

Sorcery, Magic and the Mekeo World View

Introduction

The Mekeo of central Papua have long had a certain notoriety for the virulence and pervasiveness of their sorcery. Any outsider who has lived among them for even a brief time can hardly help being impressed by the prominence which sorcery assumes in their lives.¹ People seem almost obsessed by fears of harmful magic being used against them and no death or serious mishap occurs which is not attributed to the sorcerer's powers. Villagers themselves say that they are preoccupied with such fears and that consequently they tend to be highly suspicious of each other's motives, even of close relatives.

In this paper I attempt to show that the structuring of the Mekeo world view, in which the access of certain individuals to dangerous, destructive supernatural powers plays such a dominant role, has important social consequences. While on the one hand it creates a strong force for social conformity, on the other it sets up a background of intense suspicion and tension against which social relations must operate.

Mystical Powers and Political Authority

It is now recognised that the possession of ritual knowledge, including death dealing powers, may be an important element in the rise to power of a Melanesian big man.² Among the Mekeo, who have a complex structure of ascribed leadership, the role of the sorcerer is virtually raised to an hereditary political office which forms an integral part of the authority system.³

Mekeo political structures seem to be characterised by an unusual concern with the separation of different powers into discrete roles. In the past there was thus a careful distinction between the civil authority of the peace chief (*lopia fa'aniau*) and his

ceremonial assistant (*lopiá eke*), the military authority of the war leader (*iso*) and the ritual powers of the sorcerer (*ugauga*) and the war magician (*fai'a*). A village was composed of several named, patrilineal descent groups, each of which constituted an independent political unit with its own hereditary leaders. The *lopiá fa'aniau*, the senior chief, was the genealogically most senior member of the most senior lineage of the descent group. The heads of junior lineages (which were ranked in order of seniority) held the positions of junior chief (*lopiá eke*), war leader, sorcerer or war magician. While most descent groups were large enough to have both a senior chief and a war leader, not every group had its own sorcerer or war magician. Nor was this considered necessary as any chief is said to have been able to use the services of ritual specialists from other descent groups in the same village or in allied villages.

The senior chief represented the apex of this structure. People compare him to the middle finger of the hand—below him, but supporting him from either side are the other fingers representing the war leader, the war magician and the sorcerer. He was responsible for directing all the activities of his descent group and for maintaining law and order within it. He was the centre of its ceremonial life and the guardian of its lands and resources. The *lopiá eke* acted as his assistant at important feasts and public ceremonies. The war leader led the group in time of war but he could not go to war without the senior chief's permission.

The *fai'a*, who is generally referred to as the 'war magician',⁴ was not primarily concerned with protective magic or magic to kill the enemy (there were other experts for that): his ritual powers were far more potent. He determined which of his own people would die in battle, and it was the relative strength of the mystical powers commanded by the *fai'a* of the two opposing sides that determined which side gained victory. As well as causing injury and death in battle, the *fai'a* also used his powers to kill people by attacks from wild animals and in violent accidents such as falling from trees or cliffs. The *ugauga* on the other hand, caused death in more insidious ways: through internal illnesses and snake bite.

Neither the *fai'a* nor the sorcerer were supposed to kill in a haphazard manner or of their own accord. Their services were at the command of the senior chief and they were directed by him. People explain that sorcerer and *fai'a* acted as the chief's 'policemen'. If a clansman continually disobeyed his chief or persistently caused trouble, the chief instructed the sorcerer or *fai'a* to deal with him. If, for reasons of his own, the sorcerer or *fai'a* wanted to kill a man, he first had to gain the permission of the intended victim's chief, and permission would only be granted if the chief was satisfied that the victim deserved his fate. Law abiding clansmen who supported their chief were naturally protected by him. Thus, in theory at least, the dangerous powers of the ritual experts were firmly harnessed in the interests of the public good by the chiefs.

