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THE RESURGENCE OF WITCHCRAFT AND SORCERY PRACTICES IN THE GULA'ALA SOCIETY OF THE MALAITA PROVINCE, SOLOMON ISLANDS: A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

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Figure 1. Map of the Solomon Islands, the arrow points to the location of Gula'ala

(This map and the other in this article are taken from the following internet source, <http://www.google.com.pg/search?q=map+of+solomon+island&biw=1366&bih=667&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=w15vUd6tIOvQiAfLu4CgDA&ved=0CCsQsAQ#imgrc=C3cEfSYnBAGsJM%3A%3BtT3NRSgOpun3nM%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Fwww.ezilon.com%252Fmaps%252Fimages%252Foceania%252Fpolitical-map-of-Solomon-Is.gif%252F>)

3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Fwww.ezilon.com%252Fmaps%252Foceania%252Fsolomon-islands-maps.html%3B1412%3B864 (accessed April 18, 2013).)

INTRODUCTION

Christianity has been in Melanesia for almost a century-and-a-half. Nevertheless, in spite of Christianity having been in Melanesia for that long, old evil practices are still re-emerging, and being practised. Of great concern is the resurgence of sorcery practices among the Gula'ala people. One wonders whether Christianity has really made an impact in the lives of the people. Longgar shares the same concern, stating, "The current unprecedented resurgence of the practice in most part of Papua New Guinea is alleged to be . . . posing real challenges to the churches".¹ The Gula'ala people share this same heaviness in their society. This paper investigates why there is such a resurgence? How can the churches address this unprecedented increase in sorcery practices?

METHODOLOGY

This paper relies heavily on data from library and internet sources. The research approach is qualitative. Ethnographically, the writer is indebted to Hilliard and Keesing,² who carried out extensive studies in many areas of Melanesia, including the Solomon Islands. Keesing, in particular, carried out ethnographical studies of the culture of the Kwaio people, a related culture to the Gula'ala people. For this reason, the paper relies heavily on Keesing's writings. Biblically, texts from the Old and New Testaments are used as the bases for constructing a doctrinal understanding of the problem of sorcery. When clear biblical teaching is established, principles must be clearly applied to the given context.

The paper covers three areas: (1) an introduction to the Gula'ala people group; (2) the influences leading to the resurgence of sorcery and witchcraft

¹ William Longgar, "Sorcery and Christianity in the Gazelle Peninsula", in Franco Zocca, ed., *Sanguma in Paradise: Sorcery, Witchcraft, and Christianity in Papua New Guinea Point* 33 (2009), p. 305.

² See the different contributions of articles, and other sources, written by these two authors.

in the context; and (3) the biblical responses to the problem in the Gula'ala society.

THE GULA'ALA PEOPLE

In this section, the traditional beliefs of the people, influences of Christianity, and the impact of colonialism, on the social, religious, and cultural values of the Gula'ala people are discussed.

GULA'ALA SOCIO-RELIGIOUS STRUCTURE

The Gula'ala people are Melanesians, and share the common Melanesian integrated worldview, which draws no distinction between the spirit world and the physical world. There is no separation between religious and physical experiences.³ The Gula'ala are coastal people. Their lives depend much on the sea, and they practise bartering, in exchange for land produce from the neighbouring people groups.⁴ They share common kinship ties with the *Kwaio*, *Kwara'ae*, *Fataleka*, *Ata'a*,⁵ and other people groups living along the East Coast of Malaita Island. Because of that movement, custom, culture, and traditional religious belief are similar.⁶ The socio-religious structure will be discussed in relation to their land affiliation, and their religious practices.

³ Longgar, "Sorcery and Christianity", p. 305.

⁴ This practice still continues today, in the same location that was used by my forefathers. Alison Griffiths quoted Cathy Deck's description of this bartering system, where goods are exchanged for goods; Alison Griffiths, *Fire in the Islands: the Acts of the Holy Spirit in the Solomons*, Wheaton IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1977, pp. 50-51.

