"Sanguma em i stap (*Sanguma* is real)"

Ethnographic citizenship and epistemic exclusion in Tok Pisin sorcery stories since 1945

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Abstract: In Papua New Guinea, people's political participation takes place in contact zones among many different cultures, and public discourse circulates only when people create interfaces between disparate languages, systems of knowledge, and value orientations. Citizenship rests on one's capacity to translate oneself; yet translations are not treated equally in mass print media. In the same way that the national creole language Tok Pisin is subject to competing ideological evaluations about the nature of multilingualism, Tok Pisin public discourse is characterized by competing tendencies toward epistemic inclusion and exclusion. In this paper, I present several different frames found in Tok Pisin public discourse which privilege different epistemological positions on sorcery and other occult topics. In each case, talk of the occult involves both an openness to differences in knowledge and a tendency to treat particular knowledge claims as beliefs (*bilip*) to be overcome. While *bilip* has become the dominant way to constrain public talk about the occult, I also show that the *bilip* can be reinterpreted to index a moral stance of mutual recognition of differences as well. Competing tendencies of inclusion and exclusion in Tok Pisin discourse also feed into and reinforce each other. The struggle over ontological recognition will thus always be a part of creole cosmopolitanism in PNG. **Keywords:** occult, belief, creoles and pidgins, media, citizenship.

Introduction: Jimmy Kain's story

In 2017, the Papua New Guinea *Post-Courier*, a national newspaper of Papua New Guinea (PNG), reported that three people were being detained at a local police station in the capital Port Moresby. They had been accused of, and had confessed to, using "sorcery" to kill a young boy who had died recently at the hospital (Arnold 2017a). The next day, the paper reported that the relatives of boy had staged a public protest (Arnold 2017b).

[**Slide** — **Jimmy Kain's story**]

Under the headline "Community rallies to weed out sorcerers," the article quotes a statement by the boy's uncle, named Jimmy Kain, who speaks in English and an urban variety of Tok Pisin, a national creole language:

> "Sanguma em i stap (Sanguma is real). From the government, you would notice that they are focusing on the violence against alleged sorcerers and their human rights, but what about the other side of the issue? As a government we have to come down and see the real issue that is affecting our people. Sorcery related killings are happening everywhere," said Mr Kain. "Mi laik appeal long gavman of the day, disla sorcery act em i stap pinis. Long dai blong disla innocent pikinini, mipla laikim osem gavman i mas wokim sampla action long enforsim disla lo (We want to appeal to the government of the day, the Sorcery Act is already there.)"[1]

Kain's statement illustrates one of the crucial dilemmas of citizenship in PNG. As a post-colonial country, PNG has always embraced its cultural diversity. Its public spaces and institutions are assumed to be zones of contact among profound differences. Unlike many other liberal states—where the establishment of a political sphere rests on the evacuation of concrete forms of belonging from civil society—people of PNG can claim public standing on the basis of their diverse, particular communities. Yet they are only recognized when their communal identities can be made intelligible in an official metalanguage of difference in which they are read as a traditional foundation that individual citizens transcend. People are called upon to recognize each other in contact zones, but to learn to see difference in the same external, ethnographic lens of the state (Schram 2018, 203). A public demand for government action on sorcery instead of sorcery accusation is a rare instance in which these two alternative modalities of citizenship are directly opposed. More often, these two modalities underlie every instance of public discourse in Papua New Guinea.

[**Slide — Two different metapragmatic operations**]

In PNG, public discourse depends on establishing interdiscursive links to both of these modalities. Specifically, two distinct metapragmatic operations come into play:

(1) the identification of common grounds for communication in diffusely and unevenly shared languages, and

(2) the typification of the persons who occupy these meeting places as a basis for containing, commensurating, and ranking differences among them.

We can draw an analogy between the politics of language contact and the politics of knowledge. Based on this analogy, I will present several examples of news reports of *sanguma, posin, masalai,* and other occult forces in which we see these two operations at work to convene a creole reading public.

