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## SORCERY ACCUSATION-RELATED VIOLENCE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: THE ROLE OF *GLASMAN/GLASMERI* AS CATALYSTS OF ACCUSATION AND VIOLENCE

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### Abstract

This Issues Paper discusses the role of *glasman/glasmeri* in the phenomena of Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence (SARV) in Papua New Guinea. It is based on a multi-year mixed methods study of SARV. It reports on the types of people who act as *glasman/glasmeri*, their motivations and self-identity. A major finding of the study is the significance of the role of *glasman/glasmeri* in the crystallising of suspicions of sorcery into specific accusations against individuals, and the catalytic impact this has on violent responses. We found that the involvement of a *glasman/glasmeri* in an accusation of sorcery significantly increases the likelihood of a violent response. The paper concludes with some regulatory suggestions on how to help attenuate their role in promoting SARV.

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# SORCERY ACCUSATION-RELATED VIOLENCE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: THE ROLE OF *GLASMAN/GLASMERI* AS CATALYSTS OF ACCUSATION AND VIOLENCE

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## Introduction

This Issues Paper discusses the role of *glasman/glasmeri* in the phenomena of Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence (SARV) in Papua New Guinea (PNG) today.

It arises from a research partnership between academics at the Australian National University (ANU), Divine Word University and the PNG National Research Institute.<sup>1</sup> Local researchers and data collectors also played a crucial role in gathering information and analysis and the methods are described further below. The study was designed to inform the PNG Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence National Action Plan ('SARV NAP'). The main research questions addressed by the study are:

1. Who is being accused of sorcery, where, why, how often, by whom, and how does this change over time? (And why?)
2. Why do accusations lead to violence at times and not at others?
3. What regulatory levers exist to overcome sorcery accusation-related violence, and what is the context or conditions necessary for them to work effectively?
4. How is the SNAP working as a coalition for change network? What are its impacts, failures and challenges?

This paper is part of the answer to question two, as it seeks to identify the role of *glasman/glasmeri* in relation to how

<sup>1</sup> This research is supported by the Australian Government in partnership with the Government of Papua New Guinea as part of the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development program.

accusations of sorcery are made and the conditions in which a violent response is engaged. These figures emerged as significant in the analysis of our findings, prompting the examination of their role, as discussed below. The *Tok Pisin* words *glasman/glasmeri* can be roughly translated into English as 'diviner' and their role should be understood in the context of a widespread worldview in which sickness is strongly associated with the spiritual world. This means that both causes and remedies of illness are located at a supernatural level as well as in the physical world. As a consequence, curing illness may involve recognition of and taking action against what we collectively refer to here as 'evil spirits'. In such a worldview, the ill person is understood to be a victim, the object of aggression or punishment inflicted by an agent who may be human, such as a witch or sorcerer (Foster, 1976). As we have noted elsewhere (Forsyth and Gibbs, 2021), this worldview frequently co-exists with one that explains illness through a purely naturalistic or bio-medical framework.

*Glasman/glasmeri* were associated with SARV in all the areas of PNG where we conducted research. Of all accusation incidents we documented, a *glasman/glasmeri* was involved in the accusation being made in almost a third (29 percent). As detailed further below, their main role was to identify either the existence of sorcery in relation to a particular incident, or the actual identification of individuals as having used magic in some form, and at times to try to reverse the effects of that magic, such as through curing individuals of illness. The presence of a customary or semi-customary figure involved in assisting in the identification process is also a familiar figure in other countries, such as the *ojha* in India (PLD, 2014), the *sangomas* in South Africa, and *jhankris* (Nepalese diviners) who have been instrumental in cases of sorcery accusation-related violence in Nepal (WHRIN 2014: 18).