The careful separation of roles, while sharing authority between the lineages of the descent group, at the same time served to stress the moral superiority of the senior chief. Authority was delegated to the heads of junior lineages but it was only the lesser or the more baneful aspects of power that were left to them. Violent, aggressive use of power was the realm of the war leader, its punitive, destructive aspect was the province of the sorcerer and *fai'a*. In sharp contradistinction, the senior chief stood above these sordid aspects of political power. He was the embodiment of the benevolent, beneficent aspects of authority; the very word *lopi*a means good and kind. He represented generosity, hospitality, goodwill and peace. His first concern was to 'look after', 'to care for' his people and it was unthinkable that he should cause harm or injury.

The contrast in roles was symbolically stated and underlined in many ways. The senior chief, for example, was responsible for offering generous hospitality to all strangers who came to his clubhouse, whereas any stranger unfortunate enough to set foot by mistake inside the clubhouse of the war leader, was brutally slain on the spot. The war chief who is described as being wild and hairy, with decorations of the teeth and tusks of animals, clearly belonged more to the realm of bestial violence than of human affairs.

Likewise, the sorcerer and the *fai'a* were concerned less with the world of men than with the mystical and dangerous realm of the spirits. Their separation from the rest of the community was emphasised by their physical seclusion during the time of their ritual preparation and, as Hau'ofa has shown in some detail, in the spatial arrangement of the villages.⁵ *Fai'a* and sorcerers never walked along the main thoroughfare of the village, even on ceremonial occasions, but kept to the paths on the outskirts of the village or the tracks in the bush behind it, and their houses were not built in the central part of the village but rather on its peripheries or in the bush. The senior chief, who marches up the central thoroughfare on ceremonial occasions and whose house naturally occupies a prominent central position in the village, can be seen as the representative of human order and morality who mediates the intervention into human affairs of the dangerous, non-human, external forces associated with the war leader, the *fai'a* and the sorcerer.

With the suppression of tribal warfare at the beginning of the colonial period, the war leader and the *fai'a* gradually lost the prominence they formerly enjoyed. Today the *iso* acts as a civilian assistant to the senior chief and few men claim to practice *fai'a* (though the knowledge and techniques are said to be preserved by the hereditary holders of the position). In consequence, the authority structure and its symbolism have been reduced to a simple dualistic division of roles between the chief and the sorcerer. Possibly this simplification of the system has thrown into relief an

ambivalence which has clearly always existed beneath the surface: in using the sorcerer as his socially recognised henchman, the chief necessarily undermines his role as the altruistic protector of his people, for if he does not in fact control the sorcerer, he should.

The ideological emphasis on the altruism and moral rectitude of the chief does not succeed in allaying suspicion that the lethal powers of the sorcerer are not always used in the best interests of the community nor in a moral manner. Many people claim that the chiefs have lost the powers which once gave them control over the sorcerers. Ordinary men may, for a stiff fee, hire the services of a sorcerer. Though in theory he cannot act unless the chief of the intended victim gives his permission, people believe that the sorcerer, through greed or simply malice, may not bother to consult the chiefs, who in any case have become too weak to oppose his will. Yet though people accuse the chiefs of impotence, fear rather than contempt is more characteristic of attitudes to them.

A further complication underlies this. Despite the symbolic insistence on the separation of roles, people are aware (although for obvious reasons the topic is not discussed openly) that many, if not most, of the senior chiefs possess destructive powers of their own which can be exercised without the intervention of the sorcerer.⁶ Indeed people can relate examples of contests of mystical powers between chiefs and sorcerers.⁷

The Range of Magical Powers

A wide range of magical powers exists, from the major destructive powers of the specialists to minor protective magic employed by almost every man. In fact the range is so complex and diverse that any attempt at classification is likely to raise problems. I have grouped them roughly into three: 1) death dealing powers, 2) powers leading to disaster for the group, 3) minor powers.

Death Dealing Powers

These are by no means the exclusive property of the sorcerer and the *fai'a*. Other forms of death dealing magic include *faifai*, in which water spirits are employed by the magician to drown his victim or make him sicken and die; *kua* which inflicts incurable sores that spread and eventually cause death; *imoi ipapepe penia* which causes infants to die suddenly. There are other powers to kill children by drying up their mothers' milk and to kill women by making them bleed to death. Yet another power, *ikupu*, which is used to protect property and crops from thieves, may cause only illness and non-fatal injury, but can be fatal.

