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SORCERY ACCUSATION- RELATED VIOLENCE IN ENGA PROVINCE

Philip Gibbs
William Kipongi
Anton Lutz
Ibolya Losoncz
Miranda Forsyth
Fiona Hukula

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Abstract

This Issues Paper discusses the emergence of a form of Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence (SARV) in the Enga Province of Papua New Guinea (PNG). The paper is based on a multi-year mixed methods national study which, over four years, collected data from 198 incidents of SARV in Enga. The paper reports on the development of an Enga form of sorcery, the extent of SARV, and the main characteristics of the incidents in the province, that churches and government agencies have attempted to respond with limited success. Based on a number of insightful studies, the paper concludes drawing attention to the need for community laws and safe house facilities, and greater investment of finance and personnel for creating an effective way forward.

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SORCERY ACCUSATION-RELATED VIOLENCE IN ENGA PROVINCE

By Philip Gibbs, William Kipongi, Anton Lutz, Ibolya Losoncz, Miranda Forsyth and Fiona Hukula

Introduction

Sorcery and witchcraft beliefs and practices are an important aspect of life in many parts of the world, particularly the global South (Forsyth, 2016). Scholarly literature, non-government organisation reports and UN documents often treat the negative consequences of such practices and beliefs. In parts of Africa, witches are believed to act unconsciously, yet driven by the urge to act malevolently (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). Sickness and death, misfortunes and other inequalities of life are attributed to witchcraft and where modern medicine may treat the external symptoms, witchcraft is believed to uncover the hidden causes (Ashforth, 2005). Similar beliefs and practices in various forms are part of contemporary life in Papua New Guinea. This paper draws on data from a multi-year collaborative research project into overcoming (SARV) in PNG (Forsyth et al., 2017). The project was designed to support different sectors of the Sorcery National Action Plan (SNAP) and to contribute to the national effort to prevent and find proactive ways of dealing with SARV. The research dimension of the SARV National Action Plan has seen a number of insightful studies (Forsyth, et al., 2019; Forsyth and Gibbs, 2019a; Forsyth and Gibbs, 2019b; Gibbs, 2020; Hukula et al., 2020; and Forsyth and Gibbs, 2021c). The research sought to establish where, why, how often, by whom, and how sorcery accusations are occurring. It also enquired into what accusations lead to violence at times and not at other times, and what regulatory systems exist to overcome SARV. This paper provides information on a number of issues facing ethnic Enga from the Enga Province, which is just one of the 22 provinces in PNG and one of four provinces chosen for the research.

The Enga people of PNG are a Highlands (Region) society that numbers about 500,000 today (National Statistical

Office, 2011). The majority of the population lives in rural mountains and valleys. They are horticulturalists with their staple food, sweet potato, used to feed large human and pig populations. Today, both men and women are engaged in small local businesses.

The first contacts of Enga with the modern world were through gold miners' exploratory patrols, namely the Akama Prospecting Company from the Sepik in 1929-30, and the Leahy Brothers expedition from Mt Hagen in 1934 (Kumbon 2020a; see also Kumbon 2020b). Exploration continued after World War II and substantial changes were introduced by the Colonial Administration and Christian missions from the 1950s until Independence in 1975. Starting in the late 1990s, mobile phones and the constant movement of people on public motor vehicles greatly altered patterns of interaction and communication. Traditional marriage customs were increasingly disregarded and a rapidly growing population has begun to put pressure on land (Wiessner, 2020). Intermittent tribal warfare with guns has brought about death and destruction. Money from wage labour, cash crops and the Porgera Gold Mine have led to increasing individual interest, and downloads onto smartphones have introduced novel viewpoints, including ideas about sorcery (Wiessner, 2020).

Up until around 2010, any mention of sorcery or witchcraft (often known by the term *sanguma*) in Enga would direct people's thoughts to other parts of PNG such as Simbu Province or the Sepik (Gibbs and Wailoni, 2009; Gibbs, 2012). There was news of 'witches' in the isolated area of the Lagaip River at the western end of Enga, but the Hewa people there were considered linguistically and culturally different from the dominant Enga culture that news of the Hewa killing of witches was considered something foreign (Steadman, 1975). According to anthropologist, Meggitt (1981), traditionally in Enga, illness and death were attributed to ghostly malice. Now *sanguma*, is a common explanation for such happenings.

