

## Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in PNG Part 6: Catalysts of Accusation and Violence

Miranda Forsyth, Ibolya Losoncz, Philip Gibbs, Fiona Hukula & William Kipongi In Brief 2021/6

This is the sixth In Brief on the findings from a quantitative analysis of sorcery accusation-related violence (SARV) in Papua New Guinea (PNG). We report on an incident database of recorded SARV cases (including incidents of accusation with no physical violence and those that involved violence) in four provinces over a four-and-a-half year period (January 2016–June 2020). Here, we reflect on what we have learnt about the factors that catalyse accusations of sorcery and consider which factors are salient in causing accusations to turn into violence. We consider three dimensions of the landscape in which the potential of SARV is situated:

1. Conducive structural factors — essential or conducive structural factors relevant to the development of SARV;
2. Proximate factors — shorter term, localised factors that provide the enabling environment; and
3. Trigger events that are closely connected with actual accusation.

### Structural factors

One conducive structural factor that came through strongly in our research is a shared worldview in which the spirit world intervenes in the physical through human agency. This worldview is often activated through stories or narratives about sorcery, how it is used and by whom. The role of these narratives was elaborated in a recent paper (Forsyth and Gibbs 2021) in which we argued that such stories attribute causes of, denote agency over and dictate appropriate responses to ill fortune in ways that stigmatise particular individuals. These stories also play a significant role in occasioning and justifying courses of action, including violence.

In Enga, the narrative is about the *sanguma* (magical) spirit that enters women and causes them to eat the hearts of others. Our database reveals that in 46 per cent of the incidents in Enga, the female victim was accused of taking or eating the heart of someone. In an additional 14 per cent of the cases, the victim was accused of killing someone by sorcery.

In Bougainville, the predominant narrative is about the *poisenman* (sorcerer) often using food scraps to poison others. In 77 per cent of the Bougainville incidents in our database, the

male victim was accused of poisoning someone.

In the National Capital District (NCD), there is a broader range of narratives, but all within a magical worldview. In 35 per cent of the incidents in our NCD database, the victim was accused of killing someone by sorcery or sending a ‘spirit of death’. This was followed by ‘strange’ behaviour (20 per cent), which ranged from ‘eating food reserved for children’ to ‘flying like a flying fox’. While the gender split of victims accused of sorcery in the NCD is even, accusations of causing the death of someone and using a spell are notably higher amongst males than females. In Jiwaka, the dominant narrative of accusation is killing someone by magical powers (52 per cent), followed by poisoning someone (17 per cent) and making someone sick (11 per cent).

### Proximate factors

Proximate factors that lead to heightened emotions and social enmity, such as pre-existing conflict or tension, were commonly reported in our data. In 82 per cent of cases,<sup>2</sup> there was a pre-existing conflict or tension between the main person who made the accusation and the first person accused. These tensions most commonly included land disputes (35 per cent) followed by different forms of jealousies, especially jealousy over money and goods (26 per cent). Land disputes were particularly high in Jiwaka (65 per cent) and Bougainville (56 per cent), while different forms of jealousy were higher in Enga (64 per cent), followed by NCD (55 per cent).

We wanted to understand what role these proximate factors play in predicting whether an accusation turns to violence. In Enga, we found that violent incidents were statistically significantly higher when involving a previous dispute/grievance (25 per cent) compared to non-violent incidents (one per cent). Further, statistically fewer violent incidents involved jealousy over money and goods (13 per cent) than non-violent incidents (52 per cent). The other outstanding difference was that in Jiwaka, there were considerably higher numbers of land disputes associated with violence. However, this did not reach statistical significance, mainly because of low sample size, as we started collecting data later in Jiwaka.