Powers Leading to Disaster for the Group

There are several powers which indirectly cause death or harm.

They include powers to control rain and floods (*kinapui*), power to cause damage to the village by fire, garden magic (*isani ugo*) which can be used to blight crops, and hunting magic (*ipaipa*) which can be used to prevent people from catching game (though the last two mentioned may be used to ensure success, people more often refer to their negative aspect).

In other words, there are powers which correspond with practically every kind of death, illness or disaster that the Mekeo encounter. The major powers most commonly held by chiefs are *imo ipapepe penia*, *ipaipa*, *isani ugo* and *ikupu*. Many chiefs hold several major powers.

Minor powers

There are innumerable minor powers to inflict all kinds of non-fatal ailments and injuries and to cure them. People known for their effective cures for specific ailments may gain quite a reputation and become known as *mega aui* or 'spell men'. There are also minor powers for ensuring success in gardening, hunting and virtually all human affairs. In addition many types of minor protective powers exist. Most families possess at least some minor power and any individual, provided he has learnt the necessary spells and techniques, can call upon the spirits of his recently dead relatives for protection or for help.

Whilst there appears to be a wide gulf between the sorcerer unleashing his deadly powers and the ordinary man calling upon his dead father's protection for the household, both are magical acts of essentially the same kind which have the following features in common.

1. A magical power of any kind is hereditary and is usually passed from father to son.
2. It is the property of a specific individual. A father cannot give the same power to two sons. In theory, the eldest son should inherit the father's powers, but they can be passed to a younger son or divided between the heirs.
3. It involves control over a specific spirit, or type of spirit—human or non-human—which is able to perform a specific task.
4. Control of the spirit depends upon knowledge of a spell (*mega*), which names the spirit, and the possession of a relic or some object associated with it. In the case of a dead relative, a lock of hair, fingernail parings or bones serves the purpose. In the case of a non-human spirit, the magician must possess a special stone (*kepo*) which incorporates some of that being's power. Certain substances (*fua*), usually certain types of leaves or roots, are also necessary to help attract the spirit and knowledge of the appropriate *fua* is as essential as possession of the spell and relic.
5. Before attempting to summon the spirit, the magician must first prepare himself for the encounter by a period of ritual

preparation (*gope*) during which he fasts, abstains from sexual relations and avoids drinking or washing in cold water. The length of time involved and the stringency of the restrictions he imposes on himself vary with the nature of the power he invokes. The head of a household who wishes to invoke the protection of a recently dead relative may only fast for a few days, while the magician wielding major death dealing powers, like the *fai'a* and sorcerer, would observe strict seclusion and fast for several months. The object of *gope* is to strengthen the individual for his contact with the spirit's power, which is likely to destroy him if he is not properly prepared. All spirits have power but some are much more potent and therefore much more dangerous than others. Spirits of ordinary men are naturally less effective than those of former sorcerers and chiefs, or of deities like A'aisa, the originator of sorcery. The more powerful the spirit invoked, the stronger the magicians' context must be and the more rigorous his ritual preparation.

6. When the magician's *gope* is completed and he is ready to summon the spirit he places the relic or stone with the *fua* (the substances which help to attract the spirit) and applies some form of heat to them and so increase their power; he then recites the spell (*mega*) which names and calls the spirit to him. The spirit appears to him, he addresses his request to it and, providing he has made no mistake in the ritual, it is carried out. Should he lose control of the situation, the spirit will turn upon and destroy him. The procedure is basically the same no matter what spirit is summoned. If a man invokes the spirit of a recently dead relative he will place the relic of the dead person together with certain leaves and then burn a piece of bark cloth near them. The sorcerer summoning a spirit to kill a victim will need to use more powerful *fua*. In addition to leaves and roots he will employ some substance like crocodile or snake's blood or the liquid produced by drying a human body over a fire; he will then put these ingredients together with the stone (or relic) into a container made from a coconut shell (*pollo*) and place it over a fire to heat it through.

