SPECIAL ISSUE: PROCEEDINGS OF A SEMINAR, 14 JULY, 1979

'MAGIC AND MEDICINE'

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Sorcery and Healing in a Papuan Village

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Pari is a village of the Motu people, on the south coast of Papua just outside the city of Port Moresby. Its houses are still built in traditional lineage clusters over the sea, but new houses are also now extending out into the small valley behind the village. It remains a closely-knit community centred on the beach - the village "street" - which is quiet and empty during the day, but alive with games and meetings and comings and goings towards evening when the children are home from school and adults back from fishing or gardening or work in the town. I lived in Pari for 6 years with my family, running a small medical practice and learning something of Motu attitudes to sickness, which I want to discuss here.

The Context of Sickness

But first it is important to establish a context for this discussion. Pari was founded seven generations ago by a great warrior named Kevau Dagora, the story of whose exploits is known to every child in the village. Many people can trace their lineage back to Kevau or other members of his family from those days. The village stands on the south side of a rocky tongue of land whose many irregular features, as well as those of the reef and off-shore islands, are clearly distinguished by name and by countless associations of person and event. The Pari year, represented by a circular calendar, was a cycle of recurring events determined by the natural rhythm of wind and season - planting and harvesting, ritual fishing, trading voyages. Pari was an intimate, known and stable world with a rhythm and order that changed little from decade to decade.

In that setting there was great emphasis on harmony and balance, both between people, and between people and the environment of the natural world. Nothing was seen to happen by chance, there was always a reason. If things went wrong, someone was presumably to blame, and there was a wrong action to be sought and redressed. There was a right or correct way in which to perform every important action, whether planting a garden, tying a net, leading a dance. It was important to achieve a balance in the exchanges of valuables, food or obligations which were a prominent feature of village life. If no fish were being caught, fishermen might pause to consider why - who among them had broken some rule, who had been greedy or unfair in making a distribution of food, who had shown anger.

The anthropologist Murray Groves described a garden scene in another Motu village:

One afternoon early in my stay, I found a man alone in his garden wrapping young bunches of bananas in dry leaves to protect them from the sun and from the birds. While he worked he sang several small songs, softly and almost secretively. At the end of each song he intoned the names of ancestors, adding each time his own name to the list. When he had quite finished, I approached him and began to question him,

'What are you singing?'
'Songs'.
'Yes, of course, but what sort of songs?'
'Songs that I sing when I wrap bananas'.
'Why do you sing them then?'
'Because they cause the bananas to grow plump and firm.'

'How is it that songs have such power?' I asked. 'Do the spirits of the dead hear your songs and therefore help you?'

'Who knows what the spirits of the dead may hear and do?' he answered. 'We have never died and so we cannot know.'

'But you invoked the names of ancestors at the end of each song. Why do you do that?'

'The Songs that I sing are my ancestors' songs. My forebears have always sung them and their gardens have always prospered. Therefore I sing these songs. It is the way of the ancestors; it is helaga.'

'Helaga', usually translated 'holy' is the Motu word which best encapsulates the understanding that good standing, health and success depend upon careful adherence to correct behaviour and traditional rituals. Another Motu word, 'gware', further illustrates Motu understanding. It may be translated as 'omen', for it refers to a sign which is held to carry significance for the future, and in particular to predict death.

In fishing, for example, if a brown or striped sea snake is seen in the net, the fisherman will know that soon someone in the village will die. If a person is seriously ill, and men out fishing see many fish move towards the net but none are caught there, they will call that 'gware', and suspect that the spirit of the person about to die has chased the fish away. 'Gware aita haodomu' (We are fishing in gware).

Gware will also be recognised if some persons does an unusual thing. Boio Henao's husband had never danced at the Church feasts, but one Christmas he suddenly decided to dance. Later he became ill and that was recalled — that was 'gware'. It may be turned into a joke. If two regular rivals happen to agree in a village meeting, someone may make an aside, 'Daika baine mase gware dainai?' (Whose death is this gware?). If offered a gift, the recipient may invoke the word 'gware' to indicate that it was not expected.

The word is a reminder of the potential importance, in Pari understanding, of any event, however trivial in itself, and of awareness of spirits which influence daily life, particularly the spirits of persons recently dead. When the nets are ready to set out, fishermen will gather together on them, place down some betel nut and mention the ancestors either by individual name or as 'Ihau' (the old ones) before chewing the betel. In planning an expedition or some other family enterprise, those involved will sit close to the centre of the house — the Irutahuna, where ancestor spirits reside especially and make a similar offering. It is on the site of the Irutahuna that the bodies of those ancestors have lain after death, and no sensible persons would sleep there in life, certainly not on his back in the attitude of a corpse.

When a person is sick, a gathering of people, a 'bobio', will be held to explore whether the behaviour or feelings of those present might in some way have contributed to the sickness by offending the ancestor spirits ('mase diravadia'). It is recognised that actions acceptable to this generation may still be disapproved of by those whose standards belong to a stricter age.

