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'MAGIC AND MEDICINE'

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MAGIC AND MEDICINE IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

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Introduction
The Solomon Islands, which lie some 1200km. east of Papua New Guinea, have a basically Melanesian population of some 200,000 spread through a 1000km arc of eight major islands or island groupings. Though the islands were first visited by Europeans in 1568 when Mendana explored them, it was not until the late 18th century that there was any further contact with Europeans. In 1898 Britain reluctantly declared a Protectorate over most of the south-east end of the arc and maintained minimum peace, order and good government until World War II. After that the islands moved towards self government and achieved Independence in 1978. However, from the mid-1800s there were two European influences - the Churches and the traders - the latter either being based in the area and interested in coconut products or visiting traders interested in labourers for the cane fields of Fiji and, later, Queensland. By World War II well over 60% of the population were nominally Christians and possibly well over 90% of the adult population had had some dealings with Europeans and Western ideas of medicine.

Before beginning, I feel that I should point out that neither of us had any formal training in anthropology at the time when the material on which this paper is based was collected. Our own material therefore of necessity raises more questions than it satisfactorily answers and we hope that other people's experience may help our understanding of medicine and magic in the Solomons. Another serious shortcoming is that neither of us learned one of the seventy languages/dialects spoken in the region, so that information was gathered through pidgin with interpreters from quite a number of language areas.

Magic and Religion
As a background to our own material, and in support that medicine and magic go hand in hand, we have drawn on the work of Dr. Fox on the Arosi, San Cristoval, Dr. Hogbin on the Aola people, Guadalcanal, and Dr. Keening on the Kwai'o, Malaita, as we are familiar with these areas and their people. I would point out that although most of the people are today at least nominally Christian, many of the older beliefs are still adhered to. Individuals vary considerably in the extent to which they maintain non-christian customs and beliefs.

Speaking very generally, Solomon Islanders believed that the earth and the material things belonging to it, such as taro, yams, bananas, pigs, medicine and leaves for house building, were given by the creation heros, from whom they and their ancestors are descended. The recently dead and their more powerful predecessors were the prime possessors and controllers of magical power or mana. (The ancestors were also thought to be in contact with a few wild spirits who were never people.) The creation heros, then, gave the world's resources to man both material and magical, together with the ritual formulas to manipulate them to his best advantage.

This belief in mana, and in ritual formulas for manipulating it, lies behind the magical cures of the Solomon Islands. Medicine is rendered effective by carrying out the proper routine through various objects or substances activated by the secret form of words and spells. Mana may be used for good or ill, aiding or injuring, healing or killing, according to the purpose of the mediator. These days, it is difficult to find old men who admit to remembering the spells but the medicines are well remembered and in daily use.
Causes of Sickness

In discussing the use of medicines in the Solomon's, we must first ask: What are considered to be the causes of sickness? Solomon Islanders believe that man lives in the same physical environment as the ghosts and spirits of the ancestors, who were everywhere present. Sickness was usually attributed to the displeasure of the ghosts and spirits of the ancestors who have been upset by the infringement of a social law (custom). It follows that, in order to effect a cure, it is necessary to know not only the physical manifestations of the sickness, but also its cause in terms of the anger of the ancestors. That is, it was necessary to ascertain why the person had fallen ill or suffered a misfortune at that particular time and place and in that particular manner, so that matters can be set right with the offended spirits. By way of illustration of this point, we briefly describe the way in which the death of a minor chief, Don Chipi, was explained to us by the people of the village of Isuna. Everyone in the village knew, in physical terms, how Don Chipi had died - he had had a very serious illness, with bleeding from the bowel. Besides he was very old. But the question remained - why did he die in that particular way and at that particular time? Because, we were told, of the vele or black magic. On closer enquiry we were told that the vele had killed him because he had hidden away his red shell money at a tabu place, instead of sharing it with his brothers. Thus, the primary cause of his death was that he had angered the ancestors by ignoring the social obligation to share his money with his brothers.

