

The Traditional Treatment of Illness in the Kiripia Area

Introduction

In this short paper I shall outline briefly the traditional approaches to sickness found in the Palnol area of Kiripia parish, which is part of the Giluwe council area of the Western Highlands Province. I shall describe the traditional specialists who ministered to the sick, the various causes of illness and the corresponding treatments administered.

Types of Traditional Ministers

When I was preparing this paper, I called together seven men to discuss the subject with me. These seven included a man who is a practitioner of traditional medicine. In our language he is called *opipi-ye*. If a member of the community is convinced that he is the target of a poisoning, then he (or his family) call for the *opipi-ye*. The doctor undertakes these assignments only when asked by the victim or his family. He cannot become involved at will. This particular doctor was not involved with such medicine from his early years. It was around the age of 22-25 years that he became interested in this work. Because of his personal interest in the art, he went to seek another man who was a long time practitioner of such traditional medicine. He asked the older doctor to take him as a student or apprentice. Of course, this young man did not learn from books, but from the oral instruction of the older man. However, there were fees to be paid to the senior *opipi-ye* when the schooling was complete. These fees were paid with kina-shells and pig. Should the son of an *opipi-ye* want to learn the craft, then he had no difficulty learning from his father, with no fees or other problems involved. In these two ways a man could become a new *opipi-ye*.

Another man among the seven I had called together was a 'middle-man'. In our language he is called *haga-ye*. He stands between the community and the spirits of their recently dead. His more precise role is to translate the talk of the people still living and of those recently dead, so there will be mutual understanding.

If you were to ask me, 'How does this man become an intermediary between the living and the dead?', I would answer as follows: If a man is very young he is not able to perform this function. But around the age of 21 or so, he will start to exhibit these signs—violent trembling, speaking in strange tongues, and apparent madness in which he goes everywhere armed with bow and arrow. Sometimes he will kill a pig, or take food from other peoples' gardens and carry it to his own place. When the community sees these things, they say: 'This man will become our mediator (*haga-ye*) with the spirits of our dead'.

When he is thus acknowledged by the community, he makes a journey deep into the bush. He finds a certain kind of tree (something like a fir-tree used at Christmas). He digs this tree out, complete with its roots. He then carries it to his place. Sometimes, too, he will capture a *kapul* (possum), and bring it to live in his home. While he is doing all these things he also speaks in strange languages.

His final action is to go to the home of another *haga-ye*. This will be a well established *haga-ye* with much knowledge of the work. Here, he will receive complete instruction in the work for which he has been marked.

The new *haga-ye* traditionally pays his teacher with kina-shells, with a stone axe, or with pig, in gratitude for sharing his knowledge. The new mediator now begins his work, being the two-way channel of communication between the people and their dead relatives or friends. The people now fully recognise him as *haga-ye*, and they attribute his selection for this work to one of the new *haga-ye*'s own recently dead relatives. The *haga-ye*, still living, has become a true friend and confidant of the spirits.

Now his duties begin. He is able to assist members of the community whose illness is suspected to be related to the influence of a dead person. Again, his services must be requested by the people suffering this illness. He does not take on such work of his own accord. When duly requested, he comes to find out just what the root-cause of the illness is.

As to the remaining five men in our group, they are *elders* who know all about the old ways. They are Church members, but are still immersed in traditional belief. They straddle the two beliefs. Why are they in this position? The reason is an interesting reflection of the difference between the old and new traditions. When the missionaries first came to this part of Papua New Guinea the priests baptised the people. But the people did not really understand the full significance of baptism. They thought it was a mysterious rite with

power that surpassed the power of the old gods. They heeded the missionaries when they said, 'Your old ways are wrong. They are not good.' The people were quick to accept this and receive baptism. But, shortly, they found the new religion did not work as they had hoped. Those whose belief was shallow became disillusioned. They had been used to manipulating the spirits and gods in their world, in order to receive something desired. Now they found that Christians must simply wait on the will of the Father. If the Father wished to help them in a certain way, then that was one thing. But if He wished to help in an unforeseen or unwanted way, then that too had to be accepted. God was not to be manipulated. The Christian God invited belief and then obedience to His will. But men still had other ideas.