What I will show is that because both operations are necessary to create public discourse, neither can ever completely exclude the other. In recent years, mass journalism in PNG

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[1]The reporter only translates some of Jimmy Kain's quoted statement, and alters its meaning slightly. My own English translation of his full statement is: "I want to appeal to the government of the day, the Sorcery Act is already there. Of the death of this innocent child, we(excl.) demand that the government take action to enforce this law."

frames people's differences in knowledge as various kinds of cultural belief. This forms the basis for people's exclusion from full recognition. Yet this criterion for legitimate knowledge itself depends on a space of mutual translation in order to be instantiated. Thus in the act of establishing a normative model of a political actor, an alternative kind of public space is imagined in the transvaluation of the normative discourse of political agency. In the final section, I present an example of this kind of conjoined counterpublic.

[Slide — **Tok Pisin and the politics of knowledge in PNG**]

Tok Pisin and the politics of knowledge in PNG

The production and circulation of public talk in PNG, I argue, involves the same kinds of ideologies of language that intervene in the forms of multilingualism in PNG, and in this paper I draw an analogy between the two. Jourdan (2008) writes that the history of contact languages consists of both stories of the negotiation of meaning and the imposition of meaning. For Jourdan and Angeli (2014), all Pacific pidgins and creoles have been equally shaped by two competing ideologies of multilingualism. The ideology of "reciprocal multilingualism" presumes the relativity of each way of speaking in a contact situation. Speakers accommodate each other equally, and so bridges among languages are formed on a equivocal basis. However, an ideology of "hierarchical multilingualism" positions languages of colonial power as a metalinguistic standard. This ideology of hierarchical multilingualism remains the basis for the relative lack of legitimacy of many pidgin and creole languages in postcolonial nations (Jourdan and Angeli 2014).

Situations of language contact are also situations of epistemological pluralism. Thus this conflict between reciprocal and hierarchical multilingualism informs how one uses pidgins and creoles to communicate with other people with fundamentally different theories of the world.

[Slide — **Implicit and explicit typifications of the occult**]

For example, when writing about the occult in Tok Pisin, it is common to list several terms which all refer to overlapping ideas, including *sanguma, puripuri, malira, posin, blek mejik*, and *blekpawa*, among others (e.g. Gibbs 2015; Yakai 2012). Each of these forms was originally borrowed from either English (e.g. *posin*) or a vernacular. An implicit relation of synonymy is posited in their juxtaposition (Rumsey 2014). When words are derived from English, they are reinterpreted in this space of mutual translation to serve as common ground between people with different ways of speaking, as for example in the pun on *blek* in *blek mejik* and *blekpawa*. Another English-derived word *soseri* (from sorcery), however, is a marker of a prestige register. Its use changes the multilingual context for discourse on occult topics because as a prestige term it also indexes English as a dominant code and metalanguage.

This register shift also elicits an asymmetric "semantic ascent" (Quine [1967] 1992). In considering how people with fundamentally different theories of the world can find common ground, Quine argues that one must identify the ontological commitments of each theory (Quine 1948). Yet if different theories are each committed to distinct ontologies, then one cannot consider another theory without abandoning the commitment that one's own theory makes to a specific ontology. To solve this problem, Quine suggests

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that both sides withdraw to a "semantical plane," to assess the reference of the linguistic forms in which theories are articulated rather than the existence denoted by these terms (Quine 1948, 35).[2] When people subordinate their Tok Pisin discourse to English semantics, however, the semantic ascent applies only to one side. The stereotypical speakers of other registers and their genres of occult knowledge are denied epistemic agency (Dotson 2014; see also Graber 2019). In his communicaton in a national public, for instance, Jimmy Kain bears the burden of aligning *sanguma* with *soseri*. Readers of the national newspaper, however, need not make any ontological commitment to *sanguma* as anything other than Kain's word for his beliefs.

