

PRIMITIVE PAPUAN IDEAS: BODY AND SPIRIT.

A Draft Manuscript by

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(Transcribed by Kim Akerman)

The primitive Papuans have their own peculiar explanations of the mysteries of human life. In regard to birth, their idea of conception includes the transfer of a spirit from TUMA – the home of the spirits underneath the land and sea – and the placing of it where a body will grow around it. The corollary is that when the body is born some of its features will be like those of the particular forefather whose spirit it encloses.

After careful examination of a newborn babe, the relatives give to it the name of the ancestor whom in appearance it resembles. On one occasion I met with a striking instance of the belief in transmigration. I was chatting with a high chief and he gave me the names of his predecessors in the Chiefship of his tribe. Among a score of names recited, his own - Enamakala – occurred at intervals four or five times. At each mention of his name he touched his breast and said – “Myself”! The natives think that while they are sleeping their spirits wander at will, and so in dreams they keep in touch with TUMA. A man, whom I knew well went into a trance during a severe illness. On his recovery he told some wonderful tales of his meeting and mixing with the spirits of his dead relations and friends. At the death of the body the spirit returns once more to its old home in the spirit world.

An eminent authority has expressed the opinion that the Snake Cult in Kiriwina is an ancient form of veneration and worship connected with ancestors, and he declared that no native will kill a snake.

The circumstances associated with my first view of ophiolatry by the natives appeared to me to confirm this theory. While walking through the village one afternoon I came upon a group of men seated and silent. Their attitude was so unusual that I enquired why they were so quiet. One of them said – “the snake”! I asked “which snake?” Pointing with his hand he replied “That one there on the yam house”. Stepping forward I saw a small snake lying asleep on a ledge of the yam house. I asked – “What does this mean?” The men then explained that whenever a snake came inside the boundaries of a village it carried in its body a spirit that had come from TUMA with the evil design of causing the death of one of the villagers. “Why does the spirit desire to do this?” I enquired. “We do not know” was the reply, “but we do know that if he remains here someone will die”. During the time we were talking, any native – man or woman – passing the place would

stop and, bowing low in obeisance and worship, would pray to the snake for permission to pass. Noticing several shell armlets and other things laid out in front of the snake, I asked why they were placed there. The reply was – “They are a peace-offering. We have pleaded with the snake to accept them and go away, But he refuses to go.” I suggested that they should kill the snake. “Ah”, cried one of them, “Any one of us would certainly lose his life if he killed the snake”. Knowing that I had shot some large snakes that came to rob my fowl-roost, one of them asked me to kill the snake. Borrowing one of their clearing knives I cut the reptile into a number of pieces which my cook-boy carried away outside the village at the request of the men and to their evident relief. A native woman who came near and heard of the killing of the snake, broke into loud wailing and cried out that someone would suffer death because of it. I told her that I would take the responsibility and suffer the consequences of my action but she refused to be comforted.

Mind and Matter: Sorcery and Sickness.

Prior to their contact with the white men the Papuans had no concept concerning the nature of disease in the human body, or any idea of curative medicine. Severe illness, causing debility and death, was attributed to the malicious magic of the sorcerer. As, in fighting, an enemy throws his spears which wound and kill, so the sorcerer, in spite or revenge, injects into the interior of the body of his victim small weapons of wood or stone which bring pain and death. The natives cannot explain this injection but they certainly believe that he accomplishes his purpose.

When the relations of a sick person notice that his illness is serious, they seek the aid of a friendly sorcerer whom they are willing to pay for overcoming the power of the offending magician and extracting his deadly darts. The first operation of this kind which I witnessed was performed on a young man who, from the description of his pain, I concluded was suffering from pleurisy.

With accompanying incantations, the sorcerer started on his task by feeling the affected part of the body in order to locate the intruding articles. He then seized with his thumb and finger a portion of the skin and gave a sudden jerk upwards, at the same time loosening his grip. Holding his arm out stiffly as if he were carefully carrying something he turned and walked along the path for a short distance away from the patient. Suddenly he stooped and, thrusting his hand down smartly, he snatched a small piece stick out of the dust on the ground. Turning round he held up the stick for the sick man to see and then threw it away. Standing beside the sorcerer as he did this, I said to him – “You picked up that stick out of the path”. He said “No I did not. When I drew it out of his body it came between my thumb and finger and went up into my shoulder. As I dashed my hand downwards the stick came down through my arm and out into my hand. Come and see me get another”.

