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Myth and Counter-myth in the Siane

Br Silas SSF

[In the original printed version, the texts for footnote numbers 5 and 6 were transposed. This has now been corrected. –Revising ed.]

Introduction

Wherever people gather in groups to share life together, they develop a common identity, values, and worldview, and ways to restore order, when they are threatened. These features must be communicable to the next generation, and newcomers to the community, if it is to survive. One of the chief ways, in which this takes place, is through the use of myth, a complex of stories, which, together, explain why the community exists at all, and what sort of behaviour is required, if it is to continue to do so.

Although it is fairly easy for scholars to identify the key myths, at least in the literature of writing peoples, they turn out to be rather difficult to define.¹ For the purposes of this article, the most useful definitions are functionalist ones, such as Malinowski's: "Myth fulfils . . . an indispensable function; it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards, and enforces, morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual, and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is . . . not an idle tale, but a hard-worked force; it is not an intellectual explanation, or an artistic imagery, but a practical charter of . . . faith and moral wisdom."² Thus, the main point of a myth is that it "works", in creating and maintaining the community, whose property it is: a good myth is one, which expresses the identity of a community, and provides it with a framework, within which to understand the world, and respond to it in appropriate ways. But, precisely because the central myths are so important to the life of the community, they are highly resistant to change, or discussion: to question the myth is to threaten the social fabric. As a community changes, its foundational myths can become its prison.

¹ Of the making of definitions there seems no end. J. W. Rogerson, *Myth in Old Testament Interpretation*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974, for example, lists 12 different ones before adding one of his own: stories or literature, which expressed the faith and worldview of a people. Definitions of the term "myth" depend largely on the interests of the writer; a broad functional definition, such as I am using here, occurs sufficiently often among other writers to justify its use.

² Quoted by Mary MacDonald, "Symbolism and Myth", in Ennio Mantovani, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions*, Point 6 (1984).

The best example of this process in the biblical record concerns the complex of stories, which comprise the Abraham myth (Gen 12-24),³ which, in some form or other, has been the foundation of Jewish identity for more than 2,500 years. The strong sense that they were “sons of Abraham”, set them apart from the other nations, preserved the integrity of the Jewish people through long periods of exile, occupation, and diaspora, which would have destroyed most communities, and formed their understanding of their place in the world. The example of Abraham’s trust in God’s promises, and patience, despite apparent setbacks (e.g., Gen 22), became the basis of their faith; and circumcision, their key cultic activity, was ascribed to his example (Gen 17). The Jews, as a community, were inseparable from the Abraham myth, which bore their identity, worldview, and values. This explains much of the opposition encountered by Jesus: His questioning of the value of the myth (John 8:31-59) led to a violent response, and probably contributed to His death. By questioning the value of descent from Abraham, He was threatening the very basis of Jewish identity, and so, their future as a people.⁴

But, by the time of Jesus, such a challenge was overdue. The Abraham myth had become less a focus for Jewish identity than a vehicle for its chauvinism, and a justification for the ever-increasing demands of the Law. In the primitive church, these attitudes, among Jewish Christians, caused serious problems, and it seems to have fallen to Paul to try to renegotiate the relationship between Jews, Gentiles, and God, as evidenced by the degree to which the subject dominates his writings. But, instead of confronting the myth as untrue, or invalid, he conducts a counter-myth, which uses the materials of the original story, but rearranges, and reinterprets, them to arrive at new conclusions.⁵ At no point, does he question the Jews’ claims to special status (see Rom 3:1-4), but he contends that the true descendants of Abraham are those who live by faith (Gal 3:6-9; Rom 4:13-18), and criticises the effectiveness of Jewish practices, as a means of sharing his blessings (Rom 2:28-29). Instead, he implies that, in baptism, all claims, based on descent, are nullified (Rom 6: 1-6; 7:1-6), and so, the way is clear for Jews and Gentiles, alike, to become the true children of God (Eph 2:11-22).

³ In referring to the story of Abraham as a myth, I am not implying that it is untrue. The point about a myth is that for practical purposes, it doesn’t matter if it is true or not. It works to create a culture, and so, on existential grounds, is accepted as “true”.

⁴ See also John the Baptist’s attitude in Matt 3:9, Luke 3:8.

