THE BIRDMAN OF KIRIPIA: POSTHUMOUS REVENGE IN A PAPUA NEW GUINEA HIGHLAND COMMUNITY

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Discursive collaboration between transcultural psychiatry and sociocultural anthropology has generated a category of “culture-bound syndromes”. To some extent allegorical of the relationship between the attitudes of the two disciplines, the category term is traditionally used of behaviour which ostensibly invites psychiatric intervention but is anthropologically explainable in terms of indigenous culture, given that most of the cases discussed occur in non-Western societies. The following is an account of an episode which could be glossed as a culture-bound syndrome, but I would prefer to interpret it as socially constructed madness for reasons which will become clear later. The decision to contribute the account to this body of work is related to a conversation between myself and the late Professor Bulmer when I returned from fieldwork in the Western Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea in 1986. It was on the topic of tree-sitting or, to be more exact, on the observation that throughout the general highland area an occasionally reported occurrence was that an individual would be discovered perched in the uppermost, dangerously fragile, branches of a tall tree against his or her will. Professor Bulmer recalled some incidents among the Enga groups with which he worked in which people had been thrown into the treetops by their ancestors, and we compared that explanation with the one given to me for the single incident described below. Our conversation was interrupted, unfortunately, and subsequent circumstances denied us the opportunity to pursue a discussion which appealed to Professor Bulmer’s ornithological imagination.

The events recounted here occurred in the upper Kaugel valley, Tambul District. A high valley to the west of Mt Hagen (the main town of the Western Highlands Province), it runs from north to south and the Kaugel river meanders along its floor, about 7400ft above sea level, gathering momentum for a seething descent into the Southern Highlands Province. Its western wall is provided by Mt Giluwe, which rises to almost 15,000 ft and during the day is often rendered invisible to valley dwellers by cloud and mist. Along this wall, in vertical strips of territory running from the valley floor to the upper slopes of the mountain, clans of subsistence farmers cultivate a relatively unpromising agricultural environment under constant threat of frost damage to their staple crop, the sweet potato.

While the altitude and environmental conditions of the Kaugel valley dwellers are different from those of the majority of highland communities, their social formation is fairly typical of the region. Extended kin groups are the main units of generalised production, consumption and exchange, and engender a strong sense of social and familial responsibility. The pervasive complex of spoken and unspoken obligations in such a society impresses itself immediately on the fieldworker, but I was also given a dramatic anecdotal example of the consequences of neglecting one’s responsibilities shortly after my arrival in the valley. My research centred on attitudes toward madness and the treatment of the mad in a rural community, and in response to some early questions I was told by a number of people of an episode of madness (or kekelepa in Umbu ungu, the language of the valley) which, they said, I would have been able to witness for myself had I come to the valley a little sooner.

The story of Api’s madness was told to me not only as a response to my enquiries on that subject, but also to stress the importance among Kaugel people of looking after one’s immediate kin, and especially the duties of males toward ageing parents. Api was a young married man of the Sipake clan, the immediate down-valley neighbours of my hosts the Kepaka clan. It was unanimously agreed that his recently dead mother had posthumously driven him mad in response to his neglect of her over a long period of time. He had gone away to work at a plantation near Mt Hagen and had not paid visits to the valley to see his ageing parents; and he had contributed nothing to their welfare. One elderly man told me that he had briefly been in the bare “ward” at the health centre at Tambul (the administration post at the head of the valley) at the same time as Api’s mother
during an illness shortly before her death. She had no blankets, he recalled, and he had asked her why her son (who was now back from the plantation) did not visit her and bring her a blanket. She had complained that Api always neglected her and said, according to my informant, that she would die soon and afterwards Api would suffer. Other people told me that Api was known to hide food when his parents came to his house so he would not be obliged to share it with them.