Causes of Sickness

It is not profitable, therefore, to seek for Motu words for conditions which we recognise as 'illnesses' and which we label in English by terms such as pneumonia, tuberculosis, leprosy. The concept of specific pathological mechanisms underlying disease was not found among the Motu, though they recognised and named common symptoms:

hua cough laga tuna shortness of breath
kemaikemai itching hisi hisi pain
A serious illness was explained in terms of the circumstances in which it had arisen: what antagonism or ill-will had been directed against the sick one or some other member of the family; what fault or omission had someone committed that this misfortune should have appeared?

An illness might also be initiated by sorcery, 'Turipuri'. Three kinds of sorcery are most commonly mentioned - Ikwatu, Momoabi and Vada - and the selection of a particular kind as an explanation of sickness reflects the apparent severity of the sickness and the circumstances of the victim.

Someone who has become ill after returning from the garden might be the victim of Ikwatu, in which a charm, an article prepared in various ways, perhaps a stick, a stone wrapped in leaves, has been so placed (perhaps buried beneath a path) that the victim has been sure to walk on it. Or a sorcerer may have obtained some material which has been personal to the victim - a cigarette butt, a piece of betel nut he has discarded, some hair - and that is used to do harm. That is 'momoabi' (having rubbish). It will be suspected when a person foreign to the village, someone from neighbouring Koita or Koari tribes has been visiting the household, since these tribes are held to be particularly proficient in sorcery.

The mechanism of sorcery is not as important as the identification of the person responsible for causing the sorcery to be done. It would not usually be suspected that a Pari man had made sorcery, but a Pari man with a grievance might invoke the aid of a Koita or Koari 'expert'. And the sorcery might have its effect on a child or another member of the house where the intended victim resides.

The sorcery for which Koari people are most feared is 'Vada'. This sorcery results in serious illness and death. A Vada Tauna (Vada man) may insinuate himself into a house at night through a small opening (it is foolish to leave windows open). His power cannot pass over water, which is an excellent reason for building in the sea. A person who walks alone at night, particularly in a dark and lonely place is likely to attract the attention of the Vadas. They strike down their victims to render them unconscious, then they open the body, remove vital parts, and close the body again to a normal appearance. The victim wakes, dazed and with no memory of what has happened, and shortly after dies.

A child whose neck seemed very limp at the time of death was thought to have had it broken by Vadas. If such an event occurs, the beach is deserted for several nights. The dogs are thought to give a warning that Vadas are about with a long persistent howling. At any time it is dangerous to go out alone in the dark, and several times I was chided for venturing across the beach to the water taps after midnight. One old man said to me, 'You know those cars you hear which enter the village and turn and speed away again at two or three o'clock in the morning? They are Koaris, Vada tauda, they come in cars now!' A whole range of events which seem innocent in themselves may be drawn upon to support belief in Vadas. Afre Tamara Lama was killed by snakebite, it was recalled that two small snakes had been seen (unusually) on the beach not far from his house. Of one man it is recalled that as a child, during ceremonies over the body of his dead father, he told of walking with his father along the Kilakilla road where they had met some strangers, and how his father had gone in among some trees with one big man while the boy stayed on the road with the others. After a time the big man and his father returned, and two days later the father was dead.

Recognition of Sickness and Simple Remedies

The nature as well as the severity of an illness is important in its recognition either by the sufferer or by those near him. A simple cut becoming infected and forming a large ulcer may be incapacitating, but not recognised as
a true 'sickness', and for such a condition there may be a number of common-
sense traditional remedies - leaves to wrap on, for example.

A simple fracture will be taken to a person known to be good with
fractures, and he will bind splints around it. Virtually everyone will know
of some herbal remedies and how to use them, and any shortlived illness, so
long as it is amenable to treatment or subsides spontaneously, will not
arouse suspicions of sorcery.

Routine treatment for simple problems may still involve the use
of magic, to counter or invoke the aid of attendant spirits. Huraga had
a fall at work, and wondered if the spirit of Govea (her cousin who had
recently died) was cross with her because her lover had climbed up the back
posts of the house at night to sit with her. Her father spoke some words over
her painful back and made it better.

The use of a 'meamea' - a saying with magical effect - is common in
many situations even today. Old Hena'o taught his grandson a meamea to use for
pneumonia, chest pain with fever, called in Motu 'udagaudia ese a gwadia'
('something in the bush speared him'). The grandson says that he has forgot-
ten it and never used it, partly because (as often happens with meameas) a
specific prohibition was associated with its use - not to eat red fish, which
he particularly enjoyed. When little Kevau was a baby and cried a lot, his
grandfather taught his mother a meamea of eight or nine short sentences to
quieten him. Today, when it might be thought that the importance of magic has
waned, it is said that young people are buying, from acknowledged experts,
meameas which they can use or just keep as a security, sayings which offer them
success in love or power for either good or ill over other persons.

More Serious Problems

Much may depend upon the sufferer's own anxiety. If he feels threat-
ened by his discomfort, if he seems withdrawn or depressed, his family will
feel moved to action. They will probably gather in consultation and examine
possible causes, quarrels unresolved, anger still smoldering, and attempt to
resolve these. The discussion may be directed with the aid of certain homely
skills, such as pulling out hairs in the head while saying the names of likely
people and listening for a 'squeak', or pulling the fingers and waited for a
diagnostic 'crack' indicating the involvement of the person when being named.
This gathering together is obviously potentially health-promoting in itself,
and also serves to enhance the balance and order and justice in the village
world more effectively than do many of the health-related activities of
Western society.