When creole languages become media for public participation, their competing tendencies of reciprocal recognition and epistemic exclusion submit the public agenda to what Bilinda Straight calls an "ontological micropolitics" (Straight 2008, 850). Postcolonial news media turn to creoles as common languages, and thus grant access to as many members of the public as possible. Yet members of diverse, postcolonial publics do not all have equal control over the metasemiotic operations through which their statements are validated (Arndt 2010; Graham 2011; see also Eisenlohr 2007). On the one hand, as a medium of interlinguistic communication, speakers of Tok Pisin can ground their public communication in egalitarian relations of mutual recognition. In PNG, many members of the Tok Pisin public want to place *sanguma* and other kinds of invisible, magic powers on the public agenda. Yet when they do so in Tok Pisin discourse they necessarily face a dilemma between inclusion and credibility.

I will now present two examples of public discourse on the occult in two different kinds of print journalism in contemporary PNG. In each example, the ontological micropolitics of a creole public plays out in two different ways.

[Slide — Wantok Niuspepa]

Belief as stigma of difference

The first example comes from *Wantok Niuspepa*, a weekly Tok Pisin newspaper for whom the occult poses an acute problem. As a national, mass-market publication, it strives to speak in an anonymous voice from nowhere. Articles bring together several different views on its topic, but tend to select the voices of official sources as "authorized knowers" (Fishman 1978, 96). Other views of the same events are, by contrast, attributed to specific people who have a limited, partial and subjective perspective on the matter. An asymmetric semantic ascent is thus an inherent part of narrating events as news. Yet, *Wantok* embraces Tok Pisin as a grassroots language. The newspaper itself was founded as part of a project to cultivate Tok Pisin as a national language for Papua New Guinea (Romaine 1992, 49–51; see also Zimmermann 2011, 78).

[Slide — A 2012 article in Wantok]

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[2]This mutual withdrawal from ontological incommensurability to a common ground of symbols is arguably the classic move of the ethnographer, who as Spiro says, "[makes] the familiar strange, and the strange familiar" by translating the worlds of both observer and observed into "a third set of concepts - that is, anthropological concepts" (Spiro 1990, 49).

Here is an example: A lengthy 2012 feature article in *Wantok* by Mathew Yakai describes several recent instances in which accusations of black magic and sorcery caused government agencies and corporations to suspend work on major projects. The article opens by asking whether *posin* and *sanguma* are good or not, noting that these are *pasin* used to kill others. It then says:

> **Bilip bilong posin sanguma daunim divelopmen**
> The belief in magic sorcery defeats development

> [...]

> **Long PNG, bilip bilong posin, sanguma, marila o puripuri i bikpela tru long planti rurel komyuniti.**
> In PNG, the belief in *posin*, *sanguma*, *marila*, or *puripuri* is very important in many rural communities.

> **Maski wol i stap insait long 21 Senseri we bikpela senis i wok long kamap insait long wol dispela bilip i stap strong yet long planti rurel komyuniti long PNG.**
> Even though the world is in the 21st century, and major changes are happening around the world, this belief still remains powerful in many rural communities of PNG.

Yakai's framing of the topic relies on both interdiscursive operations:

· **First** he mentions several different names, each referring to many different unseen entities, but all overlapping with one another. An ideology of reciprocal multilingualism creates a field of mutual translation. The category in question is open to input from people of diverse knowledge.

· **Second**, however, these objects of diffusely shared knowledge are classified as *bilip* (beliefs). In other *Wantok* articles, these colloquial terms are united as species of *soseri* (sorcery), that is, a type of thing that people believe exists but in fact does not. Whatever the occult is, it is a belief held by others in contrast to Yakai and his readers, who occupy an supposedly acultural position.

Yakai's discourse assumes a rural–urban division in PNG in which rural villages alone exhibit the belief in the occult. The article consists mainly of several descriptions of recent incidents in which people accused others of sorcery and magic. In each incident, sanguma is always a *bilip*, a *stori* (story), *tingting* (thinking) or otherwise qualified as the view of the accuser speaking from a specific cultural background.

