but I pay my respects. When I return to Lae, I find that Kamuna's children there have not learnt of his death.¹¹

Consider all this from Kobubu's point of view. The day after Kamuna is buried, leaving Kobubu the last of the Hagen–Sepik police from the Waria, a white man arrives barefoot, says he has come from John Black, recognises the house as the same as Black's at Telefomin 50 years before, knows many small details Kobubu has half-forgotten, says he must leave in the middle of the night to catch a plane, and asks about sorcery! Kobubu was an intelligent, knowledgeable man. He had been policeman, soldier and local government councillor — a man well versed in the white world and white thinking. He might have decided that, while of course sorcery shaped these occurrences, I was unaware of that, and told me no more than the straightforward narrative he began our talk with. But he concluded that Black had directed me to him, and that I was aware of sorcery. So he said or confirmed enough about sorcery to convey a narrative entirely

¹¹ Photograph of Kobubu in Gammage, *Sky Travellers*, facing 189. Talk to Kobubu Airia of Aro, Morobe Province, 2 Oct. 1987.

different from what was otherwise possible, not only of the patrol but of the nature of first contact. For me, he opened a door on sorcery. For him, what the patrol changed was not belief in sorcery, but in who was best at it. That turned out to be Black, so Kobubu, too, had to rethink who whites were, and what powers they had. Fifty years later, that led him to reveal extraordinary confidences and insights.

Why does the behaviour of Europeans, including on academic fieldwork which most of us take to be entirely natural, so readily raise the spectre of sorcery among New Guineans? I repeat that New Guinea sorcery assumes that it can control both natural and supernatural by the same means. Of course natural and supernatural are not the same: there is a world of people, and a world of spirits and ancestors. But the boundary between them is weak, and both are subject to the same laws, so both can be treated similarly. Sorcery means pragmatic and hard-headed assessment of circumstance based on experience, then solutions which Europeans would say are of two kinds, but New Guineans would say are part of the same thing — commonsense judgements about how to act or respond, plus appeals for natural and supernatural help, via alliances, spells and so on. In such a world view, whether something is natural or supernatural matters to some extent, because that points to the best remedy, but finally is immaterial, because the same process controls both. So any circumstance, whether or not involving Europeans, brings the possibility of sorcery into play.

In general, New Guineans consider that whites have little or no powers of sorcery, because they do not believe in it. That makes them vulnerable. They can be influenced without their knowing it. I would say that, when New Guineans first meet Europeans, or any outsiders, that is the attitude they take. But, with Black, that attitude changed dramatically and, with me, it changed on such slight acquaintance that the change cannot have been natural. Black was revealed as a great sorcerer because he had power, and that showed he had knowledge. I was thought a sorcerer because I had knowledge, more exactly unexpected knowledge, in that sense unnatural knowledge, and therefore power. Just as with Habana, knowledge signified power, and power was evidence of sorcery. Being European, Black and I also had wealth, that other sign of power but, unlike most Europeans, who combine wealth with ignorance, an unnatural combination, we combined wealth with knowledge, at least of some things. We were typical sorcerers.

In addition, both Black and I wanted to know more. Far more than other whites of his time, Black probed to learn more of what he called the 'native underworld'. That probing is characteristic of the sorcerer. Before 1938, Habana knew much, but went home often to learn more. No matter how much a sorcerer knows, he or she seeks always to know more, to extend his or her control. How else to explain my knowing much but seeking such small details as where Gabriel's tree was, and what 'Suni' meant, and whether the Sirunki men thought the pay for Maitingi was enough?

Most important of all in my case, I was in the right place at the right time. That is a sign of spiritual favour. It was remarkable that I should ask Gabriel of all people for help, or meet Nilak a month before I met Suni, or tell details of Maitingi's death that his clan never suspected, or reach the Waria the day after Kamuna was buried and be the first to pay respects at his grave, or walk barefoot into Kobubu's camp just as John Black had 50 years before. For New Guineans, such coincidences demand explanation. We Europeans don't try to explain them. We, who pride ourselves on probing the nature of things (it is the Australian National University's motto), say that such things are chance. We take pride in our ability to explain, but resorting to chance, luck, coincidence, miracle, is a great weakness in our explaining. Is it any wonder that not only New Guineans, but many peoples throughout the world, keep to their old ways of thinking rather than adopt ours? Is it surprising that, having heard how we explain, they remain curious, wanting to know more, wanting to probe far beyond where we leave off? We need to learn more sorcery.

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