Similarly, when a Langalanga man from a group who propitiated sharks in the past, was attacked by a shark in the Honiara port area in 1964, it was explained that the spirits were angry as the man had broken their law of exogamy by living with a girl of his own clan.

So even today, among some people, ghosts or spirits of the dead are often held responsible for ills. Some examples described to us are as follows: becoming ill as a result of meeting with a wild spirit while travelling in the bush; meeting a ghost on the path while going to one's garden; entry of a spirit into the body of a young girl; sore back, caused by a spirit shooting a spear; blindness through being smacked in the eye by a spirit; and the sickness of a woman through a ghost's refusing to go away from the house in which he died.

Deaths in the very young and the very old, plus some simple complaints such as coughs, cold and simple fevers, were excepted from these causes and regarded as natural.

Breaking some tabus devised by an individual had specific consequences. A bespelled coconut or Cordyline leaf around the base of a betel nut or coconut tree signified a prohibition to casual pickers. If someone disobeyed, and climbed the tree, the result could be a swollen leg or a boil in the groin. Another man protected his garden from thieves by placing a bespelled stick across the path - any thief crossing it would later break his leg.

How Does Sickness Result?

But how do the ghosts or spirits cause illness? In the Solomons each person's soul is perceived as a shade or reflection. In sleep it may wander and leave him in a dream. It may leave him after a bad shock so that the person becomes unconscious, ill or delirious. The soul will have been attracted out of his body by the action of the mana of a ghost or spirit.

Curing

In such cases it is necessary to call in the priest, specialist, or custom-man (as he is referred to in pidgin English), to get the soul of the sick person back into his body. It is assumed that the custom-man will have access to more powerful mana. He will communicate with his spirit or
ancestors, who will intercede with those who caused the illness. This is possible because the ever-present ancestors maintain social relationships among themselves. To give an example, we were told that a certain Choiseul custom-man would take a very long leaf of a particular species of Croton, called 'the tongue of the spirit', split it down the midrib, pull it over his head and hang it around his neck. He would then go to the sacred grove to speak to his ancestors who would tell him the meaning of the sickness. Maintaining complete silence, he returns to the sick man's house and outside the door, he gives a loud shout which recalls the man's soul to his body. Then the practitioner enters the house, strips off the leaf and brushes it down both sides of the sick person's body to sweep out the evil. The leaves are then thrown away.

Divination is often employed to find who or what spirit is responsible, to find out how a spirit/ghost has been offended, or to ascertain the appropriateness of taking some course of action, such as which medicine is likely to be effective.

People get in touch with their ancestors through trance, such as after a surfeit of betel nut which produces a dissociated state, or in dreams. There are many methods of divination, such as holding out the branch of a Cordyline and directing specific questions to it (if the branch shakes, that is an affirmative answer, if the branch remains still, the answer is negative); by lighting a fire with special timber known to be pleasing to the spirits - if the smoke ascends vertically communication has been established; or a man goes into a trance while chewing betel nut. He holds out his betel nut, and when it rolls up his arm around his chest, that is a positive signal.

The Spells

As has been noted by a number of anthropologists, the cure consists of three parts, the spell, the substances and the manner in which they are ritually used. Certainly, all the older people to whom we spoke mentioned that the substances were first bespelled (whispered over, in pidgin English). Fragments of spells which we did collect always began with a list of ancestors' names being invoked. However, from all younger informants we were only given the uses of plants (which in fact at the time of collection of the data was Margaret's principal interest).

The Substances

Dr. Fox has listed breath, lime, water, certain trees, shells, such as mother of pearl and cowry, and certain stones as being conveyors of mana par excellence - the plants being most often selected for their congruity with the object to be achieved. Some plants are said never to die - branches can be broken off, they can lie on top of the ground indefinitely, and regardless of the weather they will live (which, considering the rainfall in the Solomons, the heat and the humidity, is not surprising). The Cordyline, Coleus and Slatostema genera when cut and thrown away persist in a live state. These plants are thought to give life, health and strength. Cryptophysillum species is another plant which fits into this category and is used to cure when part of the body is numb - described as some part of the body dying. The leaves are heated and rubbed on the affected part to bring back life.

