

Kumo, the Deadly Witchcraft in the Central Highlands of New Guinea

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Introduction: There is one word in the Territory of New-Guinea, the very mentioning of which causes men, women and children to tremble with fear. This word is "sangguma." It is a Melanesian expression and has in all the local languages its equivalent or its quasi-equivalent. The Gende and Chimbu-people use for it the term "*kumo*".¹ Several meanings are contained in the term "*kumo*", and it is not easy to confine, what is and what is not implied by it. At Yonopa, on the right bank of the Middle Ramu River I heard a man say: We are not afraid of common crocodiles, when we swim in the Ramu River. They would not touch us in the water, because they cannot open their mouth in the water. If they did, they would drown. Only if the crocodile is a *sangguma* it is dangerous. (Although this statement does not hold good, it shows how much the native mind is influenced by the *sangguma* complex.)—When I was once with the Fou people, who live on the eastern slopes of the Bismarck mountains, they were very much afraid of *sangguma*, who according to their conviction was prowling around their huts in the early evening and in the small hours of the morning. (This *sangguma* was apparently one of

1. In Alfons Schaefer's Vocabulary of the Chimbu language. Micro-Bibliotheca-Anthropos. Vol. II., we read: *Kumo* (means) Death magic.

their enemies, who whistled, in order to lure the people out of their houses to shoot them with his arrows.)—Beyond any doubt proved facts of physical killing of men by thrusting many short and sharp sticks into the various parts of their body are described by the missionary Rev. G. Koster, S.V.D.² This cruel kind of killing was by the people referred to as “sangguma”.

In the Highlands I never found, that people called this latter kind of killing “*kumo*”. Still it is certain, that *kumo* expresses all different kinds of death magic and especially witchcraft. *Kumo* is always understood as something essentially evil. The belief in *kumo* is responsible for untold misery in the Highlands of New-Guinea. Throughout all the Years I have spent with the natives of this area (from 1934 to 1961, with an intermission of about 7 years) I have hardly observed anything as damaging as this deep-rooted belief in *kumo*. It is well known, that otherwise quite healthy people have died, just because they were convinced that they had been struck by *kumo*. Nearly always, when there occurred a death, people thought, *kumo* was the reason for it. Various methods were applied then, to find out, who had killed the person by *kumo*. The so detected “guilty” person was usually killed, if he was not able to flee in time to his relatives or friends. The murder of a would-be *kumo* person unleashed very often a chain reaction of revenge killing, unless people managed to placate the murdered persons’ relatives by gifts of pigs, shells etc.

In the present treatise I shall use the term “*kumo*” in the sense of witchcraft. By witchcraft or sorcery I understand an evil, supernatural power, which a man or a woman acquires from a bad, personal spirit or spiritlike being, and which he or she uses for associal purposes, for doing harm to people and animals.

In the book on the Gende, Wien-Moedling 1940, which I wrote together with Prof. Dr. G. Hoeltker, I have touched on this subject. There I referred only to the people on the north-eastern slopes of the Bismarck mountains, whereas this paper deals also with the densely populated areas on the banks of the

2. See: Sangguma of de Sluipmoord op de noordoostkust van Nieu-Guinea. *Anthropos*. Vol. 37-40, 1942-45, p. 213-224.

Chimbu- and Wagi Rivers.³

The following statements are based on reliable reports, which I received from natives of various tribes of the Highlands, and on my personal experiences in that area.