⁵ According to some readings of his work, Paul did not so much present a new interpretation of the Abraham-myth, as represent the original, uncorrupted version. For our purposes, this distinction is academic, and the main point is that he departed from the accepted interpretation of his time.

Had Paul confined himself to attacking isolated outbreaks of legalism and exclusivism in the church, he probably would have lost his battle to gain equal status for Gentile Christians. The power of the myth lay in the fact that it was an integrated way of looking at the world, and functioned on a number of different levels at once. In order to break the destructive patterns of behaviour in the church, he had to construct a counter-myth, which, using the same materials and assumptions, and addressing the same issues, pointed to a different course of action. Any patterns of behaviour in a community, which are rooted in its foundational myth, will resist change, because the identity of the people depends on their faithfulness to the myth. It is only the construction of a counter-myth, which preserves the element of identity from the original myth, but prescribes a different pattern of behaviour, that makes a change of behaviour possible. The remainder of this paper describes, and evaluates, a counter-myth, which we constructed, initially, to try to prevent outbreaks of torture, but, eventually, to confront the dominant sorcery myth of Siane society.

Myth . . .

Investigation of Siane society⁶ has not yielded any signs of a “traditional religion”, in the theistic sense, although respect for, and fear of, ancestors and spirits has its place. Neither do the Siane rely much for their sense of identity on a mythical history of their origins – modern Siane identity, at any rate, is located largely in the here (this world) and now, in relationships of blood, marriage, and land rights, in customs, and language. As long as these relationships continue in harmony, it is assumed that the clan controls its own destiny, and can thrive, and grow, in security. For these reasons, although most clans have their stories of origin, and culture heroes, relatively little weight seems to be attached to them, and they cannot be said to embody the clan values, identity, and worldview. However, this cannot be said of the complex of interlinked stories, beliefs, and practices relating to sorcery (Pidgin: *sanguma*), as I hope will be made clear below. So the term “myth” seems justified, even though the complex lacks narrative structure, and seems to have little in common with, for example, the story of Abraham.

The Siane worldview presupposes a closed, orderly, and harmonious world, in which even such unpredictable events as war follow prescribed patterns, unless there is interference from “outside”, in which case, chaos and disorder quickly

⁶ The Siane valley straddles the border between Eastern Highlands and Chimbu Provinces. Siane-speakers number 30,000-40,000. Evangelism of the area, by both Anglicans and Lutherans, began in the mid-1950s.

follow. The quintessential “outsider” is an evil spirit, itself a rather minor creature, which, at times, may take up residence in a dog, cricket, or other creature of the grasslands, which takes possession of (almost always) a woman, and so, wreaks havoc within the clan. It is said to enter its “host”, either through the nostrils, or the fingernail-bed, and take up residence, either in the womb, or the temples, and “sorceresses” of this type are thought to gather in groups under a “queen”, in order to assault the clan, under the direction of their “spirits-familiar”. Thus, according to the myth, the immediate consequence of spirit-possession is the formation of a seditious secret society, threatening the clan’s regular power structure. The spirits are believed to feed on human livers, extracted from living victims, although exactly how this takes place is unclear.⁷ According to some accounts, the spirit enters an intermediate vehicle, usually a dog, to perform the necessary operation, and eat the liver itself, but others claim the women remove the liver and eat it. In either case, the extraction leaves no trace, but the victim falls ill for no apparent reason, and, unless the liver can be restored, soon dies.

Thus, any unexplained death is seen, not just as a loss to the clan, but as evidence of possible sorcery, with its subtext of clan vulnerability, and a threat to its power structure and identity. Whether or not the suspicion of sorcery is acted upon, seems to depend on other, additional circumstances discussed below: if it is, the next step is to enquire of the body whether it was a victim of sorcery. Since almost anything (an insect settling on the body, small movements due to the onset of rigor mortis, an elusive smell) can serve as a positive answer from the dead man. And so, since the interview takes place indoors, in near darkness, confirmation of the clan’s suspicions is almost inevitable. In order to identify the culprits, the women are rounded up by the young men (usually at gun- and arrow-point), and interrogated. Suspicion naturally falls on those who had a grudge, or reason for one, against the deceased, but, if a confession is not forthcoming, further confirmation is sought from an external “white witch”, who, for a substantial fee, will identify the culprits.