We were told the Cordyline genus belongs to the spirits, or a spirit lives in it, or even that it is not a tree but a spirit. It is specified in the creation legends as one of the first things given to man. One clan in Marau regard themselves as descending from the Cordyline. Hence its importance, particularly in protective medicine.

Red is regarded as powerful, and because lime (made from burnt coral), when taken with betel nut chewing, helps produce a red colour or is used to produce a red dye, it is similarly regarded as powerful medicine. The literal
translation in many languages for the Coleus genus is 'blood, blood'. A
suffusion made from the leaves of the red variety when crushed is given in
cases of illness where there is blood in the faeces or urine. Plants with red
sap are also singled out and used with sicknesses associated with blood. For
example, Horsfieldia spicata, a large forest tree suggesting strength and life,
has red sap. Bark scrapings from it, together with other substances, are used
in serious illness where there is internal bleeding.

Lime is used in many medical treatments. It is bespelled, held in
the cup of the hand and blown towards the sick person. It is also used to
massage a sick person's limbs or back. As it is associated with red, lime is a
powerful medicine when used with the correct spells by the specialist.

Another important plant in the Solomons, particularly in Guadalcanal,
is the ginger in all of its species - Alpinia, Guillauminia, Curcuma, Costus and
so on. Power is associated with heat, hence the value of the ginger.

White sap from various plants, such as the Ficus genus, is often used
for various skin complaints, being rubbed on the affected areas.

Plants which have slippery sap, such as Crinum sp., Pipturus repandum
and Hibiscus manihot, are used in procedures to ensure easy delivery in childbirth.

Strong smelling plants also provide powerful medicine. Ginger,
Evodiaeas, one Clematis sp., are popular, but the favourite is Halfordia sp.,
which is used to attract persons of the opposite sex, to repel evil or just to
please the spirits.

We could continue to give many examples of sympathetic medicine but
will just mention one more: A sick person's body is described as feeling heavy,
so a bespelled piece of the light-weight timber Sterculia shillinglawii is hung
in the rafters above a sick person so their body will feel light and well again.

Preparing the Substances

When gathering vegetable substances it is, in the case of trees, the
inner bark that is used. When leaves are used, it is the young and vigorous
growing ones which are important. Bark scrapings or crushed leaves, as the
case may be, are put in a leaf funnel, water or coconut water is poured through
it, and the resulting juices drunk as a potion.

It has been specified that the bark must be scraped on the east side
where the rising sun, gathering its strength for the day, is felt. For one
preventive medicine, the practitioner said the bark was to be bespelled at the
seaside, facing west when the sun was declining so that the evil would go away.

With regard to collecting the sap of a certain tree, we were told it
should be gathered just before dawn, because that is when the sap rises in the
tree and it is at its strongest. Yet another practitioner said to take the
sap of another tree at night because sap flows down at night. Another
described how he must creep up on a tree in the early hours, when it is still
asleep and shake it suddenly - the power of the tree goes to the bottom at
night and the shake will make it rise up again. A certain abortive was to be
collected when the moon was dark.

Marking the sick person's body with lime or betel and saying the
correct spells is another way cures are made. To stop a baby crying, the face
is marked with the tip of a fern. In cases of blindness the rubbing or brush-
ing is done with a vine which is first split and brushed down from the fore-
head. Another application is when the vegetable matter is chewed and the
mixture is spat over the patient or victim. Ginger and Evodia are two plants
used in this way.

Stings and bites are often dealt with by counter irritants, such as
using the stinging tree Dendrocide to counter a centipede bite or binding a
piece of Ipomea learii tightly around the head in cases of headache. The vine
is left to dry out and with the drying, the headache goes.

Some uses of plants are quite pragmatic — such as using thick fleshy leaves for poultices and holding heat during massage. Long thin leaves are bound onto wounds or sores to keep flies away. The exudate from Merremia sp. is effective in stopping bleeding. Outright poisons, such as Semecarpus sp., and a species of Evodia, are used to make the patient vomit and so expel whatever is causing the sickness.

