

## ALERT

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### The Motivations and Social Impacts of Accusations of Sorcery.

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5 March 2014

Belun's *Early Warning, Early Response (EWER)* monitoring for November 2013 through to January 2014 reported a number of violent incidents relating to accusations of sorcery occurring in the districts of Likisá, Manatuto and Dili. Initial reports for February have continued to record similar incidents. These recent incidents highlight the ongoing social tensions and conflict potential relating to suspicions and accusations of the practice of black magic across Timor-Leste.

#### Belief in magic

The belief in witches (*buán*) and magic is strong in many areas of Timor-Leste. According to such beliefs, a *buán* is considered to be a person possessing the ability to create items containing black magic (*ai kulit aat*) such as objects, potions or powders. It is believed that these items have the power to harm another person by making them fall ill or die. According to these beliefs, a person who possesses these same supernatural abilities but uses them for good, such as the creation of protection charms or for healing, is known as a *matandok* (traditional healer). Across Timor-Leste, there are ethno-regional variances in the specific beliefs surrounding the nature of magic as well as variations between rural and urban communities.

#### Dynamics of sorcery accusations in Timor-Leste

Accusing a person of being a *buán* and alleging the use of black magic creates significant social tensions within communities that can escalate to violence. According to *EWER* monitoring, very often these incidents occur in the form of destruction of property (such as house burning, destruction of crops and rock throwing), fighting and physical assault, verbal arguments and intimidation, and sometimes even escalation to murder.

While the target of such violence is usually the person accused of practicing black magic, the accuser(s) can also become the target of reprisal attacks. As the connotations associated with such an accusation are powerful, the act of accusing a person of being a *buán* can be a highly damaging and defaming insult that may provoke revenge violence from the accused and their family.

A concerning dimension of *buán* related incidents in Timor-Leste is the potential for rapid escalation, and to draw in entire families and communities. Aside from the immediate impacts of such violence, longer-term impacts can be understood in

terms of social volatility where sustained tensions, hostility and animosity can develop between those involved. Especially if the incident is not addressed, or is resolved in a way that does not resonate with all parties involved. Numerous incidents had at least one follow-up incident, demonstrating the conflict potential of *buán* accusations. More broadly, this volatility can contribute to the generation of a heightened sense of communal insecurity, particularly a fear of becoming a target of such accusations.

More peaceful methods of responding to accusations of sorcery may also be available. In several cases, the accused *buán* initiated proceedings against their accuser through either customary or formal legal mechanisms. Given that such accusations are based on customary belief systems, customary dispute mechanisms may provide a useful forum for alleviating the impacts of accusations of sorcery on communities in Timor-Leste.

Belief in sorcery does not necessarily escalate to violence in all societies. Therefore, in order to understand the motivations behind such accusations and the escalation to violent conflict, we must also look at the specific societal strains driving such violence, in addition to the belief itself.

### What are the motivations for such accusations?

Analysis of the reported incidents shows two possible dynamics of accusations of sorcery in Timor-Leste: the first being those in response to sudden illness or death; such occurrences are often shrouded in mysticism. While it is more likely that such unexplained illnesses or sudden death are due to natural causes - resulting from undiagnosed, sudden or silent disease - medically identifying the true cause is often difficult. Many communities have barriers in access to health care and the quality of health services remains limited in many parts of Timor-Leste. Autopsies are rarely performed, even in the case of sudden and unexplained death, and understanding of modern medicine techniques can be limited, particularly in rural areas. These factors leave scope for rumour and speculation of supernatural intervention.

In a number of cases reported through *EWER* monitoring, the family members of an ill or deceased person were encouraged to seek out a *buán* with the help of a traditional healer (*matandok*). In other cases, members of their community claimed that supernatural forces must have been involved in the death or illness of their family member. The belief in magic and mysticism is often used to make sense of inexplicable events, misfortune or tragedy in Timor-Leste.

The second dynamic is where the accusation may be motivated by a desire to punish, discredit or kill a particular individual, or force a conclusion to a pre-existing tension, jealousy or grievance. In some such cases, there may be no genuine suspicion of black magic. Rather, the allegation is used as a way to legitimate or redress perceived ills. For example, in an incident in Likisá in 2012, a family accused their in-laws of practising black magic. Further verification showed that this accusation was also accompanied by jealousy and perceived injustice over the ownership of a coffee plantation. This incident was mediated and resolved through customary mechanisms.