Here are some stories, which reveal, what the natives think about witchcraft. At Kwiregli in the Chimbu Valley a little boy fell into the fire, and was badly scorched. An old woman came running to see the child. Now the "kumo", which was in her head said to her: "*Mana, nono ngga kembri tsi nggorambulxka.*" (i.e. "Mother, let the two of us kill the little child!") The woman replied: "*Taman! Nono mboromai tsuara tamanungua.*" (i.e. "No! We are not blood relatives.") Then the woman went home. When she was about to go to sleep, her *kumo* said once more: "Mother, let the two of us go and kill the child!" Again she said: "*Kondo*", i.e., "Leave it alone!" Then the *kumo* told her to stay. "I shall go alone," said it. It went and came back with the "*dem munduo*" the liver of the child. The woman took it and cooked it. Then the two of them ate it. In the morning the child was dead. While all the people cried, the *kumo*-woman joined them, crying also. Secretly she thrust a *kumo ende* (a wooden witch stick) into the ground. She was caught and upon being questioned she confessed her bad deed. Some men went to her house and found the saucepan, in which the woman had cooked the child's *dem munduo*. Now it was full of gnats. The men came back, killed and cooked a fowl and gave it to the woman. She put it near the entrance of her house. Nearby she placed a piece of wood. At her side she was hiding a very sharp knife. When the *kumo* fell out of the back of her head it looked like a bat. She invited it to sit on the piece of wood (in order to take part in the eating of the cooked fowl). Suddenly she stabbed the bat with her knife. Very much blood poured from the wound. The bat's head was still alive and so she threw it into the fire, where it was burned to ashes.

(Reported by a man of the Kulxkane tribe, called Waruwo.) In former days the woman would probably have been killed, but the Government does not allow that practice any longer.

Another case occurred at Womatne in the Chimbu Valley. An old woman was accused of having killed her eldest son, who

3. The first part of this article I read before the assembled anthropologists of Japan at Tokyo 23.5.1963. A short summary of it is published in the official "Program and Outlines of Reports."

had been married a short time before. She denied strongly she was a sorceress. When nothing could make her confess, a young man swung his axe over her head, threatening to kill her. "We saw you with our own eyes thrusting the *kumo ende* into the ground. I am going to kill you," he shouted. At that moment a rat jumped from the woman's ear and ran into the government's rest house, although there was no hole in its wall. The men saw the *kumo* rat and said: "Now we have seen your *kumo* falling down from your ear. Now do not tell us lies!"—During the night the *kumo* came back to the old woman and said: "Mother, the two of us did mischief and the men were going to kill us, but now I came back." The woman replied: "Get out!" but the *kumo* rat passed through her ear into her head again.—In the morning the men came back and asked her again: "Why did you kill your son?" She answered: "My son gave me only a small piece of pork, but he gave a large piece to the parents of his wife. That is why I killed him."—After that the husband of the old woman did not want to have her any longer. He sent her back to her relatives. (My informant Waruwo maintains, that he saw the *kumo* rat jumping from the old woman's ear.)

According to one story, which was related to me by Dua, a Vandeke man, a woman had been accused of having killed a boy by *kumo*. She denied it very strongly. The dead boy's father came, and furiously threw hot ashes into her eyes. He shouted: "You are the one, who has killed my son by *kumo*!" Many men and women gathered around her and all of them told her over and over again, she had committed the crime. After a long period of accusing and arguing she finally broke down and confessed: "My *kumo* looks like a little girl. At night it went and brought the little boy's liver. We roasted it and the *kumo* divided it into three parts. One it gave to me, one to my little daughter and one ate itself." Later the woman was reported to the Government's officer, and he was asked to punish her. This man was wise enough to reject their request, although the woman had confessed herself to be guilty. She told the people: "It is not I, who wants to kill people. It is my *kumo* who kills them."

The following report, which I received from the same Dua, refers to the time, when no foreigner had arrived yet in the Central Highlands.—A man, who was sleeping in the men's house, heard at night his little daughter crying in the nearby woman's

house. He went over and saw, that his wife was not there. She had gone to a place, where an important *kumo* man had invited all the *kumo* men and women to come. When all had arrived, he opened a grave, took out the corpse and distributed it among all the men and women, who had gathered. The above mentioned woman wrapped her part in fern leaves and flew through the air on her house. She did not enter the house by the door, but descended through the roof along the middle post of the house, called *Kauglangge mambuno*. She opened the package and roasted the human meat on the fire. Now her husband, having seen everything, went near the fire. His wife was shocked when she saw him and trembling she told him: "My good husband! You thought I was a good woman, but I have different customs." He answered: "Yes, I know now, that you are a bad woman. You are a witch and perform *kumo*." After that he took his little daughter and went back into the men's house. There he awakened some men and told them all he had seen and heard. They all decided, that his wife had to be killed. So they all went to the woman's house and closed the door tightly. Then they set the house with the woman in it on fire. She died in the flames.