The medicine may be bespelled at the sacred site of a particular ancestor, at a river or beside the sea. The special stick that is used to crush the plants for their juices may be bespelled. There is then a whole range of actions which may be carried out by individuals according to how they interpret the knowledge which they inherit, either from their father, as in Malaita, or from the mother's brother, as in Guadalcanal.

In all these cures the symbolism will be noticed, both in the selection of the plants themselves and in the way they are gathered and applied to the body: with life giving water or coconut water; the washing; the drawing out of sickness (often synonymous with evil) in a downward motion; and the throwing away, usually into a river so it will be carried far away.

Who Performs the Cure

Magic is an individual thing — everyone has some access to his ancestors — but it is known that some people have more power and more specialised knowledge than others. If one's cures are ineffective, it is always possible to go to someone else, maybe in the next village, whose magic is known to be effective. Because the result of using the correct spell, substances, and application or rite is expected to be more or less automatic, a cure is regarded as a commodity and can be bought and sold. Fees were normally a small string of shell money, but often nowadays are expressed directly in dollars — two to five dollars, i.e., a week's salary for a labourer, appeared to be a common fee.

But prevention is the better part of curing. Sometimes parcels of medicine like bespelled Evodia and Celtis are dried and hung in a house to keep sickness away. Dark purple Coleus is said to make an evil spirit blind and prevents it from seeing its way into a house to harm anyone. Planted outside, it can stop the ghost of someone returning to the house where it died. Cordyline is imetical to evil spirits, so it is also planted at village boundaries and outside houses to destroy other spirits who may try to come into and harm the homestead.

Black Magic

People also become ill through witchcraft or the desire of a living man to bring evil on an enemy. Here again, the concept of the soul as an integral part of man is important. The soul possesses the whole body — anything that has been connected with a man has been connected with his soul, so that the whole soul can be affected by the action of mana upon any part of a man. Therefore, a spell by the action of mana upon any portion of the food, clothing, hair, nail parings or body waste of a man can be used to effect evil upon him. The spell is usually said at a sacred place of the sorcerer's ancestors.

Vele magic was much feared throughout the Central Solomons. The evil wisher, known as the vele man, would have a small fibre basket containing pieces of bone, vegetable matter, sacred earth, something sharp, such as a tooth, or a short piece of shell money (local versions of the magic vary), which he would swing in front of the victim, who would become unconscious. Later he would get up, return home, sicken and die within a few days. There are many local variations in accounts of vele. Some say that matter is forced down the victim's throat; that the sorcerer makes known his name to the victim;
that the vele man is preceded by a bird; or that the sorcerer could change into
a bird. Use of this type of magic became such a menace that the administration
in the 1930's issued an order to confiscate all 'velle baskets'. Wright 1940
explains that the vele used to be part of the social system and under control
of the 'big men' but in the transitional stage of the society the practice of
velle had become anarchical. Practitioners became secretive and its uses
irresponsible, i.e., it would be used for the smallest grudge against someone.
However, the practice didn't cease nor the belief in it. We were often told
that 'so and so' had died of the vele, though closer inquiry revealed other
symptoms such as cerebral malaria or a retained placenta.

In the early 1960s the people of Central Guadalcanal were concerned
about the number of vele baskets owned openly by various people. Apparently
the owning of a basket did not necessarily result in the owner being accused
of causing ill to someone. However, at this particular time there was concern
expressed and several messengers appointed by Moro, leader of a Nativistic
movement, were sent to collect the baskets. These baskets were rendered
powerless by killing a pig, wrapping the entrails of the pig around the baskets
and throwing them into the river. The relief to the various villages affected
was most noticeable.

Following pressure from the Legislative Council, a section was then
added to the Penal Code which made it an offence to keep objects of black
magic or to carry out practices which brought fear to another person. The
power of judging such offences was then passed to Native Courts.