⁵ People groups with large populations. Inter-marriages are still carried out between the Gula'ala people and these people groups.

⁶ Philip Manuao Ogua described how there are nine different clans clustered together, coming from north, central, and southern parts of Malaita. The author agrees with some facts of Ogua's record that each clan has its own sacred shrine. However, to claim that several of these clans have their totem as sharks, is not uniform with general Melanesian custom, and, the fact that the Gula'ala people come from different parts of Malaita, meant that each clan came under their own totem, from where they originated. Philip Manuao Ogua, "Communicating the Gospel in Meaningful Cultural Forms in Melanesia: A Case Study of the Gula'ala Culture and Its Relevance to the South Sea Evangelical Church", BTh dissertation, Banz PNG: Christian Leaders' Training College, 2000, p. 4.

Affiliation to land in the Gula'ala runs along the patrilineal line. The clans are the custodians of the land, and every member only has the right of usufruct. Only the clan reserves the right to distribute land. Each clan can trace back to nine or more generations.⁷ Keesing also identified this, in his study of the Kwaio people, a related people group to the Gula'ala.⁸ All who trace their genealogy back to a common male ancestry have equal rights to the land. Inheritance of land is strongly aligned with the father's line,⁹ while female progenies were married off to other clans, and live with their husbands, subsequently becoming members of their husbands' clan. The children automatically become members of their father's clan, but they still maintain connection to their mother's side for having the right to use the land. To show this connection, pig offerings must be offered on the maternal grandfather's altar. They have certain rights and claims, through their grandfather, because of the mother. It also means that, in the event that enemy clans invade a portion of the land, male affiliates must help to fight and protect the land. Land shows relationships, and is a cause for possible feuds between enemy clans.

The religious practices of the Gula'ala people tell how they relate socially to each other. These practices are based around the principle of purity: *abu*.¹⁰ For instance, how does a person relate to a menstruating woman, or a mother at childbirth? Griffiths cited as inhumane the fact that women build huts secluded from the rest of the community during maternity or menstruation. This would be her home for six weeks, under cruel conditions. Those paid¹¹ to visit must only approach at a certain distance.

⁷ The author has in his possession traditional information of known ancestors up to more than 15 generations.

⁸ Roger M. Keesing, *Kin Groups and Social Structure*, New York NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975, p. 93.

⁹ See further explanation in this area; Keesing, *Kin Groups and Social Structure*, pp. 93-94.

¹⁰ *Abu* describes purity and sacredness.

¹¹ Culturally, no is expected to visit, because of the people's concept of holiness and purity. The women do not want to defile themselves by going to the maternity side of the village. A woman is fortunate if the husband is able to pay a close relative, who is willing to defile herself to visit her.

Anyone, who touches the mother or newborn, must be put to death.¹² People fear contamination, not only on the individual, but on the whole village, also, and so, someone has to be responsible to purify the place. Only few husbands can afford to hire a close female relative, a woman or girl, who is willing to defile herself. These female relatives act as a midwife, in order to take care of the wives during this period.¹³

The centrality of the ancestors, in Gula'ala traditional belief, is a notable common denominator, shared with all Melanesian communities. It is absolute, any new ideas or contradictory behaviour are always treated with suspicion, and members of the clan or community will counteract those ideas or behaviour to protect their beliefs. Those who violate their religious beliefs face certain death. Keesing found this to be true among the Kwaio people. For example, a Kwaio man, who later confessed to killing a certain missionary by the name of Daniel, iterated that, "he brought bad ideas about the women's side of the settlement, and pollution by women. He said we shouldn't pray to our ancestors. . . . Let's kill the white man."¹⁴ Griffiths raised a similar incident concerning Peter Ambuofa's return from Queensland. Because he could not accept going back into heathenism, the family disowned him.¹⁵ He was a threat to the community, with his new-found faith in God.

