

Homicide Reduction
among the Gebusi of Papua New Guinea

A Final Project Report

Submitted to The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation

Bruce M. Knauft

Samuel C. Dobbs Professor of Anthropology

Emory University

Atlanta, GA 30322; USA

And

Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke

EHESS

Paris, France

December 6, 2016

The present report describes the activities and results of primary research on Gebusi violence and conflict management funded in 2016 by the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation. The project investigates the causes of homicide reduction among Gebusi of Papua New Guinea, who the PI documented to have one of the highest rates of homicide ethnographically known during the precolonial and colonial period -- following which there has been an apparent reduction of homicide to zero, since 1989. The research was undertaken successfully during more than two months of field research this present summer (May-July). Unforeseen circumstances included pronounced drought conditions and relief aid, on the one hand, and dramatic cases of conflict and violence, on the other. These both deepened and extended the original research plan.

Logistics for the field expedition and living conditions in the Papua New Guinea rainforest went as smoothly as could have feasibly been expected. Fortunately, MAF flight services were again operational after the severe 2016 drought earlier in the year, and adequate supplies stock in the town of Kiunga. Fortuitously, a new field house had been built for the PI in Gasumi Corners, unbeknown to us, several months before our arrival. This proved to be an excellent base for field operations. Supplies and equipment all worked effectively, excepting effective lack of satellite phone connection for outside communications.

During the funded fieldwork, a surprising number of sickness, death, and sorcery cases occurred among Gebusi and adjacent Bedamini peoples. This afforded rich

opportunities for documenting and analyzing cases of violence and potential violence in real time -- while at the same time reducing our ability to fully investigate and complete the overall corpus of historical deaths and related cases of conflict. The fuller corpus of these remain important to document at since 1998 and hopefully as far back as 1982, that is, vis-à-vis the PI's baseline documentation of Gebusi deaths and violence during these earlier two periods (Knauff 1985a, 1987, 1991, 2002a, 2013).

In relation to this work, and complementing our original proposal, unexpectedly poignant incidents of violence and of conflict management that occurred during May-June 2016 included the following:

- A sorcery suspect was publicly executed in late May among the adjacent Bedamini people in a mixed Bedamini-Gebusi village. The P.I. was able to arrange a research visit to the remote village in question following the killing. The implications of this killing and its aftermath (a second man being sought for execution is presently in hiding) have important implications for the research, including the contrast between Bedamini, among whom violent sorcery attribution and killing are still practiced, and Gebusi, among whom these are virtually or completely absent. Following up on this important case with further fieldwork next year will be of significance for the project.
- An active sorcery case was brought against a Gebusi from Gasumi Corners man by tribal neighbors in early June 2016. As documented at and after a village court case, the accusation was effectively refuted and no action taken.
- The dramatic execution of three suspected sorcerers in a Gebusi village in recent years was reported but found upon investigation to be fallacious. The "killings" in question were actually spiritual attacks by

counter-sorcery believed to be successful - rather than actual homicides in the Western sense of the term.

- The death of a major village leader in the Gebusi village of Gasumi, where the PI and co-PI were residing resulted in an all-night funeral gathering or “house cry” at which previous suspicions and accusations and the threat of sorcery were strongly and publicly debunked by the principals involved.
- A curing dance for a very ill woman for whom sorcery was suspected was attended, and follow-up pronouncements documented, in the remote Gebusi village of Yehebi.

All the above cases were effectively documented and can be effectively followed up on during an additional phase of primary research in 2017 while also completing the full ethno-historical parameters of the research project as originally proposed.

Food relief efforts to combat pronounced (category 5) food shortage among Gebusi due to the recent El Nino drought in the South Pacific merited humanitarian assistance and associated documentation by the PI and co-PI during the 2016 fieldwork. This reduced the research time available for retrospective investigation of past death inquest and dispute marriage cases, and their potential violence, as foregrounded in the original proposal.

Despite the above, which have at the same time expanded and enriched the research beyond its original parameters, we were able to investigate in a preliminary and often in a more detailed manner more than half of the historical cases of death in the relevant Gebusi communities since 1998 (N=19/33). These are being assessed longitudinally vis-à-vis the P.I.'s previous genealogies and census data, as discussed

in our original proposal. In addition, forty-one historical and present cases of marital negotiation and related potential dispute were also documented in a preliminary manner during our recent fieldwork.