There is a degree of overlap between the operation of *glasman/glasmeri* and other individuals (often termed 'Faith Healers') who claim to have visions and be able to cure illness associated with various branches of Christianity. As a general observation of our data, *glasman/glasmeri* draw their power and legitimacy from customary roots, although

there are many who appear to also seek legitimacy through their Christian identity, and include praying as part of their approach to divination. In our research, we have come across instances of someone describing a ‘pastor’ as a *glasman* – in his temporary role as a diviner - or a ‘women’s prayer group leader’ as a *glasmeri* – again, in her temporary role. Whilst there is a long history of divination as a form of specialist knowledge in PNG (see, for example, Bell, 1935), the case of the *glasman/glasmeri* who is paid to identify sorcerers/witches appears to be a more modern phenomenon.

Although some informants were highly sceptical of the claims made by *glasman/glasmeri*, calling them ‘liars’ and ‘con-artists’, a persistent theme was that these individuals exercise considerable power and are widely (and ‘blindly’) believed. This was the case even amongst many police officers and other government officials we interviewed.

A defining characteristic of many situations where accusations of sorcery arise is doubt (Bubandt, 2014; Eves, forthcoming). *Glasman/glasmeri* feed into the desire for certainty and proof about what has actually led to the particular misfortune or sickness that has precipitated the accusation of sorcery, and who exactly is responsible.

## Methods

The project utilised a convergent Mixed Methods Research design, combined with a collaborative team approach that draws on both qualitative and quantitative sources at national and sub-national levels. There are four main sources of data. The first is a database of articles from the two national newspapers – *The National* and the *Post Courier*, and national court cases reported on Pacific Islands Legal Information Institute (PACLII) over more than a 20-year period (1996-2020). It was supplemented by searches of other media through the online FACTIVA database. The second is the creation of a new database of incidents of sorcery accusation-related violence in a number of hotspot provinces from 2016 for four years (initially Enga, Bougainville and Port Moresby and then Jiwaka was added). The database is built on the basis of forms completed by a network of local data gatherers who document accusations that lead to violence and those that do not lead to violence. The forms are detailed and are designed to capture information on the victims, perpetrators and the state and non-state interventions and responses to the incident. This dataset is analysed using SPSS software. In total, we documented 1039 accusation incidents involving 1553 accused persons of sorcery in the past four years in four provinces –Bougainville, Enga, Jiwaka and National Capital District (NCD) (see Forsyth et al., 2021). The third dataset is a series of 291 semi-structured interviews conducted with a

broad range of key stakeholders, including those in the justice sector, community leaders, survivors, faith leaders and leaders of community-based organisations. The final source of data is participant observation by the research team members of a wide range of training programs carried out by the PNG State and donor organisations with Village Court magistrates and police officers throughout PNG. The integration of the two quantitative datasets with the qualitative data is described by Losoncz et al. (2020).

## What do we know about who *glasman/glasmeri* are?

*Glasman/glasmeri* can be men (*glasman*) or women (*glasmeri*), although male *glasman* appear more common. They appear frequently to be outsiders – often being specifically summoned from elsewhere to help a family or community to address a suspicious event or illness. One *glasman* we interviewed stated: “I have travelled all over the country, even to Lae and Kerema”. Indeed, we can hypothesise that their authority is derived in many ways from their role as an outsider, with assumed specialised knowledge and understandings. This is likely associated with the common narrative about sorcery (or a particular form of sorcery) as being a new problem for communities, or as having come from somewhere else – making it far more unpredictable and dangerous than local or more familiar forms of sorcery.

There is a range of motivations for seeking out or listening to a *glasman/glasmeri*. In the case of sickness or death, it is widely said that ‘there is no such thing as a natural death’ and as Gibbs (2009: 5) commented, “it is normal for people to ask not only *what* was responsible for the death, but *who* was the cause”. One reason for identification of the relevant agent is to discover whether anything can be done to heal the patient (or to bring them back to life). In a number of Highlands provinces, there is the belief that witches take the heart of the victim and keep it for a few days, so if the witch is identified, the heart can be restored to the victim. We have documented cases of extreme torture where the torturers are insisting that the accused return the heart to the body of the dead or ill person.

Other motivations include seeking justice against the person who has caused the sickness, death or misfortune, and economic reasons. One informant (a senior police officer) explained: “In cases of suspicious death, a *glasman* has his own way of doing things and can find out how and why the death occurred. Once this is made clear, then the families start to negotiate for compensation”. This is something that a certificate from a doctor or an autopsy report cannot facilitate.