In similar ways to the above, the Gula'ala socio-religious system stipulates that relationship with ancestral spirits, as channels for worship, was the ideal. The system prohibits the practice of malevolent sorcery. The punishment for anyone practising malevolent sorcery was severe and immediate: the sentence is death. However, certain forms of rituals, for benevolent uses, were acceptable. These include practices for providence in

¹² Griffiths, *Fire in the Islands*, pp. 49-50.

¹³ During this maternity period, even the midwife cannot move around freely in the village. She moves about, fulfilling her responsibility, with great care, so as not to invoke the wrath of the ancestral spirits. If the poor lady has no midwife, she is expected to carry enough food and firewood for the period. If the supply runs out before time, that is when life becomes very hard, and sometimes mothers died of starvation and cold.

¹⁴ Roger M. Keesing, and Peter Corris, *Lightning Meets the West Wind*, Melbourne Vic: Oxford University Press, 1980, pp. 13-14.

¹⁵ Griffiths, *Fire in the Islands*, pp. 28-29.

fishing, security of food gardens, and for attraction of girls.¹⁶ Whatever is beneficial for the community is good, while anything that causes misfortune or death is bad. Over the years, rituals for benevolent purposes were practised. This paper concerns itself with sorcery for malevolent purposes.

CHRISTIAN AFFILIATIONS OF THE GULA'ALA PEOPLE

This section addresses the advent of Christianity, and its impact on the cultural and traditional belief system of the Gula'ala people. Two main missionary groups worked among the people. The first to arrive was the Melanesian Mission, now known as the Melanesian church. From oral history, the Melanesian Mission arrived on Ngongosila Island, in Gula'ala, between the late 1890s and early 1900s,¹⁷ before the arrival of the South Sea Evangelical Mission (SSEM) in 1906.¹⁸ However, the SSEM soon overtook the Melanesian Mission in their work.¹⁹ Today, the South Sea Evangelical church (SSEC)²⁰ has the largest adherence and affiliations in membership in Gula'ala society compared with the Melanesian Mission. There are minor denominations, such as the Assemblies of God, and the Seventh-day Adventists, with only family affiliations.

GULA'ALA PEOPLE AS SOLOMON ISLANDERS

Missionary work predated the advent of colonialism.²¹ The Gula'ala people lived in a very isolated area, located on the East Coast of Malaita,²² away from the British Protectorate station in Tulagi, now Central Islands

¹⁶ There are sorcery practices that are seen as not conflicting with the idealised worship of ancestors. These practices are seen as adding value to the community, in gathering wealth, through having a good catch of fish, ensuring a good harvest, and having a good wife to help in the community chores.

¹⁷ The author was informed by his father, who was born 13 years after the arrival of SSEM, in 1906, that the first mission to arrive on Ngongosila Island was the Melanesian Mission.

¹⁸ Griffiths, *Fire in the Islands*, pp. 43-44.

¹⁹ David Hilliard, "Colonialism and Christianity: The Melanesian Mission in the Solomon Islands", in *The Journal Of Pacific History* 9 (1974), p. 107.

²⁰ When SSEM was localised, it changed its name to South Sea Evangelical church.

²¹ Hilliard, "Colonialism and Christianity", p. 97.

²² See Figure 2.

Province.²³ However, in spite of its isolation, the area has some historical significance; for example, it is the burial site for W. R. Bell, a District Officer for Malaita, who was murdered in October 1927,²⁴ at Gwee'abe, Sinalangu.²⁵



Another significant historical event, which draws attention to the Gula'ala people, is the blackbirding activities of the 1870s, and onward.²⁶ Gula'ala men were also taken as indentured labourers to work on sugar plantations. There were stories of men who escaped from labour recruiters, for example,

²³ Tulagi was where the British Protectorate Headquarters were located before the Second World War was fought in the Solomon Islands. The Resident Commissioner, C. M. Woodford, on his appointment in 1896, resided at Tulagi. It is more central to visit between the islands. Hilliard recorded a historical account, where a certain Bishop Wilson dined with Mr Woodford at Tulagi. David Hilliard, "The Battle for Rennell: A Study in Missionary Politics", in *W. P. Morrell: A Tribute: Essays in Modern and Early Modern History Presented to William Parker Morrell*, G. A. Wood, and P. S. O'Connor, eds, Dunedin NZ: University of Otago Press, 1973, p. 110.

