

## WITCH HUNT

***Black magic and sorcery is widespread in Papua New Guinea. This superstition is called: Saguma. Sorcery related killings became a huge problem in the Pacific nation. Hundreds of witches are hunted and killed each year.***

We can smell the dead woman before we actually see her. The corpse has been rotting away for three days in the moist heat of the highlands. Inside a hut, on a filthy mattress, lies the battered body of Waja Loko. Her legs, covered with bloodied weals, hang over the end of the bed. Her stomach is bloated. The glassy stare in her eyes is fixed on her sister, who is weeping nearby. One of her sons is engaged in a futile attempt to dispel the odour of death with air freshener spray. Waja Loko was doomed to die at the age of 55 because she was thought to be a witch. Her crime: she was supposed to have killed a young man of her neighbourhood with a deadly glance.

Monica Paulus had rushed to Goroka immediately on hearing of the murder, after being tipped off by a nun she knew. The dead witch is said to be lying in the village of Asarufa somewhere down in the valley, she was told. We hurried through the streets of Goroka, which is a small town in the highlands of Papua New Guinea just an hour's flight away from Port Moresby, the capital city, though the two places feel as if they were a whole century apart. It was eight o'clock in the morning. We hastened past the market, where people sell betelnuts and vegetables and overladen vans provide Goroka with a link to the outside world. A drunken man staggered towards us and greeted us with a slurred "fuck you!" Uve Loko urged us to walk faster. "The killers are watching us, it's not safe here!" he whispered, as he scanned the street with anxious eyes.

Papua New Guinea is a real paradise: 6.3 million inhabitants, eight hundred ethnic groups, smoking volcanos, torrential rivers, endless jungle. Birds of paradise, headhunters, shark charmers. The people are warm hearted and friendly. Clocks run at a slower rate here. Only in the last century or so has this country been catapulted out of the stone age into modernity, and it is still the home of ancient, bloodthirsty superstitions. People talk about it under their breath:

"saguma", a belief in black magic, evil spirits and witches. Every year hundreds of people are put to death, mainly women but also children and occasionally men, because they have been blamed for practising witchcraft. Saguma is the dark side of this paradise.

Uve Loko is the dead woman's nephew. He is a strongly built man, 28 years of age, with great paws encrusted with dirt, rotting teeth, a knitted cap in the national colours of New Guinea, black, red and yellow. We turned off to the left past a cemetery, climbed over a fence, trudged through banana plantations and across cassava fields, battled our way through thickets and undergrowth, all the time keeping an eye out to see whether anyone was following us, periodically stopping still and listening. Through the luxuriant forest came the mournful wailing of a funeral wake. There at the end of the path through the jungle stood two huts, crouching in the shade of a tree.

Now Monica Paulus is holding a handkerchief to her nose so as to make breathing less unbearable. She is a plump woman with her hair trimmed short. She has sad eyes. At 42 years of age, she knows only too well what dead women look like. She has been fighting against superstition for four years, moving through highland villages, speaking to the surviving relatives of victims, writing down their histories, arranging legal representation, hiding supposed witches in her own house or with friends, helping them to report their persecutors to the police or taking them to the nearest hospital - and she has been paying for most of this out of her own pocket. Sometimes she works for the United Nations as an interpreter, otherwise she sells the vegetables she grows at home. She has few accomplices: some people who work in NGOs or UN agencies, human rights lawyers, doctors. The head of the murder enquiry commission in her home town of Kundiawa is on her side, so is a cousin of Pope John Paul II, a doctor, who treats saguma victims for free at Kundiawa hospital.

Nobody can say exactly how many people lose their lives to superstition each year. People are arbitrarily stigmatized, tortured and killed simply because someone thinks it must have been them, using black magic or the evil eye, who caused a death or made a disease such as

AIDS, consumption or blood poisoning strike a village. Since the AIDS virus started eating away at the population, the number of saguma deaths has risen too. Supposed witches are also blamed for bad harvests, accidents, adultery, theft: every kind of misfortune is put down to saguma, and the affected family or clan sit down and decide who is going to be made to suffer the penalty. Most often the chosen victims are lone women, widows, invalids, eccentrics, the mentally ill, people who shun society.

