

A Female Necromancer in the Wabag District, Western Highlands of New-Guinea

By
HENRY AUFENANGER

In 1964 I visited Pompobus, where Rev. Father Feldkoetter was in charge of the local Catholic Mission Station. He pointed out to me a woman, who held an extraordinary position among her fellow natives. Her name is Nagoyam. When I saw her I noticed that she was an energetic person with vivid clever eyes. On her nose she wore a little patch of bark-cloth. Wondering why she covered her nose like that I asked her to kindly take it off for me. When she did so I was taken aback by the terrible sight of her face. Instead of her nose-tip I saw two holes which disfigured her features.—Nagoyam told me, a man had cut off the forepart of her nose in revenge for her alleged unfaithfulness toward her lover.—In former days this was an often practised custom among the people around Pompobus. Whenever a man was convinced that his wife was unfaithful to him, he cut his wife's nosetip off. In some cases he even bit it off.—According to Nagoyam the man who imparted to her this cruel and inhuman punishment had no right to do so. "He was not even my real husband," she said. Naturally she was still very furious and revengeful on account of the injury she had been suffering physically as well as mentally. The thus badly treated woman lived not far from the Mission Station in a very miserable grass-thatched hut which was very low and had not even a window. But all around this hut everything was in perfect order. The wise woman attended the religious instructions regularly and picked up quite a few christian doctrines. Especially the teaching about the Last Judgement had her full assent. "Now", she said, "I cannot take any revenge on the culprit who cut off my nose-tip. But at the Last Judgement he shall suffer for it."—Nagoyam is a widow and would like to be baptized, but according to the missionary she is still too deeply involved in nonchristian ideas. All the people of the area are convinced that she has a way with the spirits of the dead. From all sides they flock to her in order to have their problems solved. She herself too

is sure to have the quality of conversing with the spirit world. About this she gave me the following explanations: "I have a "bird" that stays in my hut. It is a male spirit of the dead. His name is Romau. I cannot see him. He does not enter me. (He does not take possession of me.) He always remains outside my person. He is my master. I cannot give him any orders. He also is my "izinggi", i.e., "my protector". He watches over me, lest anything should happen to me and that I should not be killed. This bird speaks to me only when I ask him a question. I never give him anything."—Nagoyam asks the bird and he answers by whistling. Here is a detail of her activities: Somebody calls on her, because his pig has been stolen. Nagoyam will call on her bird and name a lot of people who possibly could have committed the theft. As soon as she calls the name of the thief her bird will whistle.

In other parts of New-Guinea, for instance in the Chimbu area in the Eastern Highlands, people aver, that the dead mean to say "yes" when they whistle from a lower to a higher pitch, and "no" when they whistle from a higher to a lower tone. The dead of the Wabag area seem to use the same method.—Very often the necromancer has to find out who of all the spirits has caused somebody's sickness, and the reason why it has been imparted. Since the dead are very often meat hungry they ask for a pig sacrifice. The seeress then has to find out, which particular pig has to be slaughtered. Then she will announce: "The spirit of your dead father wants you to kill for him the black pig with the white mark on its forehead." And often she adds: "If this pig is not given to the ghost who has sent the sickness, the patient will die."—Here are some more informations Nagoyam gave me: "When anybody is very ill, I'll go to his house. There I speak to the bird (who apparently is accompanying her): "Eak!", i.e., "Bird"! Speak now! Is this person going to die or is he going to get well again?" Then the bird will answer "yes" or "no", often in the presence of many people. He talks like a real man in the Pompobus language. (I assume that the necromancer meant to say, that the bird understands the words, which are spoken in the Pompobus language.) When the wise woman has found out the culprit who stole a pig, the owner will go to the thief's house. He will tell him straight out that he was the culprit. The latter will give the pig back or its equivalent. He will not even be angry with the ghost seer, knowing that he might need her help in a short while himself.—By the help of her bird Nagoyam can tell if anybody has been killed by men's or women's death magic. (The term for death magic is *tomagai*.) Can we imagine how dangerous it was (and is) for her to discover the persons who allegedly had killed somebody by applying death magic?—Everybody believes her and her



Female necromancer.
Photo by H. Aufenanger

bird is a good heavenly man. This bird does not take revenge on anybody who has been doing wrong. He does not kill anybody nor does he punish him in any way. Although the necromancer is convinced of being protected by her heavenly bird, it is amazing that a woman has the courage to point out men who allegedly have committed crimes. To a good extent she relies on all her friends and neighbours and all the members of her tribe who respect her very highly. Every evildoer would think it over twice before he attacked her.

The following episode may illustrate the "whistling" of the dead at Dirima (in the Eastern Highlands of New-Guinea), at which I was present. An old man had died and was buried. When it got dark a lot of people assembled near the settlement of the dead person and asked him to come and get some food. After a good while the people were sure the deceased person had whistled. I had not heard any whistling at all and think it was only the autosuggestion of the people, that made them hear it.—Whatever one may think of the actions of the "simbil woman", i.e., the seeress, she holds a very important social position. She gives comfort and confidence to the sick. She takes away the doubts and mental disturbances of the troubled minds. She probably prevents a lot of crimes evildoers would commit if they were not afraid of being detected by her, and by her bird. She receives a lot of presents from all the people she has helped, and she deserves them.