The purging process now dramatically enters a new phase. The normal routines of the clan are swept away, as the leaders step aside, and, in effect, abdicate power to the young men, who, for the next few days or weeks, will

⁷ It is unclear, from the stories, whether “possession” is involuntary, or by invitation of the host. One stated aim of the “exorcism” is to deliver the woman of an unwelcome invader, but the fact that she later has to pay compensation to her victims’ families, presumes some moral responsibility on her part.

dominate all aspects of clan life. They arrest the sorceresses, and begin a process of “exorcism”, which rests upon the theory that pain inflicted on the sorceress is also felt by the inhabiting spirit, which, with sufficient pain, can be induced to leave. The evidence that the spirit has, indeed, been driven out, is that its former host makes a full confession of her own crimes, and names the other women involved.

A rope is tied under the arms, or around the neck, of the sorceress. This is passed over the rafters of the house, and tightened until she is suspended over the fire. As she is burnt, her thighs and biceps are pierced through with knives, and red-hot wires are passed through the wounds. If no “confession” results, the torture may continue all night, or she may die – in which case, it was the spirit, not the torture, which killed her to prevent her from talking. Since a “true” confession implicates other women, there is no natural end to the process, and the scope and intensity of the process could continue indefinitely – in one case virtually all the women of the clan were eventually accused – but, in practice, interest tends to flag after a few weeks of chaos and spasmodic activity, and the community returns to some degree of equilibrium.

Although the events described are very exceptional, and abnormal, in the life of the clan, they act out, test, and refine, the key beliefs and structures, which maintain its existence, and stories of sorcery, and its consequences circulate constantly to drive the message home. As already mentioned, Siane society operates on the presumption that, if its social relationships are well-ordered, and stable, its world will be predictable and friendly, but when they are disturbed, chaos and death rapidly follow. This worldview gives rise to both the *sanguma* myth, and its acting out, in the dissolution of clan structures, and anarchy, which accompany the clan’s response. The “normal” power structure in the Siane revolves around the older men, particularly those who were first-born, and have several grown-up sons of their own, who administer the community’s land, and so, have some measure of control over its economic life. Younger men have less status and unmarried “boys” virtually none, though these distinctions have become blurred, since male initiation died out, and the better-educated young men may now have disproportionate status. Right at the bottom of the social pyramid, are the women, who are viewed with suspicion, or even fear. This is partly because female fertility is, itself, seen as a magical, powerful property,⁸ but may be more to

⁸ Incidentally, the way the myth is constructed, reflects the “sacred geography” of the Siane, in which the mountain and the valley tend to be men’s and women’s domains, respectively. Men handle

do with the ambiguous relationship of women to the clan as a whole. Being patrilocal and patrilineal, men hold the land, and marry women from outside the clan; so, a married woman is, by definition, an outsider. Her loyalties are divided between her husband's clan and her own, which may be an enemy. Thus, in any given clan, the wives are a potential fifth column, threatening its leadership, and so its potency and future.

However, as already mentioned, not every unexplained death seems to confirm fears of sorcery. In the three cases, with which I have been involved, the following could be considered aggravating factors:

1. The leadership, and, therefore, the clan, was weak or divided, and this had a direct effect upon the well-being of its members. In one case, the lack of leadership had disrupted garden work, and so food supplies, and a succession of deaths, leading to the charge of sorcery, could otherwise have been blamed on the combined effects of heat, drought, and hunger. In the second, the leadership had lost control over some of the young men, who had committed a series of thefts against neighbouring clans. One spectacular theft involved more money than even the combined resources of the clan could repay, and the aggrieved clan had threatened sorcery in retaliation. Interestingly, this threat was not mentioned at all when sorcery was feared to have taken place! In the third case, the clan had been divided between two different candidates at the time of the national election, and the resulting fighting had led to a death. Accusations of sorcery began just a fortnight before compensation was due to be paid on the deceased, and so put the matter to rest.