Just before his mother died, according to one story, an example of Api's meanness was exposed to his mother by his own small daughter. Api had cooked the meat of a bird and shared this delicacy with his wife and child but hid it from his mother. The little girl did not eat her portion entirely, however, and took some to her grandmother. The grandmother, on realising Api's deception, was heard to say that Api would be reminded of the bird incident after her death, according to this story. Another version of the incident alleged that Api was cooking some birds' eggs (also a delicacy) when his mother came into his house. The ailing woman, whose sight was poor, asked what he was cooking and he replied that it was just some small potatoes. Later, however, Api's daughter exposed the deception by taking an egg to her grandmother. In this version, like the other, the dying woman made an ominous remark about Api and birds. The bird/egg incident was said to be the last act of meanness before Api's mother died, which was regarded by most people I spoke with as significant in regard to what followed.

Shortly after his mother's death, Api was to be seen in the evenings sitting in the tops of tall trees, on branches which ordinarily would not be strong enough to hold his weight. There was no doubt among witnesses that his mother was responsible. Api would fly from treetop to treetop. In the gathering darkness it became difficult for observers on the ground to track his movements: he would appear in the top of one tree, then be momentarily lost to sight before appearing in the top of another. He would spend the whole night thus, being finally returned to the ground at dawn. Sometimes his mother would take him, via the treetops, high up Mt Giluwe overnight, returning him in the mornings. The journey up Mt Giluwe could be verified by the plant scraps on Api's person when he arrived back — the plants were only found high on the mountain and did not grow in the settlement area. Attempts to communicate with him while he was in the trees were met with bird-like whistling (informants demonstrated this for me by whistling repeated notes of equal length at a constant pitch) instead of words.

In a short while (days, it seems) Api was spending time in the treetops during the daytime as well as at night. In addition he became violent; he chased people and rampaged in gardens, causing a great deal of damage. He also decorated himself in crazy ways and talked gibberish. The treesitting and mania continued for several weeks, until Api (who apparently had periods of lucidity) slaughtered and cooked a pig (i.e. sacrificed a pig to his mother). At the time of the killing he dressed in ceremonial attire and decorated himself carefully; everyone who had seen him agreed that he looked very fine indeed. After killing the pig he was no longer taken up into the trees and his self decoration, rampaging and odd speech wore off — in fact at the time I arrived in the valley people considered that Api was virtually normal again.

The above account represents what could be called the "consensus version" of events — that is, the elements of it were common to all accounts of what happened, apart from the two variants of the final act of unkindness. Individuals, however, added various elaborations, some of them extremely dramatic. I was told, for instance, that a group of young men locked themselves in a house with Api one evening in an attempt to stop his being taken into the trees. When darkness fell a great force pulled Api toward the tiny holes in the walls (big enough only to admit the inevitable family of rats into the home). It took the combined strength of eight young men to restrain Api.

Furthermore, when they held him down he gave off a smell like a rotting corpse. The smell transferred to the skin of his captors. In the end, exhausted and almost overcome by the stench, they opened the door and let Api go. The corpse smell clung to them until they washed it off in the river.

Another elaboration (offered by several people) was that during his madness Api had the power to enter locked houses at night (i.e. through rat-holes etc.). One woman said Api would leave things in the houses he entered in this way and then, the following day, come and ask for whatever he had left (her example was his machete). Sure enough, the house-dweller would find the object inside, with no explanation for how it had got there other than through a nocturnal visit by Api. Some people claimed to have seen Api hanging upside down from high tree branches and maintained that he descended from trees head first, like a lizard. And according to one person Api once escaped mysteriously from a locked house, leaving no trace of his exit.

Api was pointed out to me at Kiripia (a community gathering point some seven miles downvalley from Tambul; Kiripia has a Catholic church, a community primary school and a marketplace) one day shortly after my arrival in the valley. He was slightly decorated with fern fronds in his hair and a little paint on his face, in the manner of young men trying to attract women admirers. My companions of the moment commented that it was hard to tell whether he was completely recovered from his madness or not. Word spread quickly that I was interested in talking to Api and hearing his recollections of his experiences, and a couple of weeks after I
had seen him at Kiripia Api was brought to my house by a group of young men with the news that he was willing to talk about his kekelepa experiences. Api was now undecorated, and seemed a fairly dour individual.