We heard of an unsuccessful attempt of vele being used against a
foreigner - someone from another island in 1963. A European friend of ours,
travelling with his rather sophisticated Agricultural Field Assistant from
Western District, was walking along the south coast of Guadalcanal. The Field
Assistant was only a hundred metres behind his party and half-way wading across
a small stream when something attracted his attention from the bank. He paused,
looked up to see a man dangling a basket, and with that he become suddenly
immobilised and dropped his bedroll in the stream. He tried to shout but found
he couldn't raise any sound. He couldn't move his legs. The experience accord-
ing to him lasted several minutes and then he ran in panic to join his party.
Our friend told us that the man was in a poor state when he reached the party
and was ill for several days.

I myself witnessed another occasion of black magic for which no
medical explanation could be found. In one small village of Malaita in 1953 I
was taken to see a sick man. He was a section leader from the Yandina plant-
atations of Fairymead who had been brought home sick a few months before. There
appeared nothing wrong with him physically and he as such admitted it. About
the age of 30 he was a competent, fit person who had spent some five or six
years working on plantations. He was quite willing to tell his story of how
one morning he woke up to find some leaves of ginger had been inserted in the
wall beside his bed. It was a sign that he had been poisoned and would die.
He claimed he didn't believe in such 'rubbish custom', but nevertheless he said
he grew sick and went to the European doctor employed by the plantation. The
doctor gave him a sympathetic hearing and a sound examination without finding
any cause for his malaise. Eventually he asked the company to send him home.
I gained the impression that he genuinely did not believe that this spell of
death could kill him, yet here he was sick. When I asked why he did not get
someone to do a counter spell just in case, his reply was that this was not
for him - ignorant people might believe in black magic but he was a believer
in Western medicine and a Christian. Three weeks later that strong young man
was dead.
Does It Work?

Does traditional Solomon Island magic and medicine work? Such a question cannot be answered accurately. We were never in a position to watch a number of case histories, but there is one very vivid incident. Our servant came from the Santa Cruz Islands, some 300 miles east of Malaita on which we were then stationed. Samson was a staunch Anglican who had worked several years with us and was rather critical of 'custom medicine'. We were touring Kwaio, later written about by Professor Keesing, and were spending a night in a small pagan village a day's walk from the coast. After the evening meal Samson was outside in the dark, washing plates, when he called out in pain and hurried into the house indicating something had bitten him on the right foot. The pain grew worse, and soon he was having difficulty in breathing and complaining about generalised pain. His pulse was weak and slow and his breathing became very shallow. There was no Western medicine available beyond aspirin. Several villagers claimed Samson had obviously been bitten by some dangerous snake. They called for two men who could probably help. These two arrived as the situation seemed serious and Samson just conscious. Lime was sprinkled on his limbs and head, and while one man proceeded to stroke Samson's arms and legs away from the body, the other stood six feet away and murmured incantations, which we were told were to remove the evil spirit that had entered Samson from the snake. The spell and stroking continued for some five minutes, with a visible improvement in Samson's breathing but not in his consciousness. The men said he would sleep until next morning but would not be able to walk for another day. As predicted, Samson woke next morning completely recovered except he found he could not walk. He was able, however, to join the touring party the next day. The fee asked for as the patient was carried into bed, and while a rather worried white man was still bemused, was $2.

Will Magic and Medicine Survive?

Of interest is whether—with the breakdown of the former culture, together with European influence through Christianity and Western medicine—magic and traditional medicine will survive. One of the largest departments in the Solomons Government is health and one of the greatest demands from villages is better health services, clinics and Western medicine. In such circumstances, traditional healing methods appear to stand little chance. Similarly, the popular support of Christian Churches would at first sight give little reason to think that magic thrives.

Yet magic and medicine are alive and well. To wit, the newspaper heading, 'Magic Blamed for Big Defeat', appeared in the Solomon Islands Drum, dated 3rd February, 1978. A Bougainville boxing team defeated the local team, and the account goes on to describe how the Bougainville men had two parcels of magic which gave them supernatural power over their opponents.

Then last week we received news that the Solomon Islands cabinet had agreed to give official blessing to traditional medicine. In fact the Permanent Secretary of the Health and Welfare Department has compiled an indicative list of traditional medicine and is shortly leaving to study herbal medicine in China.

References