This disillusionment led them to return to the old ways. But they did not abandon the new religion. They kept a foot in both camps. They still tried the new prayers, for some of the new rites were similar to those of their own tradition, or at least the people thought so, and thus two sets of beliefs merged. Then, if the results were not satisfactory, they would try asking the catechist for prayers. When the need arose they might go to see the *haga-ye* or an *opipi-ye*.

Causes and Treatment of Illness

Each man, woman, and child finds security and warmth in his own clan, family, and place. There, each person finds mutual dependence. They all work for each other in gardening or in hunting. They build houses and rear children together. All works of community living are done together.

But this harmony is threatened when one of the community members becomes sick. Now the people experience anxiety and pity. The family of the sick man gathers to discuss what offence may have been committed that could have caused this illness in their midst.

Within a short time, the neighbours are also invited to come and sympathise with the patient. They, too, make their contributions as to the possible cause of the illness. Not having much medical knowledge of sicknesses, they tend to blame the illness on one of the community's recently dead members—a father, mother or brother. They suspect that the family has failed to make a suitable offering to this spirit. This neglect, it is thought, prompts the spirit concerned to inflict the punishment of a sickness. What the community really has to find out is this: exactly who has sent this illness?

Illness through poison

Firstly, they check the obvious symptoms; whether the patient is

unable to sleep through the night and whether his body is generally weak.

If the patient has been secretly given *poisen* then the following symptoms are also observed: the skin is flushed and hot, there is bleeding of the nose, and the face is swollen. The thing to do then is call in the traditional doctor (*opipi-ye*). He will use his own specialised knowledge of herbal medicine, using various leaves such as *kumul*, ginger root and *pitpit*, and include salt manufactured in the bush. The *pitpit* is cooked in the fire, then the outer layers are removed. The core of the *pitpit* is then cooked with ginger root until it is soft and pulpy. The patient is then given this to eat.

The doctor then waits for an hour or so until the patient defecates. The faeces are then examined for signs of the different foods the patient has recently eaten. The doctor is able to detect the remains of *kaukau*, or pig meat, or corn, or other foods. When he has identified the problem food, he informs the family, who verify his findings. This food is felt to be the one which has poisoned the patient. The family supports this diagnosis.

They then question the patient as to who gave him that particular food, and where it was given. When the patient tells them, they have then identified the guilty party, and the matter is filed for future revenge.

After this, the family nominate a day when the doctor must return. In the meantime they will prepare to kill a pig. When the appointed time arrives and the doctor returns, the pig is killed and eaten.

When the pig is ready to be eaten, the doctor prepares its husk for the patient. He then calls the name of a big local river, and all the known places along its length, because the river must purge the patient of all the poison in his system, so that the illness will not recur. This will ensure his complete recovery.

Illness caused by spirits

But if it is thought that the spirit of a dead community member has caused the sickness, then, the people seek out a mediator (*haga-ye*). When the *haga-ye* arrives he makes initial inquiries about the possible cause of illness. The people reply that they suspect a spirit, but do not know which one. The *haga-ye* undertakes to find the spirit's identity.

The procedure involves a spear and the leafy branch of a tree. The branch is inserted in the fence surrounding the patient's house. He then makes a hole in the fence and passes part of the spear through this hole.

The *haga-ye* then grasps one end of the spear, leaving the end on the opposite side of the fence free. He then calls on the spirit responsible for the illness to make himself present. The spirit thus conjured grasps the free end of the spear and pulls it towards

himself. The *haga-ye* responds by pulling the spear back to his side of the fence. This pattern is repeated all the while that the family is reciting the names of all the dead relatives of the sick man. When the correct name is hit upon, the spirit releases his hold on the spear and the *haga-ye* no longer feels resistance to his pull.