The following report I received from Kavare, a young Gende man. He was at that time a wearer of plaits, called *arambragi*, and belonged to an undertribe of the Nombri. He narrates: My elder brother, Kanggi Anggiva, had been shot by the Bundi through his neck. He did not die from that wound though. But later there was *kumo* sitting in his belly. When he was lying in the house, a small red snake came out of his body and crawled along his leg down to the ground. This snake was the mother of Kanggi Yapoi, a woman from the undertribe of the Konarigim. She had performed the *kumo*. My elder brother died soon on account of it. The men said to the snake: "*nde u yoko, iko ambu wo!*" i.e. "If you have given a premonition, do not go away."—"But if you have performed *kumo*, go away!" Upon that the snake crawled away. The men followed it. It sneaked into a woman's house (*anggainggo*). The men entered the house also, but they did not kill the snake. Then they buried my brother. In the evening three men hid themselves at my dead brother's graveside, where they kept watch, while three other watchers were posted near the woman's house. The woman, who had previously transformed herself into a snake, changed herself now into a *kigera* bird. (A hawk or a buzzard). On

its tail the hawk had a twisted barkstring, the kind, women use for their string dress. The hawk flew to my brother's grave and sat there on the branch of a tree, because it intended to eat the corpse of my brother. It could not see the hidden men. In the beginning the three men thought, it was an ordinary hawk, but when they saw the twisted string on its tail, they knew, what was going on and said: "Now we know, who the hawk is." The hawk looked hither and thither, to make sure, there was nobody about. Then it flew from the branch on the fence of the grave. Now the three men made a spell and spat. This caused the hawk to become unconscious. Then the three men shot at the bird. It was hit, but it broke the arrow, which was sticking in its body into two and flew away. Later the hawk transformed itself again into a woman, who went back into her house. (In this area every woman has a house of her own.) She had laid both her hands on the back of her neck. The three men, who had been lying hidden near the woman's house, took the woman by her hand and asked her: "Where have you been?" She did not answer. Blood was flowing from her eyes, and she was unconscious. She only kept groaning: e e e. Upon that the men cut off her head with an axe and threw her body into the Guago river.⁴

From these stories, which are in the opinion of the natives established facts, we can conclude: 1. All the acting persons, who perform the witchcraft, are women, but in one case there is a report about a gathering of sorcerers and sorceresses.—2. In the first three reports the *kumo* is a living being, which occupies the woman. The *kumo* is not the woman herself. It is a separate being. The woman is only the person who lodges the *kumo* being and cooperates with it in its criminal actions. The *kumo* being looks like a bat, or like a rat, or like a little girl. Apparently both, the *kumo* being and the woman herself are interested in killing. The reasons for killing people seem to be craving for human meat, envy and revenge. The *kumo* woman and the *kumo* being seem to have a special liking for the liver of a human being. (The liver of animals is of the

4. This story was originally published in German in the above mentioned book: Die Gende, i.e., p. 179. I translated it into English for convenience's sake and because only a small amount of copies of the Gende book is available.

greatest importance at the sacrifices the natives give to the spirits and to their dead ancestors. The liver seems to be regarded as the centre of life in men and animals. The human soul may leave a person for a certain time—even for weeks, while the man is still living on, but if the liver is gone, he cannot live any longer.) The *kumo* being is an essentially bad being. It does not seem to be capable of any good deed at all. It can be seen. It runs and jumps. It eats and can be killed and burned. It is a being which has blood in it and can be wounded with a knife. It speaks the local language. It walks and carries the human liver. It is afraid of being killed. It urges the woman to commit the crime. It does not command, it tries rather to persuade the woman. It calls the woman “mother”. It has willpower and sticks stubbornly to its purpose. It is not obedient to the command of the woman to get out, but comes back without her permission. It is clever and in one case at least it outwits the men, but it can also be tricked.—In some regards the *kumo* being’s qualities surpass the human ones. It can go through a wall, in which there is no hole. It falls out of the woman’s occiput like a spirit, who is not hampered by material obstacles. It can pass through the woman’s ear, although it is as large as a rat. The *kumo* being takes away the child’s liver in a way, that the relatives are not aware of what is going on. It has a particularly hard dying head, which dies only in the fire.