I watched him repeat his trick a number of times without any variation in his actions. I noticed that each time he held up a stick the patient gave a deep sigh of relief, and at the end of the operation he declared that his pain was gone. Whether the sorcerer was guilty

of self-deception I had no means of learning, but the satisfactory ending of the operation demonstrates clearly the triumph of mind over matter.

Another sorcerer, whom I watched at his work of extraction, declared, after examination of the sick person, that small spears inside the body were causing the illness. The patient was laid on a platform outside the house and relatives were seated on the ground to watch the proceedings. This magician claimed that by his wizardry he would cause the spears to fly out of the body into the air.

He began walking round about the platform reciting his incantations and waving his hands over the patient's body. At length he called out – "The spears are free, they are in the air", and the people crouched low for fear one might strike them. Shouting – "Here is one", he stretched his arm out into the air and, to the amazement of the watching crowd, he held in his hand a thin piece of the wood that spears are made of, about ten inches in length. Then, jumping about here and there and crying aloud as he made his grab high in the air, he secured six or seven of the weapons and handed them to the relatives. Having noticed that the sorcerer had a small wickerwork basket on his breast suspended with a string around his neck, I put out my hand as if to touch the basket and said – "What is this"? The answer was a fierce snarl which, with an angry scowl, stopped me from enquiring any further. But it was patent to me that, with sleight of hand he had drawn the spears from his basket, while his rapid movements and bird cries served to distract the attention of the watchers. He had acted his part very cleverly, however, and as all concerned, including the patient were pleased with the result, he deserved his fee. After some time had elapsed I managed to purchase the small spears and kept them as mementoes of an interesting experience.

The chief sorcerer in the large village near my home, whose name was Pulitara, was held in great reverence and fear because of his famous skill and success as a magician. On one of my usual walks through the village, I saw a woman walking up and down near her home and evidently in great distress. In answer to my enquiry as to why she was so sad she held up a little grass petticoat and said – "This is the petticoat of my daughter who died yesterday". I asked her – "What caused your child's death"?

Looking round to assure herself that no one could overhear what she said she replied – "Pulitara"! "What had he to do with it", I asked. Speaking in a whisper she said – "Pulitara says the word and we die". Then away she went again, to and fro, moaning and crying in her great grief.

In the course of the years Pulitara and I were on friendly terms and he did not hesitate to talk freely of his methods of practicing sorcery. He would speak as callously about causing the death of human beings as if he were referring to the killing of animals. We were seated on my front verandah one day, and chattering as usual when he said to me – "You see that man out there walking towards his village. Well if I set my eyes on him and *o nanogu* – in my mind I say – 'You go home and die', he goes home and he dies". Thus he claimed that he possessed the power of the evil-eye. He went on to say – "I have other ways of bringing about the death of people. One is by using the leaves of trees. I

go into the bush and gather leaves from various kinds of trees. In the night I make a fire on the floor of my house, and putting the leaves into my sacred cooking pot I boil them. As they are boiling I keep stirring them while I am speaking into them the incantations which causes death. I am the only person who knows the kinds of leaves required and the words of the incantation. Before I die I shall pass on my knowledge to my relative Togiassi, who will be my successor. When the leaves are ready I take them from the pot and, in the dead of night, I go out and lay them on the doorway of the house in which the man I wish to kill, lies asleep. Coming out of his house in the morning he walks over the leaves without seeing them. Presently he turns towards the door and sees the leaves. He instantly feels the pain in his stomach, and pressing his hands upon it, he cries out – ‘The leaves! The leaves! I have stepped over the leaves! Oh the pain!!’ In a short time he dies”.

I may say that no case of this kind came under my notice during the time in which I lived near that village. The reputation and record of Pulitara as a sorcerer however were evidence that his claim was not mere idle boasting. To me, the most significant factor in sorcery was the absolute confidence placed in the power of the spoken incantations to produce the effect of sickness and death in its victim.