New for Enga

Sorcery, known today as *sanguma*, is associated with the narrative that sickness, death and misfortunes are caused

by people (also known as *sangumas*) who are possessed by a spirit which goes out to steal and eat peoples' hearts (Forsyth and Gibbs (2021a). This new form of response to misfortune and death started in Enga around 2010. It was in 2010 that national newspapers started reporting sorcery cases in the Enga Province (Gumuno, 2010)¹. The following year, 2011, a woman was accused and burned to death at Waipu, near Yampu, not far from Wabag. There followed by the public accusation and burning of a woman from Enga named Angeline Kepari Leniata (Wama, 2013). She was born and grew up in Paiela, near Porgera at the western end of Enga bordering the Hewa region. She had been accused of sorcery in Paiela and had fled to Mt Hagen in the Western Highlands. However, rumours that she was a 'witch' followed her there and she was publicly accused and burned alive in Mt Hagen on 6 February 2013. Further accusations and violence followed, with two women accused and tortured near Yampu on the same year and another from the Paiela Valley near Porgera (*The National*, 2013)².

Violence such as tribal fighting is endemic in the Enga Province. However, for most Engans, accusations of witchcraft and outbreaks of sorcery accusations and violence were something new.³ In 2014, the Provincial Police Commander, George Kakas, from Enga, claimed that traditionally, Engans did not hold sorcery beliefs and that the recent cases of sorcery-related violence respond to an introduced ideology (Stop Sorcery Violence, 2014). In 2017, the Engan Acting Police Commander, Epenes Nili announced that *sanguma*-related killings were a 'new thing' in Enga, reaching frightening proportions (Nalu, 2017). He stressed an urgent need to combat 'the evil spreading like wildfire across the province' (Nalu, 2017b). Stories circulated about how some Engan women wanting to obtain magic to stop their husbands from getting new wives, had visited the neighbouring Simbu Province, but had mistakenly brought back *sanguma* magic.

Yama nenge: The eating spirit

¹ The report is from the Tsak valley in Enga, where a group of armed men searching for a suspected sorcerer had killed an innocent teenager in his stead.

² Of the two women tortured near Yampu, one died, but the other survived. She appeared telling her story on the 'Olsem Wanem' program, episode 16, 2015, screened on national EMTV. In the Paiela Valley case from Enga, a man was given a thirty-year sentence after accusing his aunt of practising sorcery and then killing her. The woman was probably a relative of Angeline Kepari Leniata because both are from Tombena Village in Paiela.

³ There were frequent reports of sorcery accusation-related violence from neighbouring provinces. For example, between 2001 and 2013, in the national newspapers, there were 22 reports of SARV from the neighbouring Southern Highlands Province.

The new magic is often referred to as *yama nenge* (literally means 'eating spirit') in the Enga language. The traditional Enga term *yama* refers to peoples' lustful desire closely associated with food, especially the desire for pork. *Yama* is like a strong feeling or desire to eat meat. In Enga, traditionally elderly women or widows were those primarily labelled as persons possessing a *yama* spirit. There was a customary practice of marginalising older women in the community, particularly disregarding them in contrast to men when meat was distributed at big feasts and celebrations. *Yama* was thought to cause misfortune or sickness, but it would not be responsible for serious illness or death as attributed nowadays to belief in *sanguma*. An Engan commented that *sanguma* is the *yama* spirit 'developed to the next level'.

Since *sanguma* is something non-empirical or supernatural, it may be used to explain various undesirable events like sickness, sudden death or car accidents. Nowadays, if somebody suffers economic misfortune, business failure, unemployment, marriage breakdown or failure in studies, people may offer *sanguma* as the cause and will call on a 'glasman' (diviner) who, they think can tell them the 'truth', identify the cause and advise on a fitting course of action (Forsyth et al., 2021).