Whilst people frequently seek them out, *glasman/glasmeri* also find their way to situations where accusations emerge of their own accord, and in some cases, we were told of them attending funerals and stirring up trouble.

There are strong economic drivers for *glasman/glasmeri*. In the vast majority (over 90 percent) of cases we documented in our database, the *glasman/glasmeri* were paid for their role in the SARV incident. This was supported by the qualitative data, where payment of relatively large amounts (1000 – 2000 Kina) was frequently referred to. In 89 percent of the cases we documented, the *glasman* was paid by the relatives of the person believed to have been harmed or killed by sorcery, and this was a common pattern across all the provinces.

*Glasman/glasmeri* also received non-financial benefits in 22 percent of the SARV cases they were involved in. There was a considerable and significant regional variation in this occurrence, and it was highest in Jiwaka (37 percent), followed by NCD and Enga. It was the lowest in Bougainville (7 percent).

There is likely to be a wide range in how *glasman/glasmeri* perceive themselves and their role – ranging from those with a belief they have a psychic ability and can operate as a channel of legitimate power or insight to fight evil and heal; through to those involved for purely economic reasons and consciously exploitative of others' beliefs. There are even those involved out of desperation and trying to save themselves from suspicion and blame.

In one case, a woman, believed to have a *pisai* (malevolent invisible spirit) living in her, also functioned as a witch-finder, leading to the deaths of many of her fellow *pisai* people. When questioned on what evidence she saw for her accusations, she freely admitted that she did not rely on evidence, but made accusations under duress, thinking she would be killed herself if she did not blame someone else in a convincing way. In another case, the *glasman* we interviewed explained that his father had died when he was two-years-old and his mother was accused of killing his father (possibly through sorcery) and ran away; this meant that he was orphaned from a young age. In a dispute, he was threatened to be put in a bag and burned but he got away by admitting that he was what he terms a 'witch doctor/*glasman*'. He then found he was valued as a *glasman*. Later, during the election in 2004, he was involved in burning down someone's house and he was put in jail. Whilst in there, it seems his reputation as a *glasman* helped protect him somewhat. He was released from jail and, in our interview at least, said that what he had said before about 'demons' as a *glasman* was '*giaman*' (lies).

In another case from Simbu, a young boy was labelled as a

*glasman*. From around the age of five, he would be taken from his family or school and bribed and threatened into making predictions, identifying *sanguma* (witches), locating missing objects, and so forth. He was finally turned over to the safe house in Goroka, where we met and interviewed him and his family after his father decided the risks of this *glasman* activities had become too great. He foresaw that if one of the boy's accusations led to a murder or a tribal fight, he, as the boy's adoptive father, might be held responsible.

A final example comes from an interview with a *glasman* in Enga. This *glasman* spoke of his powers extensively and frankly. He appeared convinced that what he was doing was for the benefit of people, and that he was saving the accused from being harmed by cleansing his spirit. He recounted a recent experience:

In Kairick, they wanted to burn three women. They were accused for causing a child's death. When I arrived, the child was lying there, and the three women were tied up. They were about to be tortured and burned. I told them that they had eaten the child. Then I asked them to buy three packets of rice, three packets of noodles, three besta tinned fish and three flex (phone) cards. Then I lined up the suspects and tell them, "*it was not your fault. Just that you all went and bought that poison with K300 is your mistake. Where is it?*" Then they said, the spirit might be with them, but they could not see it. Then I told them, "*good that you all have admitted*". I took them into a house, kept them there and in the evening, I called for that bird to sing. Then I called for the rat, the cat and the dog to come. I invited them all into the house and cut them all. Then early in the morning of the next day, I asked the suspects on who got the spirit first, then who was second and who was third. The other one who was also accused, I told her, you are not part of this group, so you can go free. Then I cleaned the three. Now they are back to normal. Then I brought them to the Paiyam police station and before the eyes of the police, I declare them that they are now normal human beings. They should not be accused again. Now they live a very normal life. Police and army were also there and they have witnessed it.