Each of these cases could be read as an example of "scapegoating", i.e., the transfer of blame and punishment from the group, as a whole, to a powerless individual, or sub-group. The malaise in the clan is real, but the way the myth functions is to project blame away from the real culprits to those who cannot fight back.

hunting, karuka nuts, and bush materials – all from the mountain, and believe their ancestor-spirits congregate there. Men, alone, plant the phallic-shaped yams, which grow at higher altitudes. The valley is associated with red pandanus (linked to menstruation), the globular yams, planted exclusively by the women, and the sanguma spirits, which take the form of a valley-dwelling insect. When sorcery is discovered, it may be perceived as an invasion by the women's (valley) domain.

2. In every case observed, there was a large group of disaffected young men in the clan. Traditionally, these have no significant status in peacetime, and their alienation has been aggravated by the education system. Many of them have been sent away to high school, but dropped out, or failed to find work after graduation. They are often further marginalised by the older people, who worked hard to pay school fees, only to see their expectations of rich rewards come to nothing, and, as a result, may find it hard to pay bride price, or find a voice in the community. During a sorcery purge, however, they are promoted from the margins to the centre of society, and, for a few days, at least, rule the roost – possibly an incentive to inflate claims that sorcery has taken place. In this regard, it is interesting that two of the three cases took place during school holidays, when bored students added to their numbers.

Thus, it seems likely that underlying the immediate threat from sorcery is a more diffuse sense that all is not right with the clan. Clans, where there is a secure leadership, harmony, unity, and a feeling that the group is in control of its own destiny, are unlikely to overreact to an unexplained death, but in an atmosphere of dissatisfaction, frustration, fear, and community disintegration, the search is on for a scapegoat, to be purged in an outbreak of anarchy and violence. So, if the church is to bring the gospel into the heart of Siane life, it must address not only the fear of sorcery, but the whole complex of community disorders, which contribute to the perception that fear has become a reality. This, of course, is a long-term pastoral challenge, beyond the scope of this paper – ultimately, the clan must be refocused around the worship of, and allegiance to, Christ, if fear is to be banished for good. But a counter-myth, which uses the same stories, in light of the knowledge of Christ, to reach a different set of conclusions, can help to begin to bring this about.

... and Counter-myth

Up to the present day, the church has had little success in countering the *sanguma* myth in the Siane, and, if anything, sorcery trials are becoming both more frequent and more destructive. This is probably because the church's critique has always focused on a single issue rather than the whole package of ideas and perceptions, which comprise the myth, and, through it, the basis of Siane society.

Thus, some clergy doubt the existence of sorcery. Although they may receive formal support from a few clan members, who don't wish to be seen as "primitive", my own experience is that the issue is simply not negotiable, and this

is to be expected, where a myth is at stake. Because it represents a whole integrated worldview, the myth is perceived as subjectively, existentially, true, and is not up for argument. Casting doubt on its validity simply confirms the view of the people that, as outsiders, church workers cannot understand, and, therefore, should be excluded from the discussion.

A second approach, is to criticise the torturing of the women as being incompatible with Christianity, but this fails to take the problem seriously. If sorcery actually has taken place (and, from the Siane point of view, by this stage, it has), there is every reason to believe that more people will die, unless the spirits are driven out. In such a case, a little suffering, or even death, is a small price to pay, and it is irresponsible of the church to urge the clan simply to do nothing, and open itself to possible extinction when a remedy is to hand.

Thirdly, some church workers abandon attempts to confront the myth, and limit themselves to trying to mitigate its effects: urging moderation on the young men, bathing the victims, as they hang over the fire, finding medical attention for them, and helping them to run away, if threatened. Obviously inadequate, as a Christian response, this strategy also seems rather self-defeating. Since the whole point of the “exorcism” depends on inflicting sufficient pain, reducing the intensity of the pain may simply mean it must be continued for longer.

None of these solutions has been well received by the people, and, if *sanguma* stories are, indeed, part of the foundational myth, it is easy to see why this should be so. Each of these approaches detracts from the myth, without putting anything back. It is perceived as weakening the clan, by neutralising the power of the myth, without supplying any alternative. A counter-myth must be provided, which addresses all of the same issues as the myth it seeks to replace – the destiny, security, order, and well-being of the clan – and also offers a remedy for the immediate problem of sorcery.

The counter-myth, described here, consists of two parts: a critique of the traditional view of *sanguma*, in its own terms, and a Christian alternative, which seeks to remedy both the immediate problem and the underlying insecurities. It rests on a strongly dualistic view of good and evil, and could be summarised thus:

1. Traditional solutions are not, and can never be, effective against sorcery, because they deal only with the surface phenomena, and ignore the root of the problem.