## Trigger events

Trigger events tend to act like highly flammable kindling, enabling the release or channelling of energy built up through the structural and proximate factors. In nearly all cases (99 per cent), there was an immediate trigger incident preceding an accusation. The death of a person was the highest trigger incident type (50 per cent), followed by sickness (37 per cent) or economic misfortune (six per cent). Regional variation in the prevalence of these three types of trigger incidents is relatively small. In terms of which trigger incidents are more likely to lead to violence, we found the proportion of cases with death as the catalyst that sparked the accusation was significantly higher (64 per cent) in violent incidents than in non-violent incidents (44 per cent).

We also wanted to know how an individual became accused as a result of a trigger incident. The most common mechanisms were to be named by the person (or relatives of the person) believed to have been harmed or killed by sorcery (39 per cent); having been seen near a person believed to have been harmed/killed by sorcery (22 per cent); or being identified by a *glasman/glasmeri* (diviner) (19 per cent). The proportion of victims accused by identification by a *glasman/glasmeri* was significantly higher in Jiwaka (46 per cent).

In cases where more than one person was accused of sorcery (30 per cent of all accusations), the other accused were identified as a result of being named by the person first accused (34 per cent); being in a close family relationship with the person first accused (28 per cent); or trying to save or defend the person first accused (16 per cent). Being accused because of a family relationship is especially high in Jiwaka (91 per cent), where most incidents involve entire families being accused of sorcery.

## Trends and observations

Though the distribution of the characteristics of victims of violent incidents is largely the same as victims of all accusation incidents, there are a few notable differences:

- In Enga, violent accusation incidents were significantly more likely to have more than one accused (66 per cent) than non-violent accusation incidents (22 per cent). While a similar trend was also observable in Bougainville (28 per cent violent, 18 per cent non-violent) and NCD (37 per cent violent, 20 per cent non-violent), the magnitude of the difference was considerably smaller.
- In Enga and Bougainville, accusation incidents were significantly more likely to have turned violent against victims who were originally from another community.
- In Enga and NCD, accusation incidents were significantly more likely to have turned violent against victims who had no schooling and victims who were accused before.
- In Enga, the chance of an accusation turning violent nearly doubled if the first accused victim had been

accused before.

- Two additional statistically significant factors in predicting violence following accusations were how precise the accusation made against the individual actually was, and whether or not it involved an allegation that the accused had caused death. In other words, the level of violence associated with the accusation of sorcery correlates with the level of violence directed towards the accused. Thus, accusing an individual of having caused death through eating a person's heart was more strongly associated with violence than generally accusing someone of having cursed someone or made someone sick.

The specific content of accusations tended to adhere closely to the dominant narrative about sorcery in the relevant location. Accusations framed within a location's dominant sorcery narrative also increased the likelihood of violence. In Enga, the accusation of causing someone's death — either by eating their heart (the most prevalent narrative) or by methods unspecified — is significantly higher amongst victims of violent incidents than non-violent incidents. In Jiwaka, the accusation of causing someone's death (methods unspecified) is significantly higher amongst victims of violent incidents than non-violent incidents. In Bougainville, the accusation of poisoning someone is significantly higher amongst victims of violent incidents than non-violent incidents. Finally, in NCD, the accusation of making someone sick is significantly higher amongst victims of violent incidents than non-violent incidents.

*This research is supported by the Australian Government in partnership with the Government of Papua New Guinea as part of the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development program.*

## Author notes

Miranda Forsyth (ANU); Ibolya Losoncz (ANU); Philip Gibbs (Divine Word University); Fiona Hukula (PNG National Research Institute); and William Kipongi (PNG National Research Institute).

## Endnotes

1. The start date for the NCD data was January 2017 and March 2019 for Jiwaka.
2. There was some regional variation, with pre-existing conflict/tension being highest in Jiwaka (95 per cent) and lowest in Bougainville (73 per cent).

## References

Forsyth, M. and P. Gibbs 2021. [Causal Stories and the Role of Worldviews in Analysing Responses to Sorcery Accusations and Related Violence](#). *Foundations of Science*.