The *kumo* woman.—All the *kumo* women in these stories are elderly persons. The *kumo* woman cannot get rid of the *kumo* being. She has no authority over it. She sometimes cooperates with the *kumo* being. She refuses to kill the child, because she is not related to it. The *kumo* being has no authority over the woman. It asks for her cooperation, but it does not force her. The woman cooks and eats the human meat. The *kumo* woman allows her young daughter to participate in the cannibalistic meal. The *kumo* woman pretends sympathy and laments over the dead child, whose liver she has eaten. She thrusts a *kumo ende* into the ground, although the child is already dead. (About this little stick see further down). *Kumo* women are forced to confess their bad deeds. They are liars, denying their crimes. Only by evidence and terrible threats they are induced to tell their bad actions. *Kumo* women are not wanted. In former days they were often killed. Now they are merely dismissed, because the government does not allow

this kind of punishment any longer. The relatives take her usually back into their community in spite of her *kumo*. One *kumo* woman becomes under the influence of her *kumo* being so cruel, as to kill her own son, raging with envy and revenge.

The fourth and the fifth story are somewhat different from the former ones. There is no reference made to the *kumo* being. We hear, that the witch leaves her little child alone in the house and goes out, to attend a meeting of sorcerers and sorceresses. Not even her husband knows, that his wife is a witch. She is able to fly through the air on top of her house. She enters the house through the roof, without (as it seems) damaging the roof, gliding down the middle post (which is of special importance with the natives of the Highlands). She roasts the human meat and is shocked, when she sees herself found out. She is burned to death for punishment and for safety's sake.

In the fifth story the *kumo* woman transforms herself into a little red snake. She had entered the man's belly and caused his death. The snake's red colour may be significant, but so far I cannot say, what it implies. The snake understands the question or rather the man's order to crawl away, if she was a *kumo* person, and obeys it. At night she appears as a large bird near the grave, but the string from a woman's dress, tied to the bird's tail, gives her away. She wants to take out the buried corpse in order to eat it. She is cautious, looking around to find out whether there is anybody to watch her. She is shot and wounded with an arrow, but apparently the arrow would not have done her any harm, if the men had not made the spell. The magic seems to have been more powerful than her own power as a witch. She transforms herself into a woman again. Later she is killed.

The *kumo* people are doing their associal work especially at night time. There are certain men, who can, in their own and in other natives' opinion, tell a *kumo*-man or -woman. Young men go often out late in the evening, in order to sing love songs with young girls. They come back at any time of the night. If they then see somebody walking about in the darkness, they suspect him or her to be a *kumo* person. The young men will chase such persons, and having asked them questions they will or rather would kill them or at least pluck out some of their hair. This hair is believed to be magic laden and very useful in a future war with the relatives of the sorcerer or the witch. (It seems to me, that the *kumo* person, whose hair was taken,

was not killed, because the magical power would have elapsed, with his or her death).

The hair is buried in the ground and on top of it a cordyline shrub is planted. If a war arises, a leaf is plucked from the cordyline and the ground is hit with a stick. That makes the enemies tremble with fear. They will run away and can be easily killed.⁵ This custom proves, that not only the *kumo* persons themselves have extraordinary powers, but also their hair and probably other personal things are carriers of that power.—Closely connected with this belief is apparently the conviction the natives have about the human soul, part of which adheres to the things, which have come in bodily contact with a person.—If the shadow of a witch or a sorcerer falls on a man or a woman they will become witches or sorcerers also.