By now the government has recognized that there is a problem, and passed a law against the persecution of witches. Local newspapers still carry stories of saguma murders every week, but there are no official statistics. Any victim who survives or manages to escape is branded for life. The stigma is even passed on to their children like a hereditary curse, and having once been proscribed they are fair game. Anyone who has been judged guilty of saguma must reckon with the possibility of an untimely death, wherever he or she may try to hide. The people most eager to carry out the death sentence are typically young men, stoked up with drugs, alcohol and superstition, men who have no education and no employment.

And that's how it was with Waja Loko, the so-called witch of Asarufa. When the screaming had ended and the men had backed off, one of the tied-up women lay dead in the mire. The men squatted on their heels and contemplated their handiwork. A few hours earlier they had marched into the village to settle a score: to obtain retribution for the death of a neighbour who had died of a strange disease two weeks earlier. Nobody knew what he had died of, but everyone was sure of one thing, witchcraft was involved. "Saguma!" the murderers mumbled to each other, as they looked to black magic for an explanation. Saguma! Tonight, the men had decided, tonight was the time for payback, in the village of Asarufa. Somebody was going to pay the penalty.

To get their blood up the men downed liquor by the bottle, smoked marijuana and danced. They then staggered down the path to where the women they had condemned were sleeping in their huts. With each step they worked up

their fury. Then they dragged the three women from their huts and tied them to a tree. There were twenty or thirty of them, men who stank of sweat, betelnut and cheap liquor. "You're witches, you're witches," they chanted, as they spat in the women's faces, waved knives and staves at them and demanded a confession.

Throughout all this Lakophi Loko was cowering in her hut with her hands over her ears, watching through a hole in the wall as the men slowly torturing her sister to death. They beat the trussed-up women with sticks, smashed their ribs, threw stones at them, drove red-hot wires into their skin. For six long hours this went on. When the women finally gasped a confession, an axe was produced from the undergrowth. Waja Loko died instantly, the other two women survived, explains Lakophi Loko. She is a small, slender woman aged 65, and life has scored her face with deep furrows. She is squatting next to the murdered woman, stroking her cheeks and massaging her scalp, as if by so doing she could bring her sister back to life.

One of the women who survived is said to be hiding in the hamlet of Kama, not far away. Nobody knows where the third woman is: perhaps she bled to death in the jungle, perhaps she too is hiding somewhere. Monica Paulus asks a relative of Waja Loko's to take her to Kama.

Rose Bob is lying on a mattress staring into vacancy, her mouth a thin line, her arms wrapped round her chest, confining her body like a straitjacket. Her back is covered with blue marks and bloody weals. Her entire body is a disaster area. When she talks about that evening three days ago, her voice gets weaker and weaker until in the end it is scarcely audible. Rose Bob is 28 years old. Life as she knew it has ceased for her. She doesn't know who it was who accused her of practising black magic, or why. Her new life will consist of trying to stay hidden. "They'll find me, they'll kill me," she says, and her voice cracks as tears roll down her cheeks. When they untied her in order to slaughter her she had run away in the dawn light, Rose Bob explains. She didn't look back, but ran until she could run no more, then hid herself in the bush. But nobody came after her. Now she is hiding here in the tiny village of Kama, a collection of

windblown huts crouching in the lee of a mountain, two hours' walk away from her persecutors

Each step is torture for her, each movement is agony. She moves mechanically, absently. She doesn't want to go to the police, they would just ship her back to her own village. "The police all believe in saguma too. They would think I ought to receive my proper punishment. But I haven't killed anybody, I'm not a witch! I'm not a witch!" Rose Bob repeats these words like a mantra. She shows Monica the X-ray which was taken in Goroka hospital, revealing two broken ribs. She has cuts made by bush knives on both of her upper arms. She now depends on the charity of kinsfolk, and has to hope her relatives won't give away her hiding place. Some of the time she just sits there with her mouth open as if she was about to scream. Rose Bob is still alive, yet her life has been stolen; from now on she'll have to exist in continuous fear of death.