The research collaboration between the male PI, who knows the local Gebusi language, and the female co-PI, who is fluent in the national language of Tok Pisin, proved highly successful. In particular, different versions and details of specific sickness, sorcery, and marriage cases tended to be given with different variations in the two languages, and by women versus men. By comparing and contrasting these different accounts, the PI and co-PI are in a stronger position to document and analyze the actual circumstance of cases than would have been possible with either working independently.

The research drew upon the PI's prior work among Gebusi (e.g., 1985a+b, 1987, 1989, 1991, 2002a+b, 2013, 2016) as well as the current case study information. To date, all this information continues to confirm that the homicide among Gebusi themselves has continued to be zero since 1989 – despite patterns to the contrary among the neighboring Bedamini people and continuing belief in the reality of sorcery among Gebusi themselves. This pattern throws into higher relief the significance of Gebusi conflict management, including during and after cases of sickness and death from illness.

Our preliminary findings suggest key implications for alternative analytic and theoretical understandings of violence reduction. These are delineated and updated

in boldface sections below, several of which are similarly categorized in our original research proposal.

Dissimulation and underreported cases of violence. The recent Bedamini execution of a sorcery suspect in a joint Bedamini-Gebusi village has underscored the importance of re-examining previous cases of death to ensure that the accurate cause and circumstances of death are known. No cases have yet been uncovered that contravene the pattern of homicide reduction ascribed among Gebusi themselves, though it is important to continue this investigation so that the entire corpus of deaths since at least 1998 – and potentially since 1982, when the PI completed his first fieldwork among Gebusi – can be cross-checked and documented.

Modern incitement of explicit demands in disputes. This new factor emerged during the research itself. Local modernity tends to encourage issues and tensions that were traditionally kept implicit and unstated to be more explicitly proclaimed, with specific monetary demands for compensation. This is strongly the case in requests for marital compensation by the bride-giving lineage, whereas in the pre-colonial and early colonial eras, monetary or material compensation – in lieu of direct or sorcery-mediated violence – was not considered an option. Now, by contrast, the amount expected for brideprices (or compensation when a woman gets pregnant but the man will not marry her) are explicitly stated, often publicly. This does not mean that brideprice will be paid in full, but its demand can defuse a sense of growing anger and frustration that previously accompanied animosities that could not be legitimately voiced or publicly stated. Even partial payment of the requested amount now helps forestall greater discontent. The growing pattern of publicly demanding compensation does cause transient conflict but does not, upon all the accumulated evidence, build tension to the point of lethal violence. This pattern contrasts with the traditional build-up of antagonisms until a structural earthquake of homicidal backlash. This pattern dovetails with the defused way that sorcery investigations following sickness deaths are now handled. By way of illustration, at the funeral feast in late May 2016, demands were not kept private in

festering discontent but made directly to the deceased's family for money and an ax that had been owed by not paid to others by the deceased. Though payment was not made immediately, the family members in question agreed in principle to comply at a later time.

Cultural reinterpretations of what constitutes balanced exchange. This hypothesis, in tandem with that abovementioned, has proven highly valuable. Increasing recourse to brideprice or bridewealth – money and goods given from the husband to the bride's relatives – appears to have mitigated the demand for exact person-for-person exchange in so-called sister-exchange marriage. Historically, lack of reciprocity through sister exchange in marriage was highly correlated with violent sorcery attributions between in-laws following sickness deaths in subsequent years. Though the incidence and desirability of sister-exchange marriage remains high, the promise of increasing amounts of brideprice in future years appears to forestall or mitigate antagonisms between in-laws. As Kelly (1977) has suggested for the nearby Etoro people, marital exchange obligations can sometimes be extended and interpreted later to satisfy the demands of exchange marriage. That promises of brideprice, which were historically nil, are increasingly allowed to be renegotiated and finally completed years later appears to assuage the potential hostility of wife-givers incrementally over time -- rather than reciprocation being effectively “all-or-nothing” at or close to the time of the marriage itself. In the colonial and precolonial past, when monetary wealth was nil and brideprice nonexistent, money or other resources, such as a pig, were not considered adequate exchange for a woman given in marriage.