The whole group crowded into my house to hear the story, and with Api's agreement I set up my tape recorder. He was fluent in Pidgin, but said he would prefer to talk in Umbu ungu about such a personal experience. Acknowledging my inadequacy in that language, one of the group appointed himself translator into Pidgin (in which I was fairly fluent), and Api's story subsequently went on tape in both languages. Comparison of the Umbu ungu and Pidgin version of events was to prove interesting later. Api's starting point was after his mother's death, avoiding all mention of his alleged mistreatment of her.

One evening, he said, he had been cooking some rice (in recent years store-bought rice has become a major dietary supplement among highlanders in general) and had briefly reflected on the fact that there was more food to go around now that his mother was dead. This momentary discourtesy to his dead mother was responsible for all that followed, he thought. After the meal he had gone outside to the toilet, and a sudden wind-like force lifted him into the trees. He called out, but he was being moved from tree to tree and when people came out of their houses in response to his cries they were unable to retrieve him. He was moved from tree to tree all night and was returned to the ground in the morning. This happened each night subsequently. Kinfolk tried to restrain him in the evenings, and at such times he heard noises in his head, such as whistling and a sound like the roar of a car engine. Some nights he was taken up Mt Giluwe, and on one such occasion he was thrown down from the top of a very tall tree, but caught just before he hit the ground.

In the daytime, he said, he would roam around the gardens, he would fight people, and he would sometimes sleep in the graveyard. At one point he started making preparations to cook his wife and child, and his wife ran away. Sometimes he could see the forces carrying him in the trees, a collection of dismembered people - single arms, or legs, or heads, all working together. Sometimes they tormented him without taking him up into the trees. He would try to hide from them in long grass, unsuccessfully. They would offer him food, but he refused to eat. Eventually he killed and cooked a pig, and then he was left alone. The pig was killed in July ("seventh month" - i.e. about two months before I arrived in the valley, though I did not take the given time too literally).

Api's story is given in its briefest form here. It was delivered a statement or two at a time, translated as he went by the self-appointed young man. At the outset I tried to coach my translator to mimic the first-person delivery of Api to ensure the best representation in Pidgin: however, he slipped chronically into a third-person rendition which I eventually deferred to in the interests of continuity. There were many embellishments to the story given above: Api would sometimes be invisibly present in people's houses, he wore red cordyline leaves, he would slash down sugar cane, he killed a pig and ate it raw. Several months later I listened to the tape of the conversation again, by which time my understanding of Umbu ungu had improved. I noticed that the translator had added a number of points to Api's story, including all the embellishments mentioned above. Api, being fluent in Pidgin, must have heard these additions at the time, but made no effort to stop or correct them: nor had the other people present. Either Api did not trust his own memory of events enough to question the translation, or he concurred with the translator's addition of points he himself had overlooked, or he was happy to allow imaginative additions in the interests of an exciting narrative. The last possibility is the most likely - Kaugel valley dwellers are no more pedantic in this respect than anyone else.

There was a marked contrast, however, between this laissez-faire and Api's refusal to be drawn on events before his mother's death. Diplomacy prevented me from confronting Api with the allegations I had heard, but I tried some indirect questions. For instance I asked whether he had worked on a plantation near Mt Hagen: this, like other questions, was fobbed off quickly on the ground that it was irrelevant to the story Api had come to tell, since it was before Api's madness and before the death of his mother.

In due course Api left, with those members of the group who were his Sipaka clanmates. The Kepaka men stayed to talk, and I raised the matter of Api's contention that his momentary reflections on the effect of his mother's death on food supplies had been responsible for all that had followed. This, they said, was untrue: Api was too ashamed to tell me how he had mistreated his mother, but his conduct had been widely observed by the community. Everybody to whom I later related Api's explanation rejected it as an evasion of the well-known truth. Some even went so far as to assert that Api's mother would have told him, directly, that she would punish him after her death.