Response to sorcery accusation by various agencies

As sorcery accusations and associated violence continued to spread in Enga, various agencies have attempted to respond (Forsyth and Gibbs, 2019a). Victims sought help from churches and church leaders were obliged to respond. Enga Catholic Bishop, Arnold Orowae, has taken a firm stand, denying the reality of *sanguma* and excommunicating communities that participated in SARV. In May 2013, he was joined by Catholic bishops in the Highlands, inviting other churches to join them in taking a clear, unambiguous, and strong stand against all talk about *sanguma* and all attempts to lay the blame on anyone, especially at the time of sickness and death (Catholic Bishops Highlands Region, 2013). Lutheran missionary, Anton Lutz, and Ruth Kissam from the Tribal Foundation have taken a stand, but the response from others in Enga has often been unclear and ambiguous. Some pastors claim that *sanguma* is the fulfilment of Bible prophesy (Exod: 22,18) and others prefer spiritual warfare, claiming that they have the ability to pray and cast out the *sanguma* spirit. Others claim that the idea of *sanguma* is a 'mental virus' passed on by gossiping and rumours. Different opinions tend to aggravate confusion in the minds of the people and it is necessary for all Christian churches to preach a unified gospel that protects all citizens of PNG.

The courts have also been called on to respond. Magistrates are to base their decision on evidence, but often the only evidence is that someone has suffered misfortune or died and there is little evidence to support a claim of sorcery. Confessions are made under duress and, in the common mind, the fact that a sick person has recovered is claimed as evidence that the torture was justified. Enga has a tiered court system - from the local village court to a joint court to a higher court called Operation Mekim Save (OMS), to the district court and the national court. The OMS has the power to demand that the whole tribe pay hefty amount of compensation for wrongs such as accusation or torture and this has begun to have a restraining effect, particularly in the area around Wapenamanda.

The police and the defence force personnel play a limited role in Enga. Not only are there logistical challenges, but a considerable number of people in Enga do not wish to release suspects to them because they believe that the police and defence force are cooperating with the occult forces of *sanguma*. Having accomplished a rescue, the police find themselves looking for ways to care for victims and they end up seeking assistance from church agencies such as Yampu Health Centre. There is no well-established 'safe house' in Enga and accused are taken, for their own safety, to facilities in other provinces.

The Enga provincial government has made several attempts to address the issue of SARV. In March 2017, there was a three-day consultation involving stakeholders, including survivors, the police, churches, NGOs, and provincial government representatives, together with members of the Consultative Implementation and Monitoring Council and the Department of Justice and Attorney General. The following year, in November 2018, there was a Law and Order Launching event (including the issue of sorcery) with the Enga governor, the provincial police commander and other top officials, administration officers, councillors and village leaders. Such events appear to have little sustained follow-ups.

Data collection and analysis

A multi-year study of sorcery accusation-related violence (SARV) has collected data from Enga.⁴ The project utilised a convergent Mixed Methods Research design, combined with a collaborative team approach drawing on both qualitative and quantitative sources at national and sub-national levels.

⁴ The 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. For more details, see Forsyth et al. (2017) and Forsyth & Gibbs. (2021). Parts 1 and 2.

Data were drawn from a database of articles from the two national newspapers – *The National* and *Post Courier* – and national court cases reported on PACLII over more than a 20-year period (1996-2020). This was supplemented by searches of other media through the online FACTIVA database.

The second source of data is a new database of incidents of sorcery accusation-related violence in a number of hotspot provinces from 2016 for four years. Enga was one of these provinces. The database was built on the basis of forms completed by a network of local data gatherers who documented accusation *incidents* that led to violence and those that did not lead to violence.

For each incident, data was collected on up to six victims of accusation, including their demographic characteristics, why they were accused, forms of violence they were subjected to, and injuries they incurred. Data was entered into Excel and then imported into SPSS. Two datasets were created: an *incident* dataset containing 1,039 records of accusation; and a *victim* dataset containing 1,553 records of victims of accusation. The quantitative analysis presented in this paper used standard SPSS descriptive statistics tools, such as frequency and crosstab analysis.

The third dataset is a series of 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.

The extent of sorcery accusation-related violence

Spanning 1 January 2016–June 2020, our database records 74 incidents of sorcery accusation that lead to major physical violence and 122 that did not lead to violence. In 39 percent of cases, more than one person was accused most often due to the first accused being forced to name others during torture or intimidation. In total, 307 people were accused. The high number of accusation is due to several persons being accused in one incident (in 61 percent of cases, there was one accused; in 25 percent of cases, there were two accused; in 11 percent of cases, there were three accused; and in 3 percent of cases, there were four or more accused).

