



Graun Em Pulap Long Pipia: Rubbish, Sorcery, and Spiritual Healing, Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

Bapra Simi, an Ambonwari spiritual healer living in the border town of Vanimo in Papua New Guinea comments that the “Earth is full of rubbish” and associates this material overflow with the possible causes and consequences of sorcery. This short explanatory paper accompanies the video entitled *Bapra Simi, Glasmeri, Spiritual Healer, Papua New Guinea* (Vávrová, 2020), which follows Bapra Simi through her material and spiritual healing practices, and her articulation of how these practices are situated in the material and spiritual world.

Keywords: spiritual healing, materiality, visual anthropology, new materialism, Papua New Guinea

Graun em pulap long pipia

“**G**raun em pulap long pipia”, [“Earth is full of rubbish”], explains Bapra Simi, the Ambonwari spiritual healer in the video: *Bapra Simi, Glasmeri, Spiritual Healer, Papua New Guinea* (Vávrová, 2020) that accompanies and forms an integrative material aspect of this short explanatory paper.¹ She refers not only to the material rubbish on the beaches in the North-West PNG border town of Vanimo, and people getting sick from it, but mainly to the structural violence of traditional sorcery and poisoning caused by gossip, casting spells, and bad will. Strangers from other PNG provinces who pass through or settle in Vanimo, fear the local sorcery. And there are many strangers, for this border town with its tropical rainforest climate has an economy based on international logging, is a surfing destination, and foreign workers regularly pass through town to renew their visas.

This paper is particularly concerned with the social situation of a group of Ambonwari people who came from the Karawari region in East Sepik Province and who have to navigate life as urban dwellers in the town of Vanimo near the international border with Papua Indonesia. Focusing on the practices of a particular healer, Bapra Simi, the paper reflects on the way social conflict is materialised in bodily sickness, and how materially experienced sickness is both inflicted and healed through the invocation of spiritual forces. The accompanying video records the work of Bapra Simi as she cures her patient Edi of a swollen leg, while analysing his condition and offering an explanation of her healing practice.

Material Things, Social Relations, and Sorcery

One of my Ambonwari ‘relatives’ settled in Vanimo back in 1995. She married Adam from Madang, further east along the north coast, and they stayed in Vanimo. Her husband died of sorcery some years ago. She died in early 2020. Several other Ambonwari relatives followed her to Vanimo in the late 1990s and likewise settled there.² Some of her children got married in West Papua, Indonesia, but they live and go to school in the capital of Jayapura which lies closer to Papua New Guinea and Vanimo. They regularly visit each other. The family members often run small market stalls, exchanging and selling Indonesian clothes, tools, instant food, and so on. There is a shopping ‘heaven’ called Batas about 50 km from Vanimo on the international border between Indonesia and PNG. ‘Batas’ means border, and this is indeed a border market exchanging goods and currencies. Reselling goods from across the border at small local marketplaces is a very popular way of making money in PNG. Bapra Simi

¹ <https://vimeo.com/709443632>. Password: BapraSimi

² The author has long-term fieldwork experience with the Ambonwari community starting back in 2005. This data was collected on several occasions in the Ambonwari village (2007-2008, 2011), as well as in Vanimo during the latest visit to the community (2019).

continues her explanation of rubbish and sorcery stating that the Ambonwari men do nothing during the daylight but sleep, eat, and defecate (Vávrová, 2020, 08:28 – 08:34). It is women, who work all day, “24/7”, she says. Women are involved in the market. The men are afraid to go out and engage in business life. They do not want to be seen by others.

Figure 1. *Bapra Simi talking about the situation in Vanimo, PNG.*



Film screen capture by the author.

In the eyes of PNG Christian believers, sorcery as a concept is a result of inequalities and the weakening of social relationships (Humble, 2013). I wonder if the uninitiated men feel weaker, mentally and physically, than their initiated predecessors, their fathers and grandfathers. The initiation rituals functioned not only as a cosmological reproduction of the lifeworld, but also as a disciplinary and toughening exercise for the young novices growing into adulthood. Urban youth without financial support and healthy social relationships end up in the streets, stealing, abusing alcohol and drugs, irresponsibly begetting children, without any social and economic stability. Urban settlers often find themselves without regular income because of notorious corruption. The small markets that people make along the road are temporary and they earn little from selling everyday goods such as loose betel nuts, flour balls, cigarettes, biscuits, soft drinks, small portions of sago pudding wrapped in banana leaves, and cooked fish. There is usually no state control over this informal economy. However, I was told by the Ambonwari in Vanimo that when the COVID-19 outbreak happened, the police destroyed all the wooden stands people had in the central open market area to prevent large gatherings of people. Prior to the pandemic, my ‘father’ David told me that his