Clearly there was no doubt from the beginning that Api's madness was entirely connected with his behaviour toward his mother. No particular psychologism is needed to suggest that the theatrical episodes and the eventual pig-killing and ceremonial dress were a public expression of culpability and remorse in the face of (possibly unspoken) social as well as "spiritual" censure. While treetop sitting, in itself, may seem particularly unusual to Western readers (in advance of the conceptual complication of "flying") it should be considered in relation to the wide geographic occurrence of treetop perching as an occasional behaviour in the general highland area. I was told of the phenomenon occurring in the Southern Highlands Province, in the Simbu Province, and in the Enga Province. Combining elements of danger (the individual is perched on high small...
The last incident mentioned here was related by one person as Api having been thrown down by his mother, but saved before he reached the ground by another dead relative who intervened on his behalf. Api's own houses; she flew him in the trees; she took him up Mt Giluwe; she threw him down from a great height, etc. View Api's affliction as a matter of torment rather than "mental illness" according to indigenous terms of reference. Api was always spoken of as being lifted or carried or moved by his mother. She pulled him out of branches) and inaccessibility, the treetop provides an opportunity for the public expression of torment free of interference by others. In addition, in the Kaugel valley at least, the treetop area is significantly (though not at all exclusively) a domain of spirits. Pre-Christian practices described to me would sometimes, for example, involve the enticing of human spirits down a vine especially arranged with one end high in a tree (and the other in a bamboo container). A pre-Christian sense of power existing "in the sky" in the Kaugel valley has been noted by Didi (1982:37a) in a discussion of spirit cults.

At the core of the elaborate and fanciful (I was never able to find anyone who claimed to have seen Api in the act of flying... ) versions of Api's period of kekelepa is the reasonable certainty that he spent time perched in trees and sometimes had to be physically restrained on the ground. As mentioned previously, the story of Api was told me as an example of the importance of looking after one's immediate kin. There is no doubt that after the death of Api's mother misfortune of some kind was expected by the community, and anecdotally there was a sense of inevitability about the eventual pig sacrifice. In the many versions of the story which I heard, the pig-killing was the least elaborated and most matter-of-fact element, spoken like an anti-climax — "... then Api killed a pig and returned to normal". In this respect, psychologistic explanations are tempting to a European commentator; such as the suggestion that Api acted out his torment for as long as was deemed appropriate before sacrificing the pig.

In the context of revenge and kekelepa, however, the madness suffered by Api can be thought of as one of a number of misfortunes which his mother could have visited upon him (crop failure or bodily harm, for instance) as punishment. And the discursive representations of the episode suggest that it is appropriate to view Api's affliction as a matter of torment rather than "mental illness" according to indigenous terms of reference. Api was always spoken of as being lifted or carried or moved by his mother. She pulled him out of houses; she flew him in the trees; she took him up Mt Giluwe; she threw him down from a great height, etc. The last incident mentioned here was related by one person as Api having been thrown down by his mother, but saved before he reached the ground by another dead relative who intervened on his behalf. Api's own story that he was being carried by dismembered people de-emphasised his mother, but retained the sense of being tormented by the dead. Api's social behaviour on the ground - rampaging in gardens, chasing people and so on - is understandably the response of a tormented person, and it is important to note that time elapsed between his mother's relinquishing him and his return to social normality, the emotional recovery lagging behind the cessation of the spiritual onslaught.

When discussing with me the types of affliction the dead could visit upon the living a number of people, particularly in the older generations, included the qualification that only recently deceased parents, siblings or spouses were able to bring about madness in an individual, usually in response to mistreatment while they had been alive or failure to honour an obligation following their death. Limited architectonic privacy and an active and extensive kinship network ensure that familial conduct in the Kaugel valley is, in general, chronically exposed to the community at large: mistreatment and lapses in filial duty quickly become public knowledge. The inference that madness effected by recently dead kin also has much to do with the censorious gaze of the community is hard to avoid.

Under the terms of reference customarily applied in transcultural psychiatry, Api would undoubtedly be classified as an example of a short term psychosis or hysteria best interpreted as a culture-bound syndrome: guilt was acted out, the appropriate cultural action (pig-sacrifice) was taken, Api became normal again. But such a designation gives the affair a synchronicity and cultural typicality which it does not really deserve. While many people could recall instances of madness as punishment of the living by the dead (and I witnessed one myself during fieldwork), the events of Api's madness were singular. The mad do not always take to the treetops, madness is not always interpreted as the work of dead kin, and Api's "flying" was most unusual, according to even the eldest of my informants, although tree-sitting itself was not.