The SARV database provides important insights into the main characteristics of these incidents such as gender, age, residence, economic and educational status, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Key characteristics of SARV victims and percentages of victims of violent incidents, Enga, January 2016 – June 2020

	Victims of violent incidents (%)
	n=149
Female	96
Accused before	54
Born in the community	35
Economic status same as rest of community	81
Education	
No schooling	69
Started and/or completed primary school	30
In paid employment	5
Age	
0-10 years	1
11-18 years	3
19-40 years	38
41-60 years	51
Over 60 years	8

Considering age in Table 1, given that the number of women in the older age category is only slightly over a half of the number in the younger age category, it makes the older group significantly more susceptible.⁵ There were also victims who were both very old and very young; a number of cases during this period involved the accusation and torture of children as young as six (mainly children of accused women).

Each incident may also involve secondary victims, such as children of those accused who may face loss of parents, homes and property, and social stigmatisation. Of those incidents that led to violence, 33 percent involved killing, leading to 37 deaths. A further 40 accused were left with a permanent physical injury. In 47 cases (involving 97 accused individuals), the accused persons were tortured, with the ostensible reason in 87 percent of cases to obtain a ‘confession’.

⁵ Life expectancy for women in Enga Province, PNG is 62 years (Kitur et al., 2019. p. 5.)

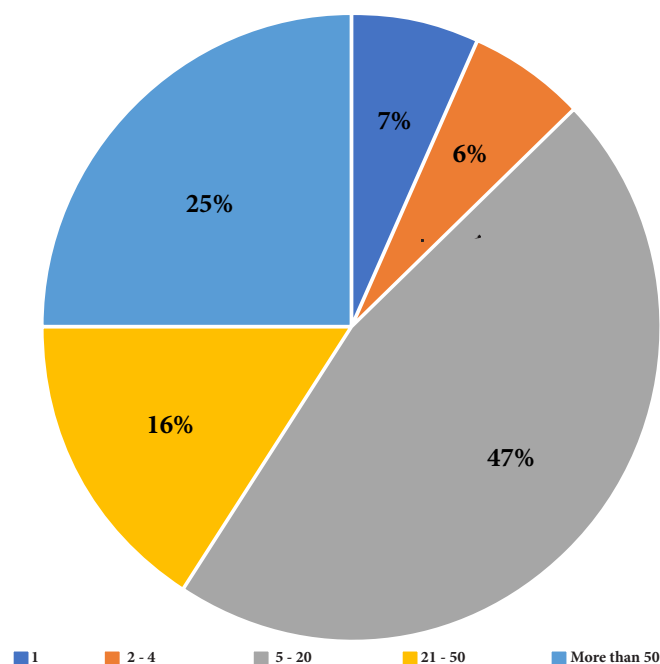
Table 2. Key characteristics of attempts to extract confession, and percentages of victims of violent incidents, Enga, January 2016 – June 2020

	Violent SARV incidents (%)
	n=74
Place of violence	
Both in public and in private	44
In public only	35
In private only	20
Length of violence	
A few hours	24
A day	24
Several days	45
A week or longer	7

In all the cases of accusation that led to violence, there was a known incident that started the accusation. As many as (86 percent) of these known incidents were either death or sickness. In 47 percent of accusations leading to violence, a diviner (*glasman/glasmeri*) was involved.

The number of people involved in committing violence varies as shown in Figure 1. In a few cases, only one person or a small group committed the violence, but in most cases the number of people committing violence was far greater, with a mob of more than 50 in a quarter of the cases recorded.

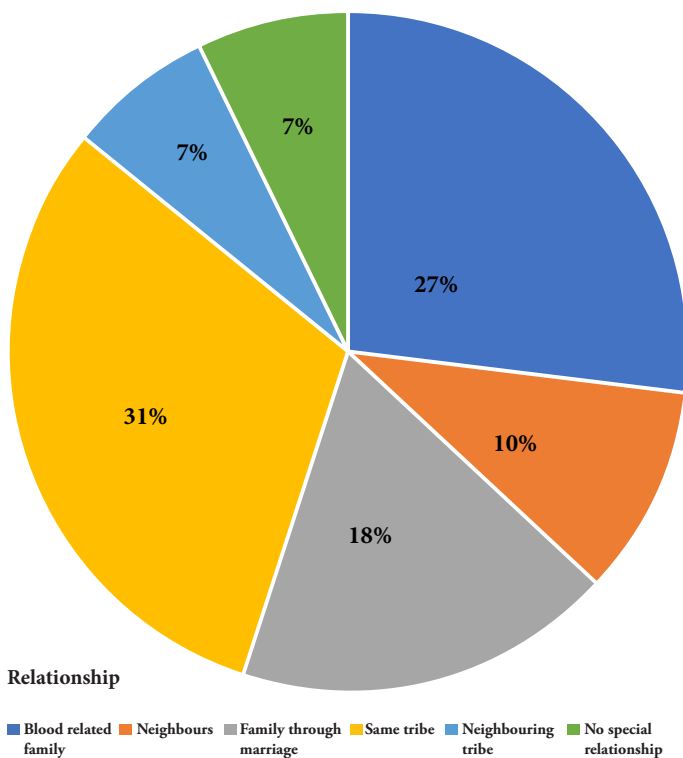
Figure 1. Distribution of the number of people who committed the violence, and percentages of violent incidents, Enga, January 2016 – June 2020