The relics and stones used by the magician are considered to be repositories of supernatural power, but again they vary in intensity. The hair of a dead relative is comparatively weakly charged with power but the stones (*kepo*) used by the sorcerer are so highly charged that no ordinary person would dare to touch or even look at them.

In certain types of sorcery personal leavings of the victim—spittle, urine, faeces or even the dust from his footprints—are put in the *pollo* with the other substances, but personal leavings are not necessary for all types of fatal magic.⁸

The Nature of Supernatural Power

As many writers have pointed out, the term 'supernatural' is inappropriate when applied to Melanesian concepts of the 'power' which underlies magical acts. The Mekeo equate this power with heat; the same word *isapu* is used for both. *Isapu* is perceived as a physical quality or force which is present in different degrees in physical objects which are, or are considered to be, hot, for example chilli and ginger which taste hot. Like heat, *isapu* radiates from an object and one only has to touch or even come close to an object heavily charged with it to be 'burnt'. For instance, when digging a new grave in the village cemetery, people are very wary of touching fragments of human bone which they might inadvertently uncover for fear that the 'heat' present in the bone might 'pierce' their bodies and strike them ill. In the case of the highly potent stones possessed by sorcerers and other magicians, the *isapu* with which they are charged is so strong that even the magician himself dares not handle them with his bare hands but manipulates them with long sticks to avoid direct contact.⁹ Ordinary men could not even look upon, let alone touch, such objects without collapsing or falling ill.

Like heat, *isapu* can be felt, but is invisible, and can be used creatively or destructively. More sophisticated informants often compare it to electricity, equating the 'charging' of an object with *isapu* to the charging of a battery. The aim of the magician is to generate precisely as much *isapu* as he can in order to summon and control the spirits. During his ritual preparation (*gope*) he gradually builds up heat within his own body by avoiding the cold, heavy foods, like fat and meat, consumed by ordinary men. He restricts himself to a diet of a few burnt bananas seasoned with plenty of hot ginger and chilli and he is careful not to dissipate this heat by washing in or drinking cold water or by indulging in sexual relations. Clearly the longer he fasts and obeys these restrictions, the greater amount of *isapu* he builds up within him. Should he attempt to summon the spirits without this preparation, their power would strike through his 'cold' body, killing him or leaving him seriously ill.

The relics, stones and the various substances employed by him all contain *isapu* in varying degrees and when they are combined together and then heated over a fire, their potency is greatly heightened. The power that the magician generates, both within himself and in the container (*pollo*) which holds the relics and potions, enables him to call and control a spirit. But it is the spirit, through its superior power, which kills the victim, inflicts the injury or whatever it is the magician intends. The power generated by the magician merely gives him access to the more potent *isapu* of the spirits.

The realm of the spirits and the world of men

While *isapu* is present in some degree in the natural world

surrounding men, its source, or at least its greatest concentration, is in the realm of the spirits. The spirits of the dead *isage* reside in a village called Kariko which is said to be situated on the side of a hill on the coast somewhere towards the west. A'aisa, the deity who instituted the Mekeo social order, setting up chiefs and sorcerers and conferring their present powers upon them, presides over the spirits of the dead in Kariko and over numerous powerful spirits who were never human beings. The powers of these spirit beings range from the ultimate powers of A'aisa, through those of other non-human spirits and of the great sorcerers and magicians of the past, to the much lesser powers of the spirits of ordinary men and women.

Numerous non-human spirits, like the ogres Au Isoiso and Iko who are summoned in hunting magic (*ipaipa*) by powerful magicians, roam the bush and others live in creeks and ponds (*faifai*) and in the hills and stones (*kepo faifai*). Spirits of the dead also sometimes wander in the bush and may be encountered at night by men out hunting. They usually appear in the form of animals or reptiles whose complete fearlessness of human beings reveals that they are not ordinary animals. In general then, the realm of the spirits is physically separated from the world of men—the village and gardens. Only the spirits of the recently dead are believed to be present in the village, near the houses under which they were and still are often buried. Eventually they too leave their living relatives to join A'aisa and the dead in Kariko.