wife was all day at the market while he looked after their children. None of their children go to school. David showed me his string bag in which he always carries dry ginger for protection from evil spirits. He requested that I send him a pocket-sized Bible that he could carry with him anywhere in order to safeguard himself. I sent him one. David regularly spoke perfect English in order to encrypt our discussions from people listening in. Most of the people in the community speak either their local language or Tok Pisin, a Melanesian *lingua franca*.

Figure 2. Bapra Simi and Edi in the process of healing.



Film screen capture by the author.

Glasmeri* and *Poisonman

The name for a shaman in Melanesian Tok Pisin is *glasman* ‘glass-man’ or *glasmeri* ‘glass-woman’. Generally, a *glasman* is seen as anybody who can communicate with the spirits (Mihalic, 1986 [1971]). A *glasman* combines Christian belief and exorcism with some elements of traditional healing (Haiveta, 1990; Herbst, 2017). A shaman is a person who can shift subconscious and conscious awareness into the spiritual dimension, interact, and return at will. In PNG perception, the shaman uses the material object of a magnifying glass, spy-glass, or camera-zoom in his/her visions and dreams to bring things closer (Lattas, 2000). It is to reveal them, make them visible, bring them to light.

Glasman or *glasmeri* are the mediators between life and death whether they are addressed as shamans, diviners, prophets, cargo cult mediums, or spiritual healers.

The rise of Catholic charismatic churches and religious extremism can be identified as the precursor of an increase in sorcery practices emphasising Satan, the devil, and expelling evil spirits (Forsyth, 2016, p. 337). The mix of Christianity with sorcery beliefs and unreliable medical services makes people turn to God for healing (Barker, 2003).

A sorcerer, on the other hand, is someone who manipulates natural energy, also known as *sanguma* ('working magic'), for purposes of causing harm. In PNG a sorcerer is called a *poisonman* ('poison man'). A witch is not a person but a supernatural entity possessing the person. Witchcraft allegations tend to happen along lines of social tension. They erupt in waves, 'crazes' (Moro, 2018), and allegations of sorcery and witchcraft are deeply entrenched in gender-based violence, especially in the Highlands (Jolly et al., 2012; Eves, 2021). There are several current studies about sorcery and spiritual practices in PNG and elsewhere, and they all look at the negative aspects of those practices (Forsyth & Eves, 2015; Rio et al., 2017; Kauli & Thomas, 2020). These studies confirm that anybody can be a victim of a sorcery accusation: men, women, children, rich or poor. It is women, however, who are the major victims of sorcery accusation and, thus, it is characterized under the gender-based violence framework (Forsyth, 2016, p. 335). Consider numerous cases of burning witches in the Highlands of PNG. Those women, accused of being witches, were torched and burned to death and it was a *glasman* who confirmed their 'malevolent acts'. Their torture and deaths clearly demonstrate the gender-based nature of sorcery-related violence (Gibbs, 2012). The *glasman* decides who to kill and who to let live.

A sorcerer is usually power oriented and dominates others. If someone suddenly dies, although it could be interpreted as an accident or a natural disaster, a sorcerer or *poisonman* might be blamed. In other circumstances, people say: "*em i gat sik bilong ples*" ['He/she has village-sickness']. It is a health issue that arises from the disruption of social relationships. The cure must involve finding out who is angry with whom. Conflicts must be settled, and usually they are settled by giving betel nuts and food, after which the "hospital medicine" (the pharmaceuticals) will work for the patient as well. In the past, in Vanimo, there used to be a compensation paid "long kilim tok" ['to stop the criticism'] in order to resolve a social dispute between two parties and restore relations (Banks, 1999).

Spiritual Matter

In cases of both witchcraft and sorcery it is a spiritual matter (Moro, 2018). Similar to Evans-Pritchard's (1937) observations among the Azande³ regarding their belief in magic, Bapra explains how Edi stepped over something in the doorway which caused

³ The Azande are a diverse ethnic group traditionally spread from southern Sudan to the semitropical rainforests near the borders of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

his leg to swell up (Vávrová, 2020, 01:30 – 01:40). Bapra suggests that there was ‘working magic’ making Edi sick.

