

GOOD COMPANY AND VIOLENCE

*Sorcery and Social Action
in a Lowland New Guinea Society*

BRUCE M. KNAUFT

Among the Gebusi of Papua New Guinea's Western Province, consensual execution of suspected sorcerers within the community results in an extraordinarily high homicide rate. At the same time, a strong and generalized ethic of affectionate good company (*kogwayay*) persists in the Gebusi community, even between those persons most subject to sorcery suspicions and violence from one another. Bruce M. Knauft examines the diametrical linkage between good company and violence in a work that represents an outstanding contribution to Melanesian ethnography, to the study of sorcery, and to social action theory.

Beginning with a documentary account of a dramatic sorcery inquest observed in the field, Knauft traces the causes and results of sorcery through diverse aspects of Gebusi social life: ethos and values, kinship, marriage, social structure, the symbolism of spirit seances, narratives, and rituals, as well as the specific beliefs and procedures of sorcery inquests. In the process, interpretive analysis of texts and symbolism is articulated with case presentations and with statistical/social structural analysis of 253 sorcery attributions and 163 homicides. A dialectical linkage is traced between cultural values and behavior patterns that ultimately contravene these values.

A penultimate chapter compares and contrasts the Gebusi pattern with sorcery as documented in other Melanesian societies. General patterns of interaction between symbolic, sociological, and material determinants of sorcery attribution are considered. The data raise major questions about theoretical approaches that assert or tacitly assume a preeminence, isomorphism, or independence between symbolic and sociological explanations of social action. In the final chapter, necessary prerequisites for a general and yet empirically responsive theory of social practice are presented, making this work a solid contribution to a theory of social action.

Good Company and Violence is also the most comprehensive study of homicide in a tribal society yet published. Combining a richness of ethnographic detail with a high level of theoretical sophistication, this book will be of major importance to scholars interested in theories of social practice and to Melanesianists, as well as to those with a topical interest in aggression or violence, deviance attribution, sorcery, spirit mediumship, or sociopolitical organization in decentralized societies.

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