The separation spatial/physical of the spirit and human realms is paralleled by a corresponding lack of involvement of the spirits in human affairs. The spirits never intervene in human affairs and ignore them unless specifically summoned by humans. They are not concerned with human morality and take no action of their own to punish human transgressions. People sometimes compare the spirits to dogs 'who sit and watch but will not bite until they are told to'. Although their power is employed by chiefs and sorcerers to punish wrong-doers, the spirits never punish of their own accord.

Even the spirits of the recently dead, who still linger near their former homes, do not deliberately harm or benefit their living relatives unless called upon to do so. People sometimes leave small offerings of food around the house for them so that they will feel well disposed to them if they need to call on their help. Most ordinary people, however, say that they are afraid to summon even the recently dead and that only those who have specially learnt the appropriate spells and techniques dare to, and then only under exceptional circumstances.¹⁰ People often complain that the presence of the recently dead near them is oppressive and causes them to feel tired and lethargic.

The ordinary man does not seek contact with the spirits, rather he attempts to avoid them as much as possible. For this reason most men will not go out hunting at night except in parties of

three or more. Any contact with the spirits is inherently dangerous for the ordinary man, whose 'cold' body cannot withstand the force of the spirits' heat, *isapu*. The human and spirit realms are thus necessarily separated from each other. Accidental meetings are only likely to occur with the recently dead, the more potent spirit beings only cross men's paths when deliberately summoned.

For the sorcerer and the magician, the spirit realm is perhaps even more terrifying or threatening since, in deliberately seeking access to its powers, their lives are constantly at risk. People fear the sorcerer, but they do not envy him. In order to employ his powers, he must expose himself to terrible dangers and give up the pleasures and comforts enjoyed by common men. To protect the lives of his close kin and the rest of the community from the lethal forces he unleashes, he must deny himself their company and live alone in the bush in strict seclusion. He must also give up the rich foods enjoyed by other men and the pleasures of sex. Hau'ofa observes that ordinary people are often referred to rather disparagingly as 'the eaters', since at feasts they eat their fill while the chiefs and sorcerers look on without taking so much as a bite.¹¹ This seems a clear symbolic statement of the self sacrifice and self discipline required of the holders of major powers.

The dangerous, destructive element of the spirits' power is heavily emphasised but little stress is placed on creative or beneficial aspects. There are no deities who are attributed with the creation of the physical world or of man. A'aisa instituted the social order and gave men their political and ritual powers, but he did not create men or the natural world, they existed before he did.

Mekeo myths are concerned not with natural origins but with how the various magic powers employed by men originated. This is not always apparent on the surface. For instance the story of how the dog became the enemy of the other animals at first appears to be a simple explanatory tale, but what it explains is the origin of a particular type of magic used to make dogs more fierce for hunting. When I began to find that every myth I collected was associated with a particular type of magic, informants agreed that this was always the case and explained that when a power was passed on to another person, he was told how the power originated and then taught the appropriate spells and substances to use, but the tale on its own could be told just for entertainment.

Regulative deities are also absent from the Mekeo pantheon. There are no public ceremonies to ensure the welfare of the group, the growth of crops, the continuity of the seasons or such like. The physical world, it seems, is thought to exist and operate independently of the spirits. This of course is consistent with the separation of the two realms and the spirits' lack of interest in human affairs. People do not seem to feel any need to ensure the continuation of the natural order: it is taken for granted. What is not

simply accepted and what needs explanation is any unusual departure from the norm, any unwarranted failure or success. If the crops grow well, nobody remarks on it, this is expected in a fertile and naturally abundant region. If the crops fail, however, or if one man has a notably large harvest while his neighbours have meagre ones, people will comment and attempt to find some explanation. Perhaps the chief is punishing the people by destroying their crops, and certainly the individual who succeeds where others fail must have the benefit of some especially efficacious spell. In other words, the powers to which human beings have access through magic are the means not of maintaining the natural order but of altering or perverting it. Men can call on their dead relatives to help them in gardening or other activities but, as we have seen, they would prefer to avoid such contact and it is not necessary unless a man wishes to greatly outdo his neighbours or to cause them harm.