Bapra explains that there are people who go to Church all the time, but they do not heal people. They pray and pray, but they still do sins (Vávrová, 2020, 09:23 – 09:30). Bapra’s success in healing the victims of sorcery is that she is ‘clean’ without sin, with no regrets (Vávrová, 2020, 03:08 – 03:18). Healing is about personal commitment, good will, and repairing broken relationships while reflecting upon one’s own relationship with God. We can observe this when Bapra says at the end of the video: “The important thing is to thank God for the gift he gave to me to help Edi” (Vávrová, 2020, 21:49 – 21:58).

Figure 3. Importance of touch.



Film screen capture by the author.

She also explains that it is particularly female saints, women mentioned in the Bible, who possess healing powers emitted through their hands. Bapra analyses a dream Edi had of someone rubbing a hand on his swollen leg which then reduced the swelling. She states: “It was an angel’s hand. Rafael is the boss of Healing ministry. Female hand was of Virgin Mary, Lucy, or Magdala, Rafael’s sisters having the saint oil [on their hands]. They will rub the oil on you” (Vávrová, 2020, 14:19 – 14:54).

Bapra Simi and Spiritual Materialities

What are Bapra's specific revelations when healing that are different to other ways of exorcism? Bapra heals the way a traditional *glasmeri* would do, as the video shows. She heals by seeing and communicating with the spirits in her dreams, bringing clarity closer to her and explaining her doings to the victims. Bapra did not accuse anybody in particular of the sorcery that caused Edi's leg to swell up. She saw someone, dressed in black, with a cap on his head, who was near Edi and his family in her revelatory dream. She felt the evil energy but did not call out any name or blame anybody in particular. She blocked the negative pathways. The video shows the revelations Bapra and Edi had were positive. She stopped the bad powers from coming close to Edi. She heals with prayers and by speaking in tongues. She heals by touch and by pulling an imaginative thread on a physical piece of wood to twirl the pain out of Edi's leg. We see her doing a creative healing act, an interrogation with the spirits and revelation of the pain in the context of material processes and relationality between human and non-human worlds (Barad, 2007; Bubandt, 2017; Chao, 2019, 2022; Herrmans, 2020).

Figure 4. Bapra Simi uses a wooden stick to loop Edi's pain on to it.



Film screen capture by the author.

Bapra's active engagement with the world is creative, it is a form of *poiesis* (Lundberg, 2008) and involves the practice of healing through a detailed and embodied engagement with intertwining relations of the material and spiritual. Moreover, the

dialogic healing of human and non-human forces is obvious and lingers in the entanglement of divine forces in *sympoiesis* (Haraway, 2015; 2017). Bapra heals those who were poisoned by the sorcery and bad will. “Graun em pulap long pipia”, [‘Earth is full of rubbish’], says Bapra. She animates sorcery and bad will through the contemporary articulation of discarded material objects, the poisonous overflow of material. She uses Catholic Charismatic expression when explaining the Bible, God, and their holiness. When Bapra speaks in tongues, incorporated are aspects of traditional healing, and words and names expressed in her mother tongue – Karawari language (Telban, 1998). Equally, she voices passages and names from the Bible in Tok Pisin. Although, at the end of the video we see Edi’s leg still swollen, we are convinced that it will sooner or later be back to normal (Eves, 2021). Edi is free of the social tensions and can fully recover, concludes Bapra (Vávrová, 2020, 20:58 – 21:16).

Figure 5. *The whole family watches the healing procedure.*



Film screen capture by the author.

While not being able to travel to PNG due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I regularly videocall the Ambonwari in Vanimo. Bapra has told me that Edi is back home in Wewak in the East Sepik province. “He is doing really well”, she has confirmed. The example, presented here, reflects the possibility to reconnect to, and navigate through, the ancestral networks in a more pragmatic way and in concrete ongoing liveability (Herrmans, 2020). These networks are tightly connected to Earth, spirits, and wellbeing. The discarded material poisoning the planet could be compared to Bapra’s spiritual poisoning. Healing, as Bapra shows, is the way to keep souls and bodies alive in a relationally constituted ecology of selves or *ongoingness* (Haraway, 2015). She



preserves contact with the spiritual forces relevant to continued life whether it is in PNG or Indonesia where she regularly goes and heals across the border. “Earth is full of rubbish” and there is a need to create new pathways to recovery and new spiritual creativity.

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