### What exactly do *glasman/glasmeri* do?

Table 1 below shows our data on what *glasman/glasmeri* actually did in the cases of SARV we have documented. The most common intervention by a *glasman/glasmeri*, when involved in these cases, was to directly identify a person or people as having used sorcery. Another reasonably common intervention is to engage in actions to try to reverse the effects

Table 1. What *glasman/glasmeri* did. Percentages\* of ALL accusation incidents by location, January 2016\*\* – June 2020

	Enga (%)	Bougainville (%)	NCD (%)	Jiwaka (%)	Total (%)
<i>Number of cases with valid data</i>	<i>n=47</i>	<i>n=84</i>	<i>n=62</i>	<i>n=29</i>	<i>n=220</i>
Directly identifies a person/people as having used sorcery	70	48	53	62	56
Diagnoses a situation as having involved the use of sorcery	6	8	2	3	5
Made a promise or did some actions to try to reverse the effect of sorcery	4	12	5	0	7
Identified a false allegation	2	0	0	0	1
Engages in diagnosis of whether a person used sorcery but not clear what conclusion reached	11	23	26	35	23
Indirectly leads to someone being accused, such as by saying it will be the next person to walk past the house	4	10	2	0	5
Other	2	0	13	0	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Notes: \* Percentages are calculated using valid data i.e. excludes data that is missing or not known.

\*\* The start date for Port Moresby data is January 2017 and for Jiwaka, March 2019.

Source: SARV project incident dataset, ANU

of the sorcery through either herbal remedies or prayer. In such instances, they can be seen to be acting more as a ‘witch doctor’ than as a ‘witch hunter’. The consequences of their actions on those identified as being the agents of harm is discussed in the next section.

A large range of different divination techniques are used by *glasman/glasmeri* throughout the country, and there is some reports that these are circulating into new areas. Some of the most common of these are; the use of a bamboo stick that points to the house of the sorcerer, the use of dreams and visions, praying, the observation of the movement of fire, keeping watch over a grave at night, and other more elaborate performances. One informant stated: “they spit and they crack open the bamboo and there is something inside . . . and they say that I [belong to] the person the sorcerer tried to kill”. Others described how *glasman* would locate paraphernalia used for sorcery, such as bottles that had been buried near the victims’ houses. More sceptical informants reported that they had heard *glasman/glasmeri* nosing around for ‘the back story’ in order to ensure the person they identified was the person most people suspected anyway.

Informants reported the attempts made by *glasman/glasmeri* to appear scientific, such as noting down observations and times in notebooks. Some informants spoke about the need for ‘certificates’ for *glasman/glasmeri* to distinguish the real ones from the fake ones. One *glasman* we interviewed stated that he was publicly declared to be the ‘official’ *glasman* of the

area by the police and the army. He explained that he was just waiting for the governor to provide him with a legal licence to operate as a doctor for those possessed by *sanguma* spirit, and a car to travel around in.

*Glasman/glasmeri* also sometimes use phones as a means of divination. In one case we documented, it was said that there had been a phone message from the dead person in the coffin identifying the sorcerer. In another, people were buying phone credits so they could get further messages from the *glasman* who was giving them information over the phone. There are also stories of a special telephone number one can use to contact the dead.

### What kind of impact do *glasman/glasmeri* have in cases of SARV?

The role of *glasman/glasmeri* in SARV is significant, leading to us characterising them as catalysts of sorcery accusations and of the accusations turning into violence. Overall, a *glasman/glasmeri* was involved in the accusation being made in almost a third (29 percent) of **all** incidents we documented. There was a considerable and significant regional variation in this, and it was highest in Jiwaka (39 percent), followed by Enga and Port Moresby (NCD). It was the lowest in Bougainville (22 percent).