It might be thought that the chiefs and sorcerers would emphasise the positive benefits gained for the people by their greater magical powers but this is not the case. These powers are used in the group's best interests but they are punitive and protective rather than productive. The chiefs punish wrong doers and protect their groups from the magical powers of rival and enemy groups but they do not ensure the fertility of the group or the increase of pigs and food crops or serve any similar productive function. Indeed, people invariably stress the negative aspects of the chiefs' powers, even in the case of powers which can be used positively. Many chiefs, for instance, possess *isani ugo*, a type of garden magic which might be employed if they wanted bumper crops for a large feast, but I have only heard people refer to *isani ugo* when their crops were poor and they believed their chiefs were punishing them in this way. Similarly, people attribute poor hunting to the chief using his hunting magic to foil their efforts, but rarely credit him with their successes.

In short, the Mekeo do not see the realm of the spirits as the source of their origin and existence, on which they depend for their welfare and all material benefits. On the contrary, they conceive of a natural order which is in no way dependent on the spirits. The present social order, however, was established by the deity A'aisa; he set up chiefs and sorcerers, war leaders and war magicians and gave them access to the power of the spirits so that they could maintain orderly relations among their people. The realm of the spirits nevertheless remains quite separate from that of men, and responsibility for the enforcing of human morality and order is firmly placed on human shoulders, as the spirits only intervene if summoned by human agents. Access to the spirits' power, in any significant degree, is limited to the hereditary holders of authority and involves considerable danger and personal cost to them.

Some social consequences of the belief system

The belief that the chiefs control dangerous supernatural powers which they use to uphold the social order naturally creates a strong force for social conformity but, when this is linked to the belief that all disaster and misfortune is the result of deliberate human manipulation and that the chief is responsible both for punishing and protecting his people, it places ambiguity and tension in the very heart of social relationships.

The linking of the use of destructive powers with the maintaining of morality turns the suspicions and accusations of the group inwards upon itself. When a man falls seriously ill or suffers misfortune, he examines his conscience to see in what ways he has been remiss in his obligations to his chief and close kin. The chief himself may have inflicted the illness, or a relative to whom he has failed to meet his obligations may have hired the services of a sorcerer to make him ill.¹² The assumption that close kin can enforce obligations in this manner naturally creates tension between them. If the victim's conscience is completely clear, he may think that some rival is attacking him out of envy or spite. Since he has done no wrong, the chief should protect him, but perhaps he no longer has the power to do so. When misfortune strikes the group as a whole, either the chief is considered to be punishing them or else, once again, he is too weak. People can never be sure which, and their relationships with him must balance on the edge of this uncertainty. Since all illnesses, death and misfortune are the result of deliberate human action, all must be attributed either to the chief's deliberate action or his impotence. Nor is the situation mitigated by a balanced emphasis on the creative, productive aspects of magical power.

Conclusion

The Mekeo notion of a realm of non-human power which can be harnessed by men for their own ends seems fairly typical of many Melanesian religious systems. The equating of this power with heat and of its opposite with cold, the use of 'hot' substances like ginger and chilli and the employment of powerful stones is common to many areas of Melanesia. Indeed, the Mekeo concept of *isapu* seems almost like a text book illustration of Codrington's *mana*,¹³ except for the fact that the Mekeo do not believe that men alone can exercise such power, they can do so only through the agency of a spirit being.

Despite these similarities, the Mekeo belief system seems anomalous, at least compared with the published literature, in a number of ways.

- The only interaction with the spirits is by means of deliberate magical acts on the part of human beings.
- There is an almost exclusive emphasis on the destructive and punitive aspects of *isapu*.
- There is a lack of concern with ensuring continuity of the natural order and material benefits and welfare for the group. This is in contrast with Lawrence's notion of Melanesian religion as a 'technology' primarily concerned with material benefits.¹⁴
- Destructive powers are channelled inward on the group. Most anthropologists, however, have observed that in Melanesia destructive magical powers are not used within the group, but against enemy and rival groups and thus often become an outlet for external aggression following the suppression of tribal warfare.¹⁵
- The control of magical powers is maintained by an élite, determined by birth.¹⁶