We had expected to find that the violence was overwhelmingly perpetrated by men but the data show a mixture of genders and ages in 63 percent of cases and only ‘mostly young men’ in 35 percent of cases. Similarly, although public narratives of the mob being fuelled by drugs or alcohol are common, in none of the cases were all of the perpetrators affected by drugs and alcohol. According to our data, some perpetrators were affected in 92 percent of the cases, and none were affected in 8 percent of the cases.

The relationship between accused and accuser for violent incidents varies as shown in Figure 2. In almost one third of the cases, accusers were of the same tribe as the accused and in over a quarter of the cases, accusers and accused were blood related as family members. In only a few cases, the accusers were from another tribe or they had no special relationship.

Figure 2. Distribution of relationship between accused and accuser, percentages of violent incidents, Enga, January 2016 – June 2020

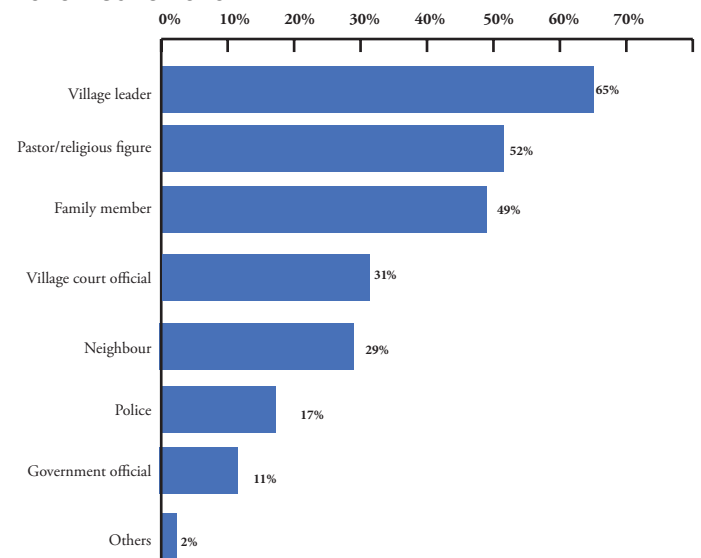


For violent incidents, a pre-existing underlying conflict between accuser and accused was known in 72 percent of the cases, most commonly jealousy over money and goods, followed by polygamy and sexual jealousy, and land disputes. However, it is not possible to automatically interpret the latter as implying that the accusation is merely a pretext for an ulterior motive (although we acknowledge accusations may be used strategically), because people are more likely

to be suspicious of those they know already have a grudge against them.

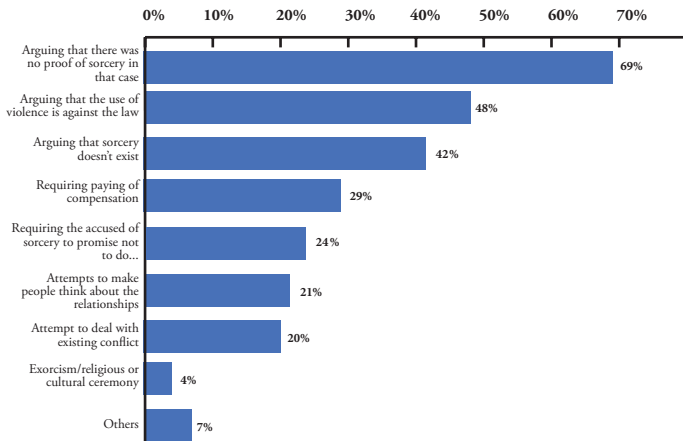
In 85 percent of cases, there were attempts to deal with the accusation in non-violent ways. The most likely person to intervene was a village leader, followed by a pastor or religious figure, as shown in Figure 3. Police or government officials were seldom part of the attempt to deal with the situation in non-violent ways.