We also found that *glasman/glasmeri* were much more likely to be involved in the accusation being made in incidents that

**Table 2. Involvement of *glasman/glasmeri* in violent and non-violent incident. Percentages\* of accusation incidents by location, January 2016\*\* – June 2020**

	Enga (%)	Bougainville (%)	NCD (%)	Jiwaka (%)	Total (%)
<b><i>Number of cases with valid data</i></b>	<b><i>n=166</i></b>	<b><i>n=391</i></b>	<b><i>n=256</i></b>	<b><i>n=79</i></b>	<b><i>n=892</i></b>
All incidents	33%	22%	32%	39%	29%
Violent incidents	47%	25%	48%	47%	40%
Non-violent incidents	25%	22%	26%	33%	24%

Notes: \* Percentages are calculated using valid data i.e. excludes data that is missing or not known.

\*\* The start date for Port Moresby data is January 2017 and for Jiwaka, March 2019.

Source: SARV project incident dataset, ANU

**Table 3. Proportion of incidents where *glasman/glasmeri* directly identified a person/ people having used sorcery. Percentages\* of accusation incidents by location, January 2016\*\* – June 2020**

	Enga (%)	Bougainville (%)	NCD (%)	Jiwaka (%)	Total(%)
<b><i>Number of cases with valid data</i></b>	<b><i>n=47</i></b>	<b><i>n=84</i></b>	<b><i>n=62</i></b>	<b><i>n=29</i></b>	<b><i>n=220</i></b>
All incidents	70%	48%	53%	62%	56%
Violent incidents	78%	65%	58%	50%	64%
Non-violent incidents	63%	42%	50%	77%	51%

Notes: \* Percentages are calculated using valid data i.e. excludes data that is missing or not known.

\*\* The start date for Port Moresby data is January 2017 and for Jiwaka, March 2019.

resulted in violence (40 percent), compared to incidents that did not lead to violence (24 percent). This difference reached statistical significance in all provinces, except Bougainville.

In NCD, Enga and Jiwaka, nearly half of the violent incidents involved a *glasman/glasmeri* in the accusation being made, see Table 2 above.

Overall, the fact that a *glasman/glasmeri* had directly identified a person/people as having used sorcery was significantly related to an accusation incident turning into violence in every province, except Jiwaka (see Table 3 above).

Our qualitative data provides a more explanation about how this link between *glasman/glasmeri* and accusation and violence occurs. “People did not go to the hospital but instead went to look for witch doctors or *glasman* and then took matters into their own hands and acted”, recounted one informant. This follows a common theme of people either going to the *glasman/glasmeri* when someone is sick before going to the hospital, or going if recourse to medicine has failed. One survivor told us that he had been accused after a *glasman/glasmeri* had told a sick person that the first person to pass her door the next morning was the person who had caused her illness, and it was the hapless youth who just happened to be the first to pass. Another commented: “A

lot of people make decisions over the advice of the *glasman*” and noted: “the advice of the *glasman* is causing people to fight, causing death”. Another explained: “When someone dies, they do an investigation on themselves and bring in the *glasman* and *glasmeri*. They do not come to the courts”. A public solicitor stated: “It often comes up in the statements I read. Instead of using the police, they believe the *glasman* is the true one. People believe them and start to do murder”.

As noted above, these findings suggest that the input of the *glasman/glasmeri* is perceived as providing the definitive proof needed to overcome the doubt about the use of sorcery in a given context, and as such, morally enables recourse to violence. This is consistent with Knauff and Malbrancke’s (2017) multi-decadal study of homicide reduction amongst the Gebusi, which found that a significant factor in attenuating SARV was the abandonment of sorcery inquests and séances. They found that whilst the ‘belief in sorcery and in the propriety of violence directed against suspected sorcerers remains very strong’, the lack of firm proof of guilt that could be generated by such a mechanism meant that ‘the effective actualisation [of violence was] greatly mitigated and reduced’ (Knauff and Malbrancke, 2017: 4).

### Regulatory responses (tried and potential)

It is clear from the discussion above that *glasman/glasmeri* are highly implicated in SARV. To what extent are attempts being made to actively prevent such behaviour or to make them accountable for the violence and misery they generate? It seems very little. We have only documented one case where a *glasman* was arrested, and even in that case after being kept for quite some months in a police holding cell, he eventually escaped – or was released.