The social strain-gauge theory<sup>1</sup> has been used as one framework of understanding sorcery accusations, stipulating that the accusations themselves can tend to reflect strained or strenuous relationships and issues that are pressure points in a social structure. Therefore looking at the source of, and situational factors accompanying accusations can act as an identifier or indices of social tension (Marwick 1970, 17). Within this theory, the social function of sorcery accusations is understood to serve as a 'pressure valve for tensions in a society that would otherwise have no other legitimate outlet' (Włodarczyk 2009, 22). If formal or customary justice systems or mechanisms are unable to provide an adequate outlet for the discussion and resolution of particular types of tensions, it is possible that an accusation may be used to settle scores or force an outcome without the need to gather or provide any evidence first. Many Timorese consider the formal justice system to be inaccessible, overburdened and slow. It is possible that an accusation of sorcery may provide a more certain and rapid delivery of punishment and justice in the eyes of an aggrieved person.

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<sup>1</sup> The social strain gauge theory was developed by the Manchester school of thought, with most significant contributions made by anthropologist Max Marwick in his observations of witchcraft in African nations.

A common characteristic of reported incidents is that the accusation of sorcery occurs predominantly between people who live in close physical proximity or share a kin relationship (neighbours, extended family). A number of the cases reported through EWER monitoring featured conflict between a family (accuser) and their son-in-law (alleged *bu*an), involving rapid escalation to severe violence. It is possible that the cultural norms and obligations surrounding *fetosaa umane* (the traditional rules governing kinship relations and obligations between families-in-law) may create certain social tensions<sup>2</sup> and as such, accusations of sorcery may be used as an outlet for such tensions.

Analysis of the characteristics of *bu*an-related incidents through the social strain gauge lens allows us to identify potential pressure points. Families-in-law and neighbours appear to constitute a significantly strenuous relationship at times, with points of social instability and tension often relating to ownership and access to land or resources, as well as a lack of access to and quality of health services. Continued efforts in addressing these structural strains may contribute to curtailing the extent to which beliefs in sorcery can trigger violence. More in-depth research is required in order to identify the specific social and/or economic tensions that might drive accusations of sorcery and subsequent violence in the context of Timor-Leste.

## References

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Wlodarczyk, Nathalie 2009, *Magic and Warfare: Appearance and reality in contemporary African Conflict and Beyond*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York.

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<sup>2</sup> Belun's policy brief *Culture and its impact on social and community life – A case study of Timor-Leste* (2011) provides further information on the role of some cultural practices in intra-familial and communal conflict in Timor-Leste.



The three most recent incidents are detailed below:

Manatuto District, Manatuto Sub-district

**January 2014**

The family of a deceased man suspects his work colleague of using black magic to kill him. Acting on their suspicions, they attack the colleague, who immediately registers the assault with the Manatuto District Police. The following day the family of the deceased again attempt to attack the colleague, who escapes to the Police station.

Dili District, Dom Aleixo

**December 2013**

A Priest is alleged to have convinced the family of two mentally-ill women that their illness has been caused by black magic, and that their female neighbour is responsible. The family of the ill women attacked the house of their neighbour, destroying a number of items in the house.

Likisá district, Bazartete

**November 2013**

This incident was initiated when a family accused their son-in-law of being a *buán*. The man (son-in-law) was insulted, and the following day he confronted his wife's family (family-in-law) along with two men from his own family. The confrontation escalated to violence and ended when the group from the son-in-law wounded two members of his wife's family-in-law using a machete. The following morning the wife's family mobilised to confront the son-in-law, resulting in the murder of the son-in-law, the burning of 8 houses, 3 kitchen buildings and a number of crops. The son-in-law's family members fled to other villages in fear for their lives.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Ministry of Health

- ▶ Improve access to and quality of health services, particularly in remote and rural communities, to reduce the number of sudden or unexplained deaths and illnesses that may lead to suspicions of supernatural involvement;
- ▶ Conduct public awareness campaigns to increase community understanding of common silent and under-diagnosed illnesses such as hypertension, heart disease and mental illnesses.

## Religious Leaders:

- ▶ Continue to be active in dispelling the intensification of sorcery accusations;
- ▶ In the case of illness or death, members of the religious institutions should provide pastoral services to the grieving family, particularly in cases where an illness or death is not able to be explained or understood by the family.

## Community Leaders:

- ▶ Community leaders should strongly encourage families with sick family members to receive medical attention and treatment as soon as illnesses arise, rather than allowing the progression of an illness that may become untreatable.

## Community Police:

- ▶ Establish greater community policing presence in rural areas. While this may not prevent threats or accusations being made, it can protect the accused, minimize intimidation and avoid potential escalation to greater harm and violence;
- ▶ Ensure that Community Police are impartial in their approach to cases of suspected sorcery.

## Conflict Prevention and Response Networks:

- ▶ Implement conflict prevention activities, such as community dialogues, involving community leaders, representatives from the health and justice sectors, Religious leaders and community members in order to discuss and prevent violence related to accusations of sorcery.

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