If the matter seems beyond the skill of the family, if a sickness
worsens or persists, then the assistance of a babalau will be sought. A
babalau is a diviner and a healer. Babalau will not readily admit to
initiating magical action, but they respond to situations for which their aid
is sought.

After the Pacific War, several young men from Pari who had had their
world enlarged by work with the Army and contact with Americans and travel to
distant areas, and who felt a desire to improve their status in ways which
were difficult to achieve either in traditional village activities or in the
expatriate-dominated town, took a course of training as babalau with a
Kilakila man. They accepted several special taboos and learnt a number of
techniques. These included praying to St. Matthew, then sleeping to dream of
an appropriate remedy for the condition they were asked to diagnose. Another
method was to write down a special telephone number (NG 179-10) on a paper
which was then burnt and brought contact with 'Elizabeth'. She was seen as in
a vision, and she had a blackboard on which she would write information
received from the Apostles or from Jesus, information which would indicate
whether a particular patient would recover or not. These Pari men say that when they became deacons of the Church they put away all their babalau practices, and all the babalau who worked in Pari while I was there came from other parts of Papua. One man from the Rigo area was referred to me at the hospital with the suggestion that he be offered a paramedical role. He used a mirror, which he said that he had purchased from a man in the mountains of Managalasi. His method was to chew betal and catkin and apply the mixture to the affected part of the patient, then press the mirror over it, and read in the pattern adhering to the glass signs of the name of the person or persons responsible for the sickness.

A babalau will often stay in the village for some days while he is working with a case. He obviously needs to get a good family and social history, since his diagnosis needs to be related as closely as possible to current family tensions. His services may be very expensive. The way the system works in practice may be represented by a number of stories from cases of which I became aware.

Ranu was a schizophrenic, whose behaviour was first noticed as abnormal when he was attending High School. He began to see spirits which disturbed him as he sat quietly or tried to sleep, so that he moved restlessly, walking long distances up and down the local road. When the family described the problem they used the word 'hekwakwana', which implies a breakdown between the spirit world and our world, leaving one exposed to spirit action. A babalau suggested that this had come about through sorcery brought on by a Koita boy who was cross with Ranu at school because Ranu had not shared food with him.

A young man claimed that he had been approached by a stranger asking the whereabouts of Isi Kevau. When Isi's family heard of this they were very concerned. Isi was a medical student, residing at the hospital and so exposed to the malign influences of strangers who came there. The family gathered, and kept Isi at home with them in spite of his protestations. They opened the Church and held special prayers, and sought the assistance of a Nara man, since the stranger was thought to have been a Nara. The Nara chief who arrived, established his credentials by his impressive physical appearance and by his claim to special feats such as the ability to walk to Sogeri (about 25km) in 20 minutes. He listened, accepted payment and went off to make some investigations. As far as I learnt, nothing further came of it and Isi came to no apparent harm. The matter was felt to have been resolved, perhaps by knowing that powerful Nara magic was now on 'our' side.

A Koiai man named Asi came to visit Ata Boio and her husband Vagi, at night. Night time is a bad time to receive a visit from a Koiai, because that is when they cause trouble. Asi came by himself, but Vagi was drunk and fell asleep. Ata and Asi fell asleep also in the same room. Asi left the next morning, and two days later Ata developed joint pains. Asi was thought to be clearly implicated, because some months earlier he had come to collect arm shells from Ata and Vagi, but they had none for him and sent him away with only money. He was seen as being cross with them and so with causing the sickness. The family of Ata and Vagi conferred on the matter for several weeks, then approached a friend at Kilakila. He drove to Asi's village at Sogeri and accosted Asi with word of Ata's plight. Asi protested strongly that he had nothing whatever to do with it. The next day he was brought to Pari and again stated long and loud that it was no fault of his that Ata was ill. He left, saying that he would return in several days, and arrived with a big load of bananas, coconuts and taro, spending all day sharing it out.

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Conclusion

A holistic view of health practices and rituals is important. They must be seen in the total context of understanding for their community. Understanding of that context will lessen conflict when health practitioners who have trained in different contexts have to cope with practices which seem bizarre or ridiculous in themselves.

It is not likely that a single understanding will be applicable to a wide range of cultures. What I describe for Pari may not apply elsewhere, even in New Guinea. But there are useful reflections of general importance to be found in consideration of the Pari view of medicine. If we persist in seeing magic as something which produces 'surprising results' then our Western view of sickness is more magical than that of the Papuans of Pari. We see sickness as 'bad luck', as magic, and we try to beat bad luck with science. The Motuan knows no 'luck', but always recognises a reason, and goes to the basic questions of who and why, seeking to find a greater hope of personal control in that situation through measures available to anybody.

We tend to abandon our sicknesses to experts, to priestly doctors. Papuans do much more themselves, and achieve a dignity in the sick role which escapes many Australians.

References

Groves, M.