Monica Paulus sits beside Rose Bob stroking her hands and listening to her story. Occasionally she gently asks a question. Monica thinks this hut, which squeezes up against the flank of the mountain as if it wanted to conceal something from the outside world, is a good place for her to hide in. Shielded by pine and eucalyptus trees and bush, it is far from her native village. Monica Paulus puts her arm round Rose Bob's shoulders, whispers to her, wipes a tear from the younger woman's face, and when nobody is looking presses twenty kina into her palm, the equivalent of six euros, for that's all she's got on her.

Monica Paulus is a lone warrior. Her values are at odds with reality. She herself narrowly escaped death four years ago when her step-brother accused her of black magic after their father died of a stroke. "He wanted the inheritance for himself," says Monica Paulus, smiling with her mouth but not her eyes. The motives are often as banal as the acts are deadly: jealousy, covetousness, inheritance squabbles, possession claims. Saguma is a nice simple method of getting rid of family members, enemies, rivals or competitors.

Monica Paulus hasn't visited her family for four years - it's too dangerous. She occasionally meets her three children in secret. Her husband, a policeman, has divorced her. Monica Paulus is on her own, and all that keeps her going is her battle against superstition, her battle to help its victims. She is still afraid inside, she says. Even after four years she gets into a panic if anyone knocks on her door without warning: they're coming for me, they're going to kill me, she shudders. If anybody dies unexpectedly in her neighbourhood she thinks, "Now they're going to blame me". Is she angry? "No, what has happened has happened." Her misfortune has given her life a direction, a goal. She says she derives strength from that. "Nobody will help us, we must fight for our rights. If we hide away, nobody will know what happened to us. We must defend ourselves, otherwise they'll kill us."

The battle Monica Paulus is waging is one against indifference and ignorance. There is a veil of apathy lying over New Guinea's highland community. Nobody feels responsible, for most people believe that the victims are getting their just deserts. In the police station in Goraka Sergeant Fogi Kotfege is sitting at his desk. In front of him is a stack of files on unsolved cases, and an out of order computer. The electricity supply has just gone down again. Mould is eating its way through the plaster. Monica Paulus is telling the policeman all about the dead witch. Oh yes, he says, he has heard about the murder of Waja Loko, such a tragedy. But unfortunately he hasn't yet got round to investigating the case. He asks her to be indulgent, as the few available vehicles in working order are already in use, and the others are out of gas. Apart from that, he doesn't have enough staff to cover the case; and there are sure to be no witnesses. He shrugs his shoulders. Sergeant Fogi Kotfege is more concerned about the possibility of the clans coming to blows in order to settle the score. Apart from that, case closed. He offers Monica Paulus a handshake and asks her to leave.

That's standard in New Guinea: victims are left to their own devices and the majority of perpetrators go unpunished. Cases of witch persecution are found in every town and every village, in Mount Hagen, Immeguna, Sirau, Emai, everywhere.

Three hours and countless potholes away from Goroka by bus is the small town of Kundiawa. Monica Paulus wishes to visit her friend Maxi Annah Gelupa there. This 27-year-old nurse is in fear for her life ever since her parents-in-law accused her of poisoning her brother-in-law's food with AIDS. Early this year he was admitted to the hospital where Maxi works. Six weeks later he was dead of AIDS. Maxi Annah Gelupa has been hiding at a friend's house ever since. After her visit Monica Paulus drops in at the police station, where the former governor of the province is being questioned about the burning of his wife. In Barawagi prison Monica Paulus writes down the confession of 31-year-old Dama Dowe, who is about to serve twenty years for the murder of an uncle he had considered to be a magician. And in Kundiawa hospital Sister Patricia reports that she has cared for 189 raped and maltreated women since the beginning of the year.

The rusty truck lacking both doors and windscreen rumbles up the mountain, higher and higher. From up here one gets a breathtaking view of the mountain panorama of the Eastern Highlands. The huge bulk of Mount Wilhelm, the tallest mountain in New Guinea, towers in the haze; far below in the valley the river Wahgi glints in the afternoon sun. Monica Paulus is being bounced and shaken in the back of the lorry, and has no eyes for the beauties of nature. Her goal is the mountain village of Giu. There she has an appointment with a family of black magicians, the Kiupa.