²⁴ Hilliard, "Colonialism and Christianity", p. 108.

²⁵ More precisely, Sinalangwi, which means, "the heat of the sun causes blisters under the feet". Keesing specifically gave the date of Mr Bell's and Mr Lillies' murder as Monday, October 3, 1927. Keesing, and Corris, *Lightning Meets the West Wind*, p. 129.

²⁶ David Hilliard, "The South Sea Evangelical Mission in the Solomon Islands", in *The Journal of Pacific History* 4 (1969), p. 41.

Aruiasi of Ngongosila, who jumped off board and returned home.²⁷ These people, and those recruited to work in plantations, such as, for the Malayta Company in Baunani (West Malaita), and Aola and Marau on Guadalcanal,²⁸ were good examples of people who were displaced by the coming of British colonialism and influences.

SUMMARY

Gula'ala people, like most Melanesians, have always been a religious people. As mentioned above, their behaviour, and other cultural practices, were determined by their religious beliefs. The culture and religious beliefs sanctioned their behaviour, and determined what was good or harmful to the well-being of the community. It was into this setting that Christianity and colonialism entered.

INFLUENCES LEADING TO THE RESURGENCE OF SORCERY IN GULA'ALA

This section discusses the impact or influence that Christianity and colonialism had on the life of the people, which may have contributed to the resurgence of sorcery practices among the Gula'ala people. This paper suggests that the advent of Christianity and colonialism were the main causes of the resurgence of sorcery and witchcraft in Gula'ala and that, social influences are secondary only. They will be chronologically deliberated.

THE ADVENT OF CHRISTIANITY

The advent of Christianity was the first underlying cause of the resurgence of sorcery practices among the Gula'ala people. For the purpose of this paper, two direct causes, related to the advent of Christianity, are under discussion here.

Firstly, two Missions were working together at Ngongosila Island. The Melanesian Mission did the ground-breaking, before other missions

²⁷ Ogua, "Communicating the Gospel", p. 6.

²⁸ Hilliard, "The South Sea Evangelical Mission", pp. 52-53.

followed.²⁹ When the SSEM arrived in the Solomon Islands in 1904,³⁰ oral history held that the Melanesian Mission had already started work on Ngongosila Island, Gula'ala.³¹ Griffiths agrees with Hilliard on the date of the SSEM's beginnings on Ngongosila Island in 1906.³²

Having two Mission groups on Ngongosila Island poses the first reason for the resurgence of old evil practices. This happened, because of the contradictory doctrines taught. Tippett noted that, in discussing the Melanesian mission philosophy, the islanders were to keep as many traditional ways and culture as possible.³³ On the other hand, the SSEM's ethos was to destroy all cultural ways,³⁴ disregarding whether or not there was value embedded in the culture, as upheld by the Melanesian Mission.

Whatever strategy was taken from the above, the Gula'ala people would conceal their cultural practices, to a certain degree. Zocca argues that professed Christians move in and out freely between their faith and old practices. This is the result of being flexible.³⁵ Commenting on Roman Catholicism in England's conversion experience, Bartle agreed with this fact, that syncretism is unavoidable, because it is hard to isolate old forms from their traditional meanings.³⁶ However, it can also be the result of a

²⁹ Hilliard, "Colonialism and Christianity", p. 97.

³⁰ Hilliard, "The Battle for Rennell", p. 109.