Figure 3. Distribution of actors who attempted to deal with accusations in non-violent ways, percentages of incidents where an attempt was made, Enga, January 2016 – June 2020



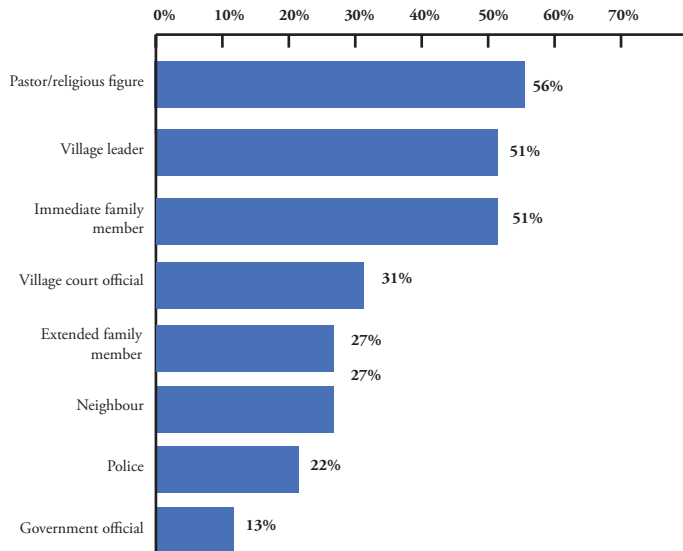
Various approaches were used to resolve accusations in non-violent ways as shown in Figure 4. The most common was arguing that there is no proof of sorcery in that case. Others argued that the use of violence is against the law or that sorcery does not exist. Less frequent were attempts to require payment of compensation for the accusation, or attempts to have people think about relationships involved. Very few resorted to a religious or cultural ceremony.

Figure 4. Distribution of approaches used to resolve accusations in non-violent ways, percentages of incidents where an attempt was made, Enga, January 2016 – June 2020



If violence was ongoing, efforts to stop the violence were attempted in most (78 percent) of the cases, typically by a pastor/religious figure, a village leader, or immediate family member, as shown in Figure 5. Police intervened in less than a quarter of such cases.

Figure 5. Distribution of actors who attempted to stop violence that was ongoing, percentages of incidents where an attempt was made, Enga, January 2016 – June 2020



In most cases perpetrators of violence were not arrested. Of the accused, a quarter (25 percent) were dead and 36 percent still live in the villages. Survivors continue to face threats (39 percent) and stigma or social isolation (46 percent).

Conclusion

People from Enga have a traditional belief in spirits and

an associated belief in non-empirical causes of death or misfortune, but fear of possession by a spirit which goes out to steal and eat peoples' hearts is a relatively new narrative, circulating in the last 10 years. This paper provides information from a national study, which over four years, included research in the Enga Province. The study documented 179 incidents of accusation involving 307 accusations. Of these accusations, 79 incidents developed into violence which resulted in the deaths of 37 people.

The data reveals that in Enga, a vast majority of those accused were women, with only 22 males out of 307 accused. More than half of the women identified were more than 40 years of age, which is significant since, with a relatively high mortality rate, there are less older people in the society. Those accused tend not to have had formal education, but the majority are not poor, being of the same economic status as the rest of the community. Significantly, for more than half, this was not the first time they had been accused. So, it is likely that the accused was a person being watched, and consequently vulnerable to accusation when misfortune struck in the community. The study also notes the vulnerability of children of accused women. Such vulnerabilities need to be taken into account in any attempt to address this issue. Secondary victims of SARV such as children who have lost parents, or those who have lost property, or have to live with the stigma of being associated with sorcery or witchcraft as a result of their relationship with an accused, should not be overlooked in understanding and responding to the trauma of SARV.

The location of accusation and violence varies. It can be public or sometimes private and can continue over several days. For most incidents, the location is not the accused individual's natal community. In Enga, women, when they get married, customarily move to form a new family with their husband's clan. Hence, an accused woman may find it difficult to reach relatives or male siblings for safety.