In order to give an idea of the extent of fear and terror with which the *kumo* superstition strikes the hearts of the natives I relate a few facts: One night, at about 9 p.m., a large number of sturdy highlanders were sitting in a house near an airstrip, which we were building in the Bismarck mountains. Suddenly there was a terrific commotion. One of the men had detected a *kumo*. All the men jumped up, ran to and fro, grabbing a piece of firewood or lighting a tuft of dry grass in order to find the *kumo*. Of course they did not find anything. Probably one of the men had heard a little noise, caused by a rat, or he had seen a leaf moving in the draught. But everyone of these strong men was convinced that a witch or a sorcerer had secretly approached the house to kill them through *kumo*. According to them the *kumo* had quickly sneaked away into the darkness.—At another time I slept in a little grass hut, high in the mountains, on a place called Bononi. Not far away from my hut a number of newly initiated boys had their quarters. Suddenly I woke up from the loud shouting of the boys. The whole area was roused. Men came running with flaming torches to catch the *kumo*. From far away excited people asked what was the matter. Of course all the searching was to no avail. Probably they would have been convinced they had killed a *kumo* person, if they had found and slain a rat.

Once I walked with an old, but very important man of the Mendi tribe near the edge of the forest. I noticed a good smell

5. See my article: The Cordyline Plant in the Central Highlands of New-Guinea. *Anthrop.*, Vol. 56, 1961, p. 397.

and told him so. He answered: "I do not smell it, but there must be somebody around here who is trying to kill us with *kumo*." He looked all around, but eventually he gave it up.—On one occasion a young married man of the Nombri tribe accompanied me to the Konarigim, who were more or less friends of the Nombri. He was very nervous and held his bow and arrows always ready in his hands. He told me, he feared much more, the Konarigim would strike him with *kumo* than with physical weapons. All my soothing talk did not satisfy him. When we had arrived and spoke to the Konarigim men, I told them, Gene (that was my companion's name) was afraid of *kumo*, but they certainly would not apply that to him. Now the Konarigim protested, they had nothing to do with *kumo* and he need not be afraid of anything.—Later, when we had gone back, Gene confided to me, that he had been very much ashamed at my requesting the Konarigim not to strike him with *kumo*. These are only a few examples, but the whole life of the natives of New-Guinea is poisoned with this destructive belief of *kumo*.

It was mainly women who had to suffer from being suspected or accused of witchcraft. Very often it was a woman who pointed out to the men another woman to have killed somebody by *kumo*. It is amazing, how many women were accused of having applied *kumo*. A good number of them killed, others managed to run away to their relatives. Many little girls were known by the name of Kumo. Their mothers, who had escaped death had given them this name for a remembrance and spite.—The fear of women being witches, kept the men from allowing women to come to the men's house. They had to make a round about way, in order to avoid coming near a men's house. When people on certain occasions cooked for the whole community it was the men, who did the cooking in the large earth-oven. The women had to sit a good distance away. From far they pushed the long wooden dishes towards the men. Heating the stones on the huge fire, the preparing of the cooking hole, etc., all was done by men only. The fear of *kumo* was responsible for this attitude.—The fear of *kumo* interfered greatly with the family life of the people. Men never took any peeled sweetpotatoes from their wives.—I asked children, whose mothers had been killed on account of being *kumo* women, whether their mothers had committed those crimes of killing people by *kumo*. Most of them said, "yes, that is a fact." But one little boy told me: "No, they have killed my mother who was innocent. When I

have grown up I shall kill those responsible."

We heard, that one of the men told the old woman, she had been observed thrusting a *kumo* stick into the ground. This *kumo* stick, which is called in the Gende language *kumo iza*, and with the Chimbu people *kumo ende*, is a very problematic thing. The *kumo* person, usually a woman, is believed to stick it into the ground near the spot, where the body of the person she has killed, is laid out. While all the people, including the witch, are mourning and lamenting, she secretly buries it in the earth. When the corpse has been carried to the grave, people search the place and very often find one of these witch sticks.⁶