Thus the responsible spirit is identified. The following prayer is then recited by the family: "We wish to give you a pig. Tomorrow, or the day after. Let this man sleep well tonight, and do not inflict any more pain on him."

The *haga-ye* realises that the patient has failed to make the necessary offering to his dead relative and the sickness is a punishment designed to correct the man's future behaviour regarding offering. The *haga-ye* urges the family to make the offering of a pig, lest the patient die.

With the advice, the family goes to the site where traditionally the skulls of their dead are kept. This is the customary place for making offerings. The site is cleared and tended, and the old house holding the skulls is demolished and a new one is made. When the skulls are re-housed, the following prayer (called *popotomul* or *popo* in our language) is said: "Tomorrow we will give you a pig; now you must let the sick man sleep well, and let him eat a little too."

When they pray, they do not call the name of the dead man, because the spirits of the dead do not like to be publicly named; they would punish such a breach with further sickness.

That night, after returning to their house, they will watch to see if the sick man eats and sleeps well. If so, they are confirmed in the diagnoses, and are now prepared to kill and offer the pig as promised.

When the pig is actually killed and prepared for eating, they will invite the *haga-ye* to come and receive his share of meat, along with some *kina* shells, a *bilum*, and some shell-beads. This is considered just reward for his valuable service in identifying the spirit who brought the illness. But one of the most important things they do is to express genuine gratitude—called in our language *paputekeno*.

Illness caused by offences

However, if a man is sick, and his relatives have tried both of the above ways (the services of *opipi-ye* and *haga-ye*) to no effect, and the man appears to be close to death, they will try a third method. They examine their own behaviour to see if there is some break in relationship between the sick man and themselves.

If they feel that the fault does not lie with them, then they will confront the man himself. They press him to say what secret wrong he has done to his family or clan.

The two chief external causes of sickness (*poisen* and spirit-inspired) have been checked but with negative result. Therefore the

fault must be an internal one. There is now a strong obligation for the sick man to confess clearly and truthfully some wrong which is still hidden.

If the sick man is conscious, the family ask him many questions concerning possible offences he could have committed: for example, has he stolen a pig from within the clan? Has he slept with a brother's wife? Slandered a relative or friend? Many other questions of this kind are asked. This constant questioning penetrates the consciousness of the sick man. If he has any cause for guilt, he will answer "yes" to the appropriate questions. If he is innocent of such charges, he will answer "No".

But if he admits to a wrong doing, then there follows a procedure for correcting the break in relationships involved. First they collect taro leaves, water, two *tiktik* shoots, and *kumul* shoots. The two *tiktik* shoots are then bound together. The taro leaf is put down and water is poured onto it. The bound *tiktik* is then placed on the water, along with the *kumul* shoots. The sick man then sits on one side of the taro leaf (with its water and *tiktik* shoots). The person who is the victim of his wrong doing sits on the other side. The sickman then takes hold of one of the two bound *tiktik* pieces in his right hand and the second man takes the other piece in his right hand. The sick man then confesses what he has done wrong. This is done in front of the whole community, and he confesses without shame or fear. He knows that any attempt to hide or obscure the truth now, will result in his death from the illness he already has.

The sick man's offended brother, hearing this confession and seeing his contribution will say: "I have no more quarrel with you, so that your sickness will not grow worse. I have already forgotten the matter. Afterwards, too, I will not remember it. I hold no grudge. Therefore I want your sickness to be healed now, so that you will live happily."

The two are now united. They separate the two pieces of *tiktik* that were bound together, and they exchange the pieces with each other. The two of them then put the two pieces in the water and say: "We have no argument or anger with each other. This water will cleanse us both together". They then pour the water on themselves and make a peace offering with the gift and acceptance of a pig, kina-shells, etc. Now everything is complete.

After two or three days, the people see that the sick man is sleeping well and the illness appears to have left him. They then say: "That was the cause of his sickness. Yesterday he was reconciled with his brother in our presence, and now everything is just fine!"