Though the increase and escalating inflation of brideprice in parts of Melanesia entails in its own problems, the advent of brideprice and its local increase to perhaps K1000 or more (c. U.S. \$350), among Gebusi it appears to have forestalled rather than increased violence between in-laws, at least to the present. This underscores the importance of assessing the implications of contemporary socio-

economic and related developments in their specific cultural and local historical context.

Our original proposal asked how many years of delay between one marriage and its reciprocation are allowed to make the exchange “balanced.” Though our data on marriage are in process and not complete, it now appears that a period of five or even ten or more years is typically acceptable for adequate monetary compensation be given, with lowered expectations and increased actual payments tending to reach a mutually acceptable accommodation during this period.

Cultural influence of Christian and government values. Our current work suggests that Gebusi themselves attribute their ongoing absence of homicide and lack of violent retribution against sorcerers – despite their continuing belief in sorcery itself – to the influence of the local Catholic and Evangelical Protestant Churches. As the elected Councillor of Gasumi Corners proclaimed, “If there are police but no Church, there *will* be killing. [But] if there is Church but no police, there *won't* be any killing.” At a gross level of value-based or ideological explanation, Christian belief and the power of divine intervention by God do appear to be important reasons of continuing homicide absence among Gebusi. This stands in partial contrast to Bedamini, some of whom in outlying areas most prone to violence have not adopted Christianity.

By itself, however, this explanation seems insufficient, since Gebusi who are actively Christian and who eschew the idea of sorcery practice in general are still quite prone to suspecting or accusing persons of sorcery when their own close relatives become severely ill or die from sickness. The aged mother of the foremost lay local leader of the Catholic Church is herself (with her son’s understanding and approval) the one person in Gasumi whose spiritual opinion is still sought to diagnose or reveal cases of sorcery. In all, Christian belief seems to a significant extent a generalized or post-facto explanation for lack of violent sorcery attributions and homicide among Gebusi rather than a sufficient cause of homicide reduction. It

appears that religious belief combines with other more pragmatic economic and social organizational factors in accounting for the highly reduced rate of killing among Gebusi.

New or resuscitated modes of dispute mediation. Gebusi now have recourse to their own elected “Council” in cases of dispute meditation. However, it turns out in fact that Councils have no enforcement power. All police have left the Nomad area and there is no presence or effectively available representative of State force or coercion, as discussed further below. More significant for violence reduction is a tendency for disputes to be individuated and “de-collectivized” by changes in the way that sickness and death investigations are conducted – and suspicions of sorcery attributed.

In particular, the customary pattern of collective spirit séance divination publicly led by a community spirit medium or shaman has been replaced by so-called “dream divination,” in which the cause of sickness or death is sought individually from a “seer.” Though the resulting pronouncements may be similar to those customarily made, they are individually paid for and rendered to the primary person aggrieved rather than voiced in public address to the multi-clan community. As such, the *collective* basis for generating stigma and mounting retributive violence against the sorcery suspect is forestalled. This remains to be confirmed by full investigation and tabulation of known sickness deaths in previous years as well as by following up on the dramatic cases that happened to take place during fieldwork this past summer.

“Second order” magic on the rise. As opposed to taking direct action against a suspected sorcerer, it is now more common to contract retribution with a more distant (and harder to trace) third party, thus displacing the revenge against sorcerers to outsiders. In the mix, revenge is not direct physical violence but spiritual as revenge sorcery through magic (*puli puli*). In cases of revenge sorcery, death is interpreted retrospectively as caused by a spirit sent to kill the alleged

sorcerer by means of sickness. Traditionally, by contrast, so-called death contracts (*to map*) entailed the contracting of third parties, typically Bedamini, to physically stalk and physically execute the suspected sorcery, that is, by direct violence. Not uncommonly, the suspected sorcerer's village as a whole would be attacked and decimated by Bedamini warriors. Though the possibility of taking "spiritual" revenge was also present, it was traditionally but a minimal and undeveloped aspect of sorcery retribution, against which direct physical action was considered preferable and more definitive.

