

The issue of sorcery and witchcraft-related accusations and violence in Papua New Guinea is receiving increasing attention domestically and internationally. A growing body of literature is also focusing on the issue, providing non-government organisations, donor agencies, and the Papua New Guinea government with an evidence base for addressing the problem in locally appropriate ways. Little of the literature, however, deliberates upon the perpetrators of these violent attacks. This is a serious shortcoming, since if culturally appropriate and meaningful prevention strategies are to be developed, there is a need to understand the worldview of the perpetrators and the factors propelling their violent, often repeated, attacks.

This *In Brief* reports on interviews undertaken in November and December 2013 in Goroka with eight perpetrators who had been involved in 13 attacks on people accused of witchcraft. The attacks occurred between 1997 and 2013, and included 32 victims, 27 of whom died as a result.<sup>1</sup> The attacks support the common view that witchcraft, or *sanguma* as it is called, is spreading into parts of the province where, it is believed, it did not previously exist. Witchcraft is a form of possession by one or more witch-spirit beings, which cause their human hosts to lose volition and to become witches (see Eves 2013). Although witches can be male or female, women are more often believed to be witches, the reason said to be that the female body is more anatomically suited for the witch-spirit, which can make its home in the womb. For men, the witch-spirit resides in the genitals. Most of the attacks recorded during the research were against women, with 30 of the 32 victims being women, and 25 of the 27 murders being of women. Place of residence after marriage appears to have a major bearing on this, since women move to their husband's village, thus becoming vulnerable outsiders.

Accusations, and the violence that follows, occur when someone is seriously ill or dies. The witch is

said to have extracted and hidden the sick person's heart, so that coercion against an accused witch may lead to the heart being returned and the ill person's health being restored. Death is said to result because the witch has eaten the heart. Regardless of the conclusions of a hospital autopsy report, considerable speculation as to the cause occurs, especially if the deceased was an important person or leader, was in his or her prime, or the death was sudden and unexpected. Only deaths of the very elderly are not considered a result of witchcraft.

Witch-hunts are referred to as 'operations' and are justified by taking the view that 'rubbish' (*pipia*), 'weeds' (*gras no gut*), or 'dangerous snakes' (*snek no gut*) must be removed from the community. The respondents targeted from one to five victims, who were subjected to extreme violence — which usually involved prolonged physical, sexual, and emotional torture — and were killed, although two involved only beatings. The brutality was defended by variously expressed beliefs that witches have the power to withstand such attacks. The perpetrators (and others) consistently commented that witches do not experience being cut or burnt, that their skin is like 'rubber' and knives simply 'bounce' off them, or that wounds inflicted by heated iron rods heal instantly. Several perpetrators claimed that victims who had been dismembered have been seen alive in other places because witches have the power to re-form (*join-join*).

The number of perpetrators involved in an attack ranged from one to 12. Perpetrators were always men, apart from one case that was initiated by a woman, who commenced the attack by torturing another woman she accused of killing her daughter. This attack concluded with the death of the woman at the hands of men of the community. Perpetrators were generally involved in one, two, or occasionally three attacks, though one man was involved in five attacks with 17 victims, all of whom were killed. In only one case were the

police involved, with six of nine perpetrators being arrested and then jailed for two and a half years.

There is a common view that the perpetrators are *drugbodis* — the idle, drug-taking youth of a community — but the research evidence shows a more complicated picture. Several of the perpetrators were in employment, and one attack involved five members who worked for a well-known local security firm. While some of the perpetrators did use marijuana, only some did so prior to an attack. One perpetrator who was a regular consumer of marijuana said that he did not take drugs prior to attacks because he wished to remain focused. Another perpetrator, though not a consumer himself, claimed that those involved in attacks take drugs because it is the only way that they can engage in such extreme forms of violence. In the case he recounted, three of the five perpetrators were consumers of marijuana, including two who worked for a well-known business in Goroka.

It has been reported in the literature that the communities are often hostage to groups of 'boys', who terrorise the community during witch-hunts as an assertion of power (see Haley 2010 and Jorgensen 2013). However, the situation differs in the Eastern Highlands, where the research found only one example of this occurring. This was in a rural community in Ungaii-Bena District and involved nine perpetrators threatening both the community and the victims with weapons, including an AK47, an M16, a pump-action shotgun, and a pistol. All of the other attacks documented here were sanctioned by most community members, who were unanimous that the community needed cleansing of witches.

A number of the perpetrators interviewed were no longer involved in attacks, for various reasons. One man stopped being involved after being counselled by his family when they discovered that he had been involved in attacks. Another said that the local member of parliament had been speaking out against these kinds of vigilante attacks and he had heeded his call. A perpetrator who was involved in five attacks in the late 1990s said that at that time law and order was weak, but this is no

longer the case today, and he was fearful of being jailed for life. Unlike some of the others who have ceased their involvement in attacks, this man was totally unrepentant, believing that the government is protecting the witches and not the community.

At this preliminary stage of reporting, the research suggests that there is a need for a primary prevention approach — to address the violence before it takes place. This would entail working more closely with communities and, importantly, the perpetrators, because violent actions against accused witches are generally widely supported. Potential perpetrators in the community not only will begin to hear wider views as the issue is discussed, but may also realise that they cannot rely on community support.

## References

- Eves, R. 2013. Sorcery and Witchcraft in Papua New Guinea: Problems in Definition. *SSGM In Brief* 2013/12. Canberra: State, Society and Governance Program, Australian National University. <[http://ips.cap.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/SSGM%20IB%202013\\_12.pdf](http://ips.cap.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/SSGM%20IB%202013_12.pdf)>.
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## Endnote

- 1 Although sorcery has been raised as a common 'problem' in the Eastern Highlands, we recorded only one attack on an alleged sorcerer. This is not discussed here.