³¹ The author was informed by his father, who was born 13 years after the arrival of SSEM on Ngongosila in 1906, that the first mission to arrive on the island was the Melanesian Mission. Griffiths confirmed that, in 1904, Florence Young persuaded government officials to release them to go to Malaita, some 60 miles away from where they were in Gavutu, near Nggela. Griffiths, *Fire in the Islands*, pp. 37-38.

³² Griffiths, *Fire in the Islands*, pp. 43-44.

³³ A. R. Tippett, *Solomon Islands Christianity: A Study in Growth and Obstruction*, London UK: Lutterworth Press, 1967, p. 35.

³⁴ The SSEM tried not to make a clean sweep of the custom, but found that they did not make progress in the school they set up. Only after they emphasised separation of the school from the pagan village, and made a clean sweep of cultural practices, did they start to see progress in their work. Roger M. Keesing, "Christians and Pagans in Kwaio, Malaita", in *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 76-1 (1967), pp. 82-100.

³⁵ Franco Zocca, and Jack Urame, *Sorcery, Witchcraft and Christianity in Melanesia, Melanesian Mission Studies* 5, Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 2008, p. 49.

³⁶ Neville Bartle, *Death, Witchcraft, and the Spirit World in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea*, Point 29 (2005), pp. 50-51.

heavy-handed attitude by the missionaries to enforce total removal and destruction of those cultural practices perceived as evil, without proper teaching given first. The missionaries total rejection of practices as evil, left people with nothing else to hold onto. This resulted in many of the practices going underground, and are now resurfacing. The heavy-handed approach of the missionaries made life void and inexpressive for the people.

The other factor is that Western missionaries have traditionally ignored the reality of sorcery. Zocca alluded to the missionaries' dismissing the phenomena "as the fruit of dealing with evil forces", if it happens daily. If it is a rare event, it would be "dismissed as superstitious and ineffective".³⁷ Without dealing with the practice, missionaries consequently brushed it aside. The other factor to consider is that missionary theology was insufficient to address, or dialogue with, many substances of traditional Melanesian spirituality. But the biggest problem, faced today, is the attitude of national church leaders themselves, which is far worst than that of the missionaries. The neo-missionary attitudes of the national church leaders is one factor contributing to the resurgence. They are ignorant in how to address the issue of sorcery theologically.

THE ADVENT OF COLONIALISM

As mentioned above, Christianity predated colonialism. From 1881, British naval officers were the representative authorities for the Western Pacific High Commissioner in Fiji, until the protectorate was established in 1893.³⁸ It was not until 1909 that a station was built at Auki, Malaita.³⁹ Two direct developments took place, following, or under the control of, the colonial powers.

The first development was the introduction and propagation of new rules and relationships. Traditional leadership patterns were affected by appointment of village constables, the introduction of corporal punishment, by hanging people for customary killings, and enforcing a tax on local people. These were seen as a "heavy-handed, and even ruthless, but remarkably effective"

³⁷ Zocca, and Urame, *Sorcery, Witchcraft, and Christianity in Melanesia*, pp. 26-29.

³⁸ Hilliard, "Colonialism and Christianity", p. 97.

³⁹ Keesing, "Christians and Pagans in Kwaio".

administration by District Officer W. Bell.⁴⁰ These administrative measures were effective, but they were foreign, and destructive in nature. It removed the socio-religious structure from its power, causing people to behave outside of their cultural context. When the traditional patterns of leadership were interfered with, it brought fear among the recognised traditional leaders, who felt they were losing control over their communities. Social control measures were weakening. People no longer respected the authority of the elders, gender relationships were no longer respected. When social control measures fail, sorcery could be resorted to. This could explain the resurgence of sorcery.