Billy Kiupa, 63, and his second wife Doris, 52, are sitting on the terrace of their house sipping home-grown coffee. From time to time Doris rises laboriously from her chair and hobbles to the living room with the aid of a crutch, to fetch some avocados. Her hobbling is a reminder of a night which she managed to survive only by pure chance.

One night last year about a hundred men surrounded the house where Billy, his wife Rose and his concubine Doris were sleeping. The mob were bent on lynching the family. They broke into the house and threw Doris from the

balcony, breaking her pelvis and hip. They attacked Billy and Rose with machetes and pelted them with stones. The onslaught went on for hours. The leader of the gang said the Kiupas were practitioners of black magic, and responsible for the death of the mayor of the village. When dawn came they let Billy and Doris go, but they tied Rose to the bumper of a vehicle and dragged her down the road to the river. There, they chucked her body into the water.

Silence. Monica Paulus sips her coffee. The avocados are still on the plate in front of her, untouched. She has been friends with the Kiupas since meeting them in the hospital shortly after the attack. Doris Kiupa wipes her face with her hand. Tears are running down her cheeks. One year on, the Kiupas are still suffering from the consequences of the assault. Doris has nightmares every night, and walking is very painful for her. Her hip has'nt healed properly. Billy shows off the scars on his skull and lower arms. True, the treatment they received at Kundiawa hospital was free, as it is for all saguma victims, but the people there could do little for their psychological trauma. Billy Kiupa knows all the perpetrators in person, but none of them has yet received any punishment. The terror remains.

While Billy and Doris Kiupa are struggling to cope amid the ruins of their life, and nurse Maxi Annah Gelupa is hiding from her parents-in-law, family members and clanspeople in Asarufa are mourning the death of the supposed witch Waja Loko. Women fall into each others' arms and weep. Relatives come from neighbouring villages to express their sympathy. The men who place the dead woman in her coffin are wearing protective masks. The smell of decay mingles with the scent of air freshener spray. Brightly coloured butterflies are fluttering from bush to bush, and some children are taking a piglet for a walk on its lead.

Uve Loko, the nephew of the dead woman, who is sitting under a pine tree a few yards away, whispers away into Monica Paulus' ear. She is attending the funeral at the request of the bereaved family. Uve Loko is trembling and weeping. Monica Paulus strokes his hair while she listens to what he is saying. From time to time she gives a nod,

but she doesn't utter a word. "I didn't want her to die!" sobs Uve Loko, burying his face in his dirty hands. "We only wanted to teach her a lesson, to make her stop doing saguma."

A few steps away from him two young men are digging Waja Loko's grave. "Those two were both present when Auntie was murdered," says Uve Loko in pidgin English, pointing at the men. "So was that one at the back, and him, and him," he goes on, indicating men who are standing by the coffin or among the mourners. They are members of the family, friends and neighbours. They are smiling as they smoke their roll-ups made with newspaper.

"How do you know, Uve?" asks Monica Paulus. And then Uve reveals the secret which has been gnawing at him: he was the one who suggested his aunt was guilty of witchcraft, and gave permission for the mob to interrogate her on the night of the murder. "I was sure she was a witch! She had no children, and her husband died of a mysterious disease, her brother too. Who else could have been responsible for that?"

On the fatal night Uve Loko had led the men to his aunt, then gone home to sleep off his drunken stupor. He begs Monica Paulus not to betray his secret to his mother. She promises, on one condition: that he come to the defence of other women suspected of witchcraft. Only in this way can he ever free himself from guilt.

Uve Loko nods vigorously and embraces Monica Paulus. Then he jumps up, grabs a shovel and joins the young men who killed his aunt. They dig the grave together, side by side. When the coffin is lowered into the earth Uve Loko goes on staring into the pit until it is filled. Then he lays a plastic flower at the head end of the mound. His mother is standing next to him, lamenting for her sister.

Two days after the burial a young woman from the same area was put to death for saguma.