The reasonably certain factors in the episode - that Api went mad (in the loosest sense of that term) after the death of his mother, spent time sitting in treetops and had to be restrained some of the time - must be articulated both with the historical context of its occurrence and with its discursive aspects. Thus it is important to remember that Api's chronic neglect of his parents was understood by the community to terminate with an incident involving a bird or its eggs, and that the community discounted Api's own explanation about the meal of rice as an evasion of the well-known truth. And it is also important to note that "flying" or being carried from treetop to treetop was an essential discursive element in recounting the episode for both Api and the rest of the community. Viewed in these terms the punishment of Api is an episode constructed, both at the time and in subsequent discursive elaborations, by the community and Api together.

For the community the singularity and drama of the affair, when recounted, is its major aspect; its uniqueness makes it a cautionary tale about a fundamental principle of social life in the Kaugel valley - the importance of fulfilling kinship obligations. Its salience is precisely that it is not a recurrent, occasional or typical "syndrome", but a single drama of madness which can be discursively linked to other equally unique incidents of posthumous revenge to reinforce a simple point about Kaugel valley society. To refer to Api's
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madness as a “culture-bound” phenomenon would surely misrepresent it as individual theatre determined by formal institutional culture. I would rather see the community as dynamic, imaginative, and reflective, actively and discursively constructing the incident of Api’s madness in a specific historical context and in terms of an imperative of their social formation.

NOTES

1. My research project was assisted by funds from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the New Zealand University Grants Committee, and approved by the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, Port Moresby.

2. The reference is to the difference between alpine and montane vegetation above approx. 11,000 feet and vegetation below approx. 8,000 feet. In dry spells children trek up Mt Giluwe especially to gather various normally unavailable flowering plants.

3. Colonial administration officers forced valley dwellers to bury their dead deeply (Dr Nancy Bowers, pers. comm.) and since converting to Christianity, Kaugel people have adopted Christian burial procedures, though the ritual behaviour involved reflects a mixture of Christian and non-Christian beliefs.

4. Green cordyline is commonly worn by men. Red leaves, however, are only worn for certain ceremonies as a symbolic gesture to ancestors. If they are worn on other occasions they demonstrate an intent to kill someone. In Api’s case it illustrated how crazy he was.

5. The careful re-translation involved here could not have been done without the help of a native speaker, for I never attained fluency in Umbu ungu. I am grateful to Andrew Pundia for his aid in this instance.


7. Dr Chris Ninkama, pers. comm. 8 March 1986.


REFERENCE


FISHERMEN OF MANUMANU:
IN DEFENCE OF ‘EMPIRICIST’ ETHNOGRAPHY

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I

More than three decades ago, between 1954 and 1959, I spent a total period of more than two years doing ethnographic field-work among the Western Motu people on the southern coast of Papua New Guinea’s main island, near Port Moresby, for much of the time at a village known as Manumanu. Regrettably the published results of that research have so far been fragmentary (Groves 1954, 1956, 1957, 1960, 1963, 1972) and therefore, when invited to contribute to this collection of papers in honour of my friend and former colleague, Ralph Bulmer, I initially saw and welcomed an opportunity to add a further small increment to the Western Motu ethnographic record.

Ralph Bulmer was himself a dedicated and meticulous ethnographic field worker, and also, particularly during his years as Professor of Anthropology at the University of Papua New Guinea, patron, sponsor, facilitator and friend of numerous other ethnographic field workers who came from many countries and at least five continents to work in the world’s last great ethnographic laboratory. The ethnography of Papua New Guinea was his lifetime passion. He was also a gifted naturalist and did pioneering work in the field of ethnobiology, generating rich ethnographic material on the Kalam people’s perceptions of and interactions with the other biological species that shared their habitat. Being myself a beach rather than a bush anthropologist, and no naturalist, I cannot hope to make any contribution to ethnobiology: the only biological species other than homo sapiens of which I was aware at Manumanu (apart from mosquitoes) were fish. Nevertheless, I thought in all the circumstances that an ethnographic account of fishing at Manumanu might appropriately honour Ralph Bulmer’s memory.