I was able to incidentally get hold of one. Several men came along averring to have found a *kumo* stick. They did not want to kill the woman, who had been accused of having killed somebody by witchcraft, they wanted only her husband to give them a big pig for atonement. The woman was sitting on the ground, with her head drooping. She was furious with anger and with shame.—The little stick, which was wrapped in leaves, was just an ordinary small twig, about 8 cm. long and as thick as a thin pencil. It did not show any marks and it was still covered with its original bark. At one end it was broken off, and the other end had been in a fire. Since the corpses are usually laid out in places, where there have been fires, many little sticks like the mentioned one can be found in and above the ground. That fact has tragical consequences, because any bad person can find such a stick and accuse another person, against whom he or she has a grudge, of having killed the dead man or woman by witchcraft.—But why does the witch stick the little piece of wood into the ground? It seems to be so unnecessary, since her crime has been accomplished. I never could find a reason for that.—If somebody is in possession of a *kumo* stick and keeps it for a long time, it may cause him some minor trouble like a skin disease. In order to make it ineffective, a certain rite is performed and a special sign is made on the ground. The owner of the *kumo* stick will throw it then into a cave or into the water, where it cannot do harm any more.—Magical sticks are prepared for other purposes as well, but here is not the place to describe them.

Numerous are the ways of tracing *kumo* people. The dead are or were for instance given red paint into their cold hands,

6. See: Die Gende, l.c., p. 152-153.

and later their clan-fellows searched the area and the various houses, in order to find traces of this paint on the housewalls or on the posts of the *kumo* man's or woman's house. The soul of the dead person was ritually asked who killed him or her by *kumo*. The netbag in which people had enclosed the soul was searched carefully in order to find out, whether it had indicated by certain signs who had killed him or her. The Vamizuhu tie strings to the toes of a laid out corpse and connect them with sticks, which are put on top of an earth-oven. Packages of vegetables marked for various people are laid into the oven and correspond to one of the sticks. The one whose package is only half done or not cooked at all, is the *kumo* person, who has caused the death of the laid out man or woman.⁷ Some times some dust from a *kumo* stick is put on cooked sweet-potatoes and given to various men and women. If one of them after having eaten the potato shows a peculiar behaviour, like getting nervous, vomiting etc., he or she is the *kumo* culprit.—Dust of the *kumo* stick was also scraped into the upper part of an arrow shaft and then the arrow was shot over the suspected person's head. If he or she ran away, it was a sign of his or her guilt.⁸ There are also men who by eating a certain kind of tree bark get into a kind of trance and are then able to see in a dream *kumo* people. Later, when they wake up, they reveal the names of the *kumo* persons.

It can safely be said: The belief in witchcraft is one of the most dreadful and destructive evils in the life of the natives. It will take generations before this poisonous weed is completely destroyed. From this state of affairs one can imagine how the poor natives were in constant fear of being accused of witchcraft. I have seen a would-be *kumo* woman, who was killed with a broad, double-edged arrow in her chest. The whole body was soaked in blood.—In one case a young man had shot at his own mother. On one occasion a mother of several small children just escaped death. An arrow had lifted up the skin of her chest. When the people realised, that I was willing to protect them, they made ample use of this opportunity. Gradually the whole population became doubtful as to whether it was right to kill people on account of witchcraft. That was the first step towards the ending of the cruel killing of innocent people.

7. See my article: The Cordyline, etc., p. 408.

8. Die Gende, p. 152.

Eventually the way of free communication between the various tribes in New-Guinea will be possible, and not every person of another tribe will be regarded as an enemy and a potential sorcerer or sorceress.

For reference see:

- 1) J. Whiting and St. Reed: The Kwoma Culture. Oceania, Vol. 9. 1938-1939, p. 213 f.
- 2) K. E. Read: Nama Cult of the Central Highlands, New-Guinea Oceania, Vol. 23, 1952-53, p. 14.
- 3) J. H. Holmes: In Primitive New-Guinea, p. 199 ff.
- 4) J. Nilles: The kuman of the Chimbu Region. Oceania, Vol. 21, 1950-51, p. 55 f.
- 5) Oliver M. Hueffer: The Book of Witches.
- 6) C. Schmitz: Todeszauber in Nordost-Neuguinea. Paideuma, Vol. 7, 1959, p. 35-67.
- 7) G. Höltker: Neue Materialien über den Todeszauber in Neuguinea. Anthrop., Vol. 58, 1963, p. 333-371.