The data from Enga reveals that in cases of SARV, trigger events are most often incidents of sickness or death. However, we also found the influence of pre-existing issues such as conflict, jealousy over money and goods, sexual jealousy or land disputes. Such pre-existing conditions may set the scene for accusation once news of sickness or death begins to circulate in the community.

Those making the accusations include men, but our data reveals that in almost two thirds of the cases, both men and women were involved. Many of the accusers were from the same tribe or clan as the accused, and almost one third were family members. Groups accusing can be large, numbering to over 50 people. Some may be fuelled by drugs or alcohol, but not all. Almost half of the accusations leading to violence in

Enga involved a diviner, exploiting community uncertainty and fears. The diviner can be physically present, but may also communicate over a device such as a mobile phone. The makeup of such large family groups, in their home territory must be daunting for anyone contemplating intervention. Rational argument that there is no proof of sorcery may have to contend with the captivating explanations from a diviner.

The research raised a question as to why a third of cases of sorcery accusation in Enga lead to violence and the rest are resolved – at least for the time being, without resort to physical violence or property damage. Our study has found that in majority of cases, there were attempts to deal with accusation in non-violent ways, led by a village leader, or by a pastor/religious figure. When mediation is unsuccessful and violence ensues, it is most often a pastor/religious figure, village leader or immediate family member who intervene to try to stop the violence. Police and magistrates intervene only in minority of the cases. However, it is notable that even when local leaders intervene, they most likely use legalistic arguments that there is no proof of sorcery in that case, or argue that violence is against the law. Such findings can be useful in development of proactive awareness materials. Even after violence has been averted, the accused often continue to face threats, stigma and social isolation. Hence, community laws prohibiting accusations, and safe house facilities are essential to creating an effective way forward.

A novel narrative of people, who appear normal, but are possessed by a spirit stealing other peoples' hearts to feast on, is arousing heightened emotions such as fear in Enga. Consequent accusations both reflect and amplify existing structural inequalities and vulnerabilities. Violence is a common response to conflict and fear in Enga, and lack of cultural traditions to manage the sorcery narrative reduces the likelihood of processes being in place to stem the pressure for violent responses that can quickly get out of control, resulting in public spectacles of accusation, stigmatisation, violence and death. A response to this new expression of violence requires critical reflection, new narratives, and new social norms that lead to non-violent responses. This is a sobering reflection for the rest of PNG as well as something that urgently needs to be addressed in Enga.

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About the Authors

Philip Gibbs, originally from New Zealand, first came to the Enga Province, Papua New Guinea, in 1973 and since then has worked in pastoral ministry, teaching and research in various capacities throughout the country. Currently he is the President of Divine Word University, Papua New Guinea. He is a Primary Investigator in the project Improving the impact of state and non-state interventions in overcoming sorcery accusation-related violence in Papua New Guinea.

William Kipongi is a researcher with Papua New Guinea National Research Institute. He is a researcher in the project Improving the impact of state and non-state interventions in overcoming sorcery accusation-related violence in Papua New Guinea.

Anton Lutz is a missionary of The Lutheran Church, working in Papua New Guinea with a focus on preventing sorcery accusation-based violence. He is a researcher in the project Improving the impact of state and non-state interventions in overcoming sorcery accusation-related violence in Papua New Guinea.

Ibolya Losoncz is a Fellow at the School of Governance (RegNet) in the College of Asia and Pacific at Australian National University. Ibolya is a researcher in the project Improving the impact of state and non-state interventions in overcoming sorcery accusation-related violence in Papua New Guinea.

Miranda Forsyth is an Associate Professor in the School of Governance (RegNet) in the College of Asia and Pacific at Australia National University. Miranda has been the lead Chief Investigator in the project Improving the impact of state and non-state interventions in overcoming sorcery accusation-related violence in Papua New Guinea, research from which has informed this Issues Paper.

Fiona Hukula is a gender specialist with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Fiji. She is a Primary Investigator in the project Improving the impact of state and non-state interventions in overcoming sorcery accusation-related violence in Papua New Guinea.

Authors contributions

All the authors, in a team including Divine Word University, the Papua New Guinea National Research Institute and Australian National University, collected data and contributed to the analysis of the qualitative data. Philip Gibbs conceptualised and wrote the original draft and final text of this paper with input through successive drafts from other team members. Ibolya Losoncz did the quantitative data analysis for the paper

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