The second development was the change in the perception of the people. Stewart and Strathern, discussing violence and change, suggested that, colonial advancement created space, through draining indigenous powers, by removing the restrictive measures at work in the pre-colonial cultural context. From the colonial perspective, the space was seen as pacification and development, but, to the people, it was a gateway for abuse.⁴¹ Hence, under the new colonial rule, the strength of the Gula'ala community to function, and express integrated social relationships, fragmented, and individualistic behaviour replaced socio-religious laws. This created fertile soil for sorcery activities.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESURGENCE OF SORCERY

The influence of Christianity and colonialism on the Gula'ala people had both positive and negative effects. Unavoidably, they created changes in the cultural behaviour, attitude, and values of the people; some good and some bad. The bad changes led to unethical behaviour – the reason for the resurgence of sorcery practices. Two factors will be discussed.

Firstly, social pressure and instability gave rise to the use of sorcery. Kiev identified this social cause, and stated that, “when efforts to cope with new challenges lead to failure, individuals naturally turn to sources of comfort”.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Pamela J. Stewart, and Andrew Strathern, “Feasting on My Enemy: Images of Violence and Change in the New Guinea Highlands”, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ethnohistory/v046/46.4stewart01.html> (accessed March 29, 2013).

This would ease their unpleasant emotional states during the change.⁴² With the impact of changes on Gula'ala society, people pursued the means to ease and stabilise uncomfortable conditions, faced in life. Towards this end, use of sorcery is a conceivable means.

Secondly, another characteristic that gives rise to the use of sorcery is the individualistic mentality, which contradicted the community spirit, which was typical of the Gula'ala people. People are more individualistic as opposed to the closely knitted relationships that existed before. Studying social structures Douglas observed and described that, "Where social interaction is intense and ill-defined . . . we expect to find witchcraft beliefs. Where roles are fully ascribed . . . we would not expect to find witchcraft".⁴³ The roles were well defined and ascribed but with change in social structure, people with this unusual mindset revert to the use of sorcery for personal gain.

SUMMARY

From the above, it is clear that the introduction of both Christianity and colonialism have not provided the needed transition from traditional beliefs to Christianity or Westernisation. Christianity and colonialism confronted the Gula'ala culture that stood against their cause, neglecting traditional systems and values already in place. Their combined effort dissipated the rigid socio-religious structure of the Gula'ala people, creating a social vacuum. Therefore, it resulted in unrestrained behaviour, with people practising sorcery and witchcraft in the society to satisfy their personal demands.

BIBLICAL RESPONSES TO THE PROBLEM OF SORCERY PRACTICES IN GULA'ALA

The challenge here is to biblically address sorcery practices in Gula'ala

⁴² Ari Kiev, *Magic, Faith and Healing: Studies in Primitive Psychiatry Today*, New York NY: Free Press, 1964, p. 457, quoted in Harriet Hill, "Witchcraft and the Gospel: Insights from Africa", in *Missiology* 24-3 (July 1996), p. 325.

⁴³ Mary Douglas, ed., *Witchcraft: Confessions and Accusations*, London UK: Tavistock Publications, 1970, p. xxxv, quoted in Hill, "Witchcraft and the Gospel", p. 327.

society. There are several approaches available to respond to this practice.⁴⁴

THE OLD TESTAMENT AND SORCERY

What does the Old Testament say about sorcery? The Old Testament deals with sorcery, using different terminologies, but pertinently covered in one word, “idolatry” (Ex 20:2-6).⁴⁵ The reference to idolatry situates any evil practices as abominable, and under biblical scrutiny. Wolford iterated that, “the scriptures have much to say concerning sorcery”, and outlined it as follows.⁴⁶

Law and Sorcery

God’s law prohibits sorcery. This practice is first mentioned in Ex 22:18, “Do not allow a sorceress to live”.⁴⁷ It is obvious that the practice was already being performed in Israel, and the penalty for practising sorcery was death. This sentence was also to be imposed on those who practised bestiality and sacrifice to other gods. It implied that sorcery and these other practices were categorised together, and were an abomination to God.