The shift from corporeal to spiritual vengeance is paralleled by the cultural distancing of curing procedures, as evidenced in a case of a woman affected by tuberculosis in the village of Yehebi, mid-June 2016.

Fear of Leviathan. In contradistinction to Pinker's original thesis concerning the world-historical reduction of homicide – as discussed and critiqued in our original proposal – recent fieldwork has confirmed that no police or other coercive government presence exists in any meaningful way among Gebusi or in neighboring areas. That there is no expectation (or hope) that police may come to investigate the recent public execution of a sorcery suspect by Bedamini underscores this point. Neither are there other government officers or officials at the Nomad station, which has effectively been closed. Gebusi continue to say that the government has "died" (*golom-da*). Even projected fear of government presence or retribution remain minimal to non-existent. When the Governor of the Province made a brief surprise visit to Nomad by plane in mid-June 2016 – attempting to take credit for privately-funded air shipments of rice food aid – he was caustically confronted and bitterly criticized by the local population for having neglected to supply any government services to the Nomad Sub-District.

The absence of police or official state presence raises the analytic import of other factors mentioned further above in the continued reduction of Gebusi violence. At further issue – which can be increasingly addressed in the continuing research

proposed – is how and why *Bedamini* patterns of collective vengeance, including in cases of sorcery attribution, appear to differ significantly from those of the adjacent Gebusi people.

At larger theoretical issue are conditions of collective action that persist or are reduced under conditions of modern social change. Bedamini have a long history of aggressive collective action against Gebusi – as reflected in patterns of asymmetric and largely unilateral raiding and homicide by Bedamini against Gebusi during the precolonial and early colonial era (Knauff 1985:ch 8). In these actions, Bedamini amassed much larger numbers of men for armed confrontation or combat than Gebusi were able to do. In 1981, the PI observed a corollary circumstance in which a large number of men from distant Bedamini villages marched into the Gebusi settlement and summarily demanded payment of a large pig lest they outright kill an older man in the settlement for having caused sorcery against them. Gebusi were fully submissive to this unanticipated intrusion and immediately provided the pig in question, which was taken straightaway by the intruders.

A related pattern appears to have continued in the recent Bedamini homicide case, in which hundreds of Bedamini from five different Bedamini settlements were said to have descended en masse to validate and witness the public execution of a sorcerer in a border Gebusi-Bedamini community. What underlies this ability-cum-mandate for collective action among Bedamini is one of the factors, in contrast to Gebusi, that now emerges as important to investigate in the proposed continuation research.

Among Gebusi themselves, the apparent reality of continuing Bedamini sorcery – and revenge against sorcerers – easily fuels the persisting belief in the reality of sorcery in their larger area even though the actual killing of those suspected is rare and apparently nil since 1989.

Conclusions

Our research suggests that individuation of sorcery inquests is a key factor in local homicide reduction among Gebusi, in partial contrast to Bedamini. Other factors include Christianization, which is more robust in Gebusi communities than rural Bedamini ones, and increasingly explicit monetization of compensation demands. Claims to and payment of money in disputes and in marriage make disputes more openly contended and directly negotiated over time, sometimes over years. This complements traditional norms of direct reciprocity, whereby the life of the executed sorcerer was taken directly as reciprocity for the life of the person believed to have been killed by the sending of sickness.

The research sheds significant light on dramatic and sustained homicide reduction in a richly documented and much-cited case – and compares this to contrastive patterns in a neighboring tribal group. These dynamics throw into relief larger patterns of violence and its potential reduction in other parts of Papua New Guinea and in other developing nations. In rural areas of many developing nations, modern cultural development includes increasingly explicit demands for monetary compensation in cases of dispute, along with de-collectivized individuation of

grievances. Though these patterns may generate or exacerbate transient conflict, our research suggests that they may nonetheless help to reduce grave physical violence and homicide especially as this is assessed relative to early colonial and precolonial patterns. This point deserves consideration in further comparative research. More generally, the research underscores the importance of nuanced ethnographic and empirical assessment of theories that stress the role of internally developed dispute mediation and conflict management vis-à-vis externally imposed constraints.

We thank the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation for its generous support of our work, and we look forward to the possibility of pursuing further HFG-relevant research.