2. The root of sorcery is Satan, who has been made honorary leader of the clan, by the whole clan's misdeeds.
3. The solution is to drive Satan from the clan, and replace him with Jesus, who will protect it from all evil.

The whole was presented as a series of parables from Siane daily life.

1. Sorcery was likened to kunai grass in the garden, which will grow again, as often as it is cut, for as long as its taproot remains in the ground. Sorcery has a shoot (woman), and a root (Satan), and, however many women are "exorcised", the problem will persist and thrive, unless Satan is expelled. Furthermore, the use of violence (Satan's tool) to drive out sorcery (Satan's tool) is as futile as trying to douse a house fire with kerosene. Places, where there are regular purgings of this kind, continue to be plagued with sorcery.
2. Jesus wishes to ring-fence this clan in such a way as to prevent any evil spirits from entering.⁹ But the clan, itself, rejects this solution: members, themselves, break Jesus' fence, in order to follow Satan into sin, and, themselves, invite Satan to share the life of the clan. If he then makes himself at home, and behaves according to his nature, it is the fault of the whole clan. The only remedy is for all to unite to drive him out, and restore the clan under Jesus' protection.
3. This means the whole community must repent, and be restored to the church. The act of repentance had three parts, beginning with a sprinkling with holy water to drive out the evil spirits. After this, at the insistence of the people, each woman had to come and swear on the Bible that she would avoid any involvement with sorcery, and this reflected a popular belief that, having sworn in this way, an attempt by the women to harm others would only harm themselves. Finally, all were received back into communion in the church.

So far, this approach has been tried on three occasions, where the inquisition and exorcism process had already begun, and, in each case, it seemed to bring the

⁹ Useful support for this point derives from the confessions of some sorceresses, who claimed that they were unable to invade the body of a devout Christian – when they tried, they were prevented, at the wrist or neck, by a whirling, propeller-like object.

process to a halt, restore equilibrium to the clan, and bring about a reconciliation with the church. In these respects, it can be viewed as a “success”, though the longer-term benefits are harder to assess. It is encouraging that the counter-myth has given, and gives rise, to spirited theological discussion, which suggests it is being internalised, and is becoming part of the clan worldview, but it remains to be seen whether it will become truly part of clan life. The long-term transformation, as already noted, will depend more on committed pastoral care.

Inasmuch as the intervention has already been a “success”, I believe it is because the counter-myth functions in the same way as the myth it seeks to replace. It confronts insecurity and disorder in the clan, and supplies a remedy. By emphasising community faithfulness, it restores the role of the leaders, as responsible for ensuring the Christian commitment of their people, for the sake of the clan. It gives the whole clan a sense of control over its future, and preserves a place for the youth, in rounding up the women (at gunpoint!) for the act of repentance. Most of all, it gives a theological framework, and, in the church, a focus of unity, with which the clan can work through its problems.

Critique and Conclusions

Although the myth-counter-myth approach seems effective in this case, some important questions remain. It could be argued that it falls short, because of its essentially conservative nature – it restores the traditional power structure, without questioning it. In particular, it fails to question the role of women as statusless, marginal, and potentially threatening, and so, leaves them as potential scapegoats for the future. This is, to some extent, because of the way the approach developed, and was used, as an emergency intervention, to prevent further suffering and death, rather than as a systematic vision of a restored Siane society. But the status of women is, in any case, not susceptible to much change at the moment, for, as long as the men hold the land, and the women have to move to marry, they will remain outsiders in the clan. Even our contention that the men were as much to blame as the women in “inviting Satan into the clan” proved to be the hardest item for the Siane men to accept.

A more serious question, in the long run, is whether the counter-myth, as well as being useful, is also “true”, or whether the basic character of the gospel has been lost, in the attempt to give it the same properties as the original myth. Is this lurid, magical, dualistic story the gospel at all? This, of course, is an old missiological problem: whether it is possible to change the form of the gospel message (even by translating it into another language) without destroying its

content. The best that can be said, in this case, is that the central gospel message (Christ is able and willing to save all who come to Him) is clear enough. The lurid trappings are only a means to communicate this vital fact, and, in themselves, do not say anything wrong about God.

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