A fuller descriptive law, forbidding sorcery, is found in Deut 18:10-14.⁴⁸ The list given in this text may not follow the arrangement of the practice, but it certainly conveys the intended meaning. Walvoord and Zuck explicitly

⁴⁴ For further reading on the different approaches, see Zocca, and Urame, *Sorcery, Witchcraft, and Christianity*, pp. 50-57, and Hill, “Witchcraft and the Gospel”, pp. 337-338.

⁴⁵ Alan R. Tippett, “The Evangelisation of Animists”, in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, J. D. Douglas, ed., Minneapolis MN: World Wide Publications, 1975, pp. 844-855, in Marvin S. Wolford, *Free Indeed from Sorcery Bondage: A Proven Scriptural Ministry*, San Rafael CA: Pathway Press, 1999, p. 85.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁴⁷ All scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise stated.

⁴⁸ “Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist, or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord, and, because of these detestable practices, the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the Lord your God. The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But, as for you, the Lord your God has not permitted you to do so.”

state that, these practices were forbidden, because it divorces life from morality.⁴⁹

In Leviticus, Moses gave these commands concerning sorcery, “Do not practice divination or sorcery”, and again, “Do not turn to mediums, or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them”.⁵⁰ God’s law directly prohibits the practice of sorcery and witchcraft by the people. The message was clear. No sorcery! Practising sorcery was finding other means, apart from God, to elevate one’s own ideas against His will for humanity.

Prophets and Sorcery

The prophets spoke God’s word against the practice of sorcery. Jeremiah denounced false prophets, the prophesying, using false visions, divinations, idolatries, and delusions of mind, even when God did not send them. These false prophets lied, and the people believed them. Because of that, Jeremiah pronounced judgment on the people, according to God’s word.⁵¹ The prophet Ezekiel shared this same experience in opposing false prophets who used false visions and divinations to lure God’s people to follow them.⁵² The prophetic word against sorcery was firm. Their pronouncements continued out against the sorcerers, and the people who obeyed them.

Repentance and Sorcery

There is the possibility of turning from sorcery. Wolford used the example of Manasseh in Chronicles. Manasseh did evil, sacrificed his sons, practised sorcery, divination, and witchcraft, against God. He led the people away from God’s laws and decrees, given through Moses to the people. Because of this, the Lord gave them away to captivity. It was on this account that

⁴⁹ Four reasons were given to qualify their argument: (1) Magical manipulation is not how one determines his future, but through moral behaviour; (2) Magical manipulation of one’s circumstances is a futile attempt to shift from God’s ethical law for life and blessing; (3) Practising magic and divination is shifting acknowledgment from God’s sovereignty; (4) It shows one’s failure to trust God with his life; John F. Walvoord, and Roy B. Zuck, “Deuteronomy”, in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Wheaton IL: Victor Books, 1983; QuickVerse CD-ROM.

⁵⁰ Lev 19:26, 31.

⁵¹ Jer 14:14-16.

⁵² Ezek 13:6, 8-9.

Manasseh repented, and prayed to the Lord, who heard his plea and brought him back to Jerusalem.⁵³

The plot of the narrative climaxed at an interesting point. When the king and his people sinned, they went into captivity. However, God inclined to hear their prayers, when they cried out to Him. This exemplified God's grace, extended to anyone, who turned to Him from evil behaviour and practices. It implies that humanity is deprived, and conditioned to be independent of God. In addition, God's grace is sufficient to anyone who trusts Him for forgiveness.

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND SORCERY

Are there any examples of sorcery from the New Testament? There are numerous general allusions in the New Testament. However, two specific examples are given below.

The Samaritan Encounter

Acts 8 begins with the persecution of the church. This results in Christians moving to other places, away from Jerusalem. Philip went to Samaria, and began to preach. In the process of preaching, many repented, and turned to God. Among them was Simon, who was a sorcerer, who also turned to God. However, as a practising sorcerer before his conversion, he was attracted by the power of the Holy Spirit coming on the people, when Peter prayed for them.⁵⁴

Simon the sorcerer desired to possess this power, and offered to pay the money to the apostles. Peter confronted Simon, by rebuking him, "your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money!" Peter continued as follows:

Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps He will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness, and captive to sin. Then Simon answered,

⁵³ 2 Chron 33:1-13. Wolford, *Free Indeed from Sorcery Bondage*, pp. 122-123.