A more common informal response is for State and community leaders and people otherwise in a position of authority to denounce *glasman/glasmeri* through using terms such as ‘liar’, ‘con artists’, ‘*giaman man*’ (liar man), ‘false magic’, and ‘false prophet’. One ward councillor became so frustrated with the behaviour of *glasman/glasmeri* that he banned them from visiting his area. Yet there is a tendency to denounce one individual as being a ‘fake’ *glasman/glasmeri* whilst implicitly acknowledging that some others may be ‘true’ ones.

Under the law as it currently stands, there is the clear ability to do more. It is possible to charge *glasman/glasmeri* as accessories in cases of SARV that amount to criminal offences, if it can be proved that they aided and abetted or incited the crime. It is also possible that when Village Courts and other courts hear about sorcery allegations, they can issue specific preventative orders to stop *glasman/glasmeri* from making any statements, direct or indirect, about a particular incident. Serious consideration should be given to the question as to whether it would be advisable to have a specific offence in the criminal law prohibiting *glasman/glasmeri* from directly or indirectly identifying individuals as being sorcerers. There are dangers that such offences will be perceived by the population as being out of touch with their genuine concerns about sorcery. However, the evidence suggests that violence can be attenuated by removing sources of certainty or authority about sorcery accusations, such as are provided by *glasman/glasmeri*.

Similar issues have arisen in other countries where diviners are said to play a significant role in catalysing violence. The relationship between traditional healers, diviners and sorcerers is often complex and intertwined with such figures simultaneously having the power to harm and to heal (Geschiere, 2008). The South African Law Reform Commission, which has engaged extensively in this debate, observed that a relevant question is ‘whether the supernatural powers said to be possessed by witches can be distinguished from the powers said to be possessed by traditional healers’ (SALRC, 2014: 38). In some countries, traditional

healers perform extremely important public health roles and play a useful role in deflecting sorcery accusations from having violent consequences. As is the case in PNG, in Africa, ‘the churches play a role both as an arena for witchcraft accusations and as a means for putting an end to such discourse’ (Kgatla et al., 2003: 17). Powles and Deakin (2012: 20) noted that whilst ‘exorcism and collective prayer can be a therapeutic ‘healing space’, there is increasing evidence that many diviners today are ‘charlatans’ and ‘more interested in making money than helping people’ (Powles and Deakin, 2012: 18). There are also concerns about Pentecostal church leaders in Africa who charge parents to have their children exorcised, leading both to profiteering from such beliefs and creating conditions for horrific abuses, such as pouring mixtures of blood and alcohol into children’s eyes (IHEU, 2009).

### Conclusion

This paper has argued that *glasman/glasmeri* play a significant role in catalysing violent responses to suspicions of sorcery. They largely perform such a role through providing a seemingly authoritative substantiation of the suspicion through various forms of ‘proof’ that may come through dreams, prayer, meditation or customary rituals (such as rituals involving bamboo sticks). In many cases, *glasman/glasmeri* directly identify particular individuals as having used sorcery, thereby significantly increasing the likelihood of that person facing a lifetime of stigma or physical violence. Due to the aura of authority, *glasman/glasmeri* are able to invoke, their pronouncements are difficult for the accused to dispute or refute. Many *glasman/glasmeri* operate in ways that generate financial advantages for themselves, although as noted above there is a mixture of motivations, with some no doubt genuinely believing they wield supernatural powers. The findings of this study suggest strongly that attention should be given to how to regulate the conduct of *glasman/glasmeri* effectively, in order to address the urgent issue of SARV in PNG.

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## Authors contributions

All the authors (Miranda Forsyth, William Kipongi, Anton Lutz, Philip Gibbs, Fiona Hukula and Ibolya Losoncz) collected data and analysed the qualitative data, conceptualised and wrote the original draft and final text of this paper.

In addition, Ibolya Losoncz did the quantitative data analysis for the paper and prepared the tables in this paper.



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