⁵⁴ Author's summary of Acts 8:1-19.

“Pray to the Lord for me, so that nothing you have said may happen to me.”⁵⁵

The attitude of the sorcerer needs to be noted here. He repented, and got baptised. After that, he was intrigued by the work of the Holy Spirit, and wanted to purchase the power of placing of hands. He was sternly reprimanded, and he realised his mistake. Finally, he begged Peter to pray that nothing dreadful should happen to him.

This narrative unmistakably presents two facts. It shows that the apostles were stern in dealing with evil intentions, and that God extends His grace to those who sincerely repent from past involvements.

The Cyprus Encounter

The story in Acts 13 followed a similar sequence. Paul and his team arrived at Paphos, where they found a Jewish sorcerer named Bar-Jesus. He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. On understanding that Paul and Barnabas arrived at Paphos, Sergius Paulus asked them to speak God’s word. When they presented the word, Bar-Jesus tried to oppose them, in order to turn the proconsul away from God. Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, cursed the sorcerer, and he was blinded. When the proconsul saw this power encounter he believed.⁵⁶

Four lessons arise from the story. Firstly, God’s will is never thwarted by any evil or natural forces. Secondly, God empowers His servants for the tasks He intends them to perform. Thirdly, anyone who refuses God’s grace will not receive it. Finally, evil intentions and actions will receive a just punishment in the end.

SUMMARY

God’s law prohibits the practice of sorcery, in any form, among His people. His servants, the prophets and the apostles, spoke against sorcery. Anyone found practising sorcery among His people was expelled, or judged.

⁵⁵ Acts 8:20-24.

⁵⁶ Author’s summary of Acts 13:6-12.

Nevertheless, God is also gracious to anyone who turns to Him. He is ready to accept those who repent of their evil.

MAIN SUMMARY

The Gula'ala people, in their socio-religious context, were rigidly composite, giving a strong communal bond to relationships within the society. However, the advent of Christianity and colonialism brought many changes in the livelihood of the Gula'ala people. Foreign laws and Christian ideals led to the disintegration of cultural morality.

This created a space for individualism to arise over communal interest. It affected how the people behaved and interacted socially. What had been a taboo in the society, was now practised, as the restraining effect of culture was removed. Individuals exercised self-reliance, through practising sorcery and witchcraft, hence the resurfacing of the evil practice.

CONCLUSION

In the past, before the advent of Christianity and colonialism, the practice of witchcraft and sorcery was forbidden. Only rituals for benevolent purposes were an acceptable norm. However, the paper discusses the issue that malevolent use of sorcery and witchcraft practices in the Gula'ala society today. It raises the questions; why is there a resurgence in the practice of sorcery? How should the church handle this unwanted practice of sorcery?

This paper argues that, although social pressures contributed to the practice of sorcery in Gula'ala, the underlying factor was the advent of Christianity and Western colonialism. More importantly, this paper presents two foundational thoughts, to respond to the problem of sorcery and witchcraft. Firstly, sorcery was a forbidden activity in Old Testament times, and its penalty was to be put to death. However, the Bible also made exceptions for those who repented from this practice, as seen in the example of Manasseh. God forgives those who have practised sorcery, when they truly turn to Him. Secondly, people need to learn the biblical and theological truths on sorcery. Most Melanesian societies are affected, and churches have even used socially- or educationally-oriented methods to deal with sorcery, but these did little or nothing to teach the truth from the Bible. Finally, this paper

envisioned that the churches in Gula'ala and Melanesia must work together to teach their people to understand sorcery, from a social, educational, and biblical aspect.

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