These episodes are all presented as anomalies in an era in which, Yakai also says, anyone in PNG can access "good information" and "knowledge." The article is accompanied by a photograph of a group of shirtless PNG men, some seated and others standing, eyes

cast downward and away from the camera while surrounded by uniformed PNG police officers.[3] The caption states that these men have been arrested as suspects in the killings of seven people. Yakai also simply notes that the men's community "has no development and today remains in the dark." In Yakai's psychologizing discourse, people like the rural men photographed are **not** his audience. They are a social problem to be addressed.

Yet other uses of *bilip* to frame occult topics pull the reader back into a public based on egalitarian and mutual recognition.

[**Slide — The two sides of belief**]

The two sides of belief

As Joel Robbins notes, the term belief in English and Bilip in Tok Pisin has two distinct senses, either "belief that" something is true or a "belief in" someone in the sense of trust (Robbins 2007, 14–15). When people's knowledge of the occult is framed as *bilip*, it elicits an asymmetric semantic ascent when it relies on the first sense of belief. Yet the second sense of belief can be a basis for instantiating a new discursive frame of the occult. This in turn establishes a new relationship to readers (see also Andersen 2017). There is hence no possibility of unbelief as a neutral and detached position on what is described, since it entails an alternative ethical stance. An example of this alternative sense of *bilip* as a frame for the occult comes from the Tok Pisin news reporting of a provincial government publication, *Simbu Nius*.

Unlike *Wantok*, provincial government newspapers of the 1980s and 90s had a specific mandate to cover rural news in a single province. To do so, its reporters often drew on people living in rural communities as sources rather than the "authorized knowers" whose voices are usually favored in mass journalism (Fishman 1978; Tuchman 1978). The narratives of events that these sources provide become part of the language of the news in these publications, and creates an alternative kind of contact among readers.

[**Slide — A 1988 Simbu Nius article**]

One *Simbu Nius* article is overtly presented as a kind of news article. It has a headline which states its topic directly: "Spirit kills man" (Daka 1988). It is accompanied by pictures and a caption of the man in question, who it says was attacked by an invisible spirit and died. Its lead paragraph, however, frames the story equivocally:

> **Masalai kilim man indai**
> Spirit kills man
>
> **Sampela taim igo pinis long Fonde 9 dei bilong dispela mun June ibin gat wanpela man long Kunabau ibin indai.**
> Earlier, on Thursday, the 9th of this month June, there was a man of Kunabau who died.

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[3]Although the article only hints at the circumstances, these men were accused of being members of a "cult" which claimed to have magic that could identify sorcerers. Their mass arrest in a dawn raid was widely reported in the national and international media, including in *Wantok* (Wantok Niuspepa 2012).

> **Indai bilong man, Wagluo Fabian krismas bilong em 63 yias old na wanpela lida man bilong Kunabau eria, ol man iting olsem em ino indai nating.**
> Of the death of the man, Wagluo Fabian, 63, and a leader from the Kunabau area, people think that he did not simply die.

> **Igat dispela bilip bilong masalai istap yet wantaim ol lain istap long dispela hap olsem na ol ting olsem masalai ibin kilim indai late Wagluo Fabian.**
> They have a belief in a spirit that lives with the group who live in this area, and so they think that the spirit killed the late Wagluo Fabian.

The article initially attributes the claim of spirit to unnamed others as a shared "belief" (*bilip*). The word *masalai* is voiced as part of their description in contrast to the reporter's. Yet, notably, both the death of the man and the so-called belief about his death are given equal importance in the establishment of the topic of this story.

[Slide — **Narrative sequence in "Spirit kills man"**]

The second paragraph proceeds to narrate the events leading up to the death much as a typical news article would, but in a way that leaves the facts open to interpretation. A nonspiritual explanation is always attributed to specific people. The report then states that the man died at home two days later. It continues by noting that in the man's final days, neighbors saw a group of finely-dressed men and women standing by his door, but that people in the house saw nothing. The people, the reporter says, were a "*lain masalai*" (a group of spirits) and the man died at the moment they gathered at the man's house door.

At each turn, the seen and the unseen are explicitly paralleled. He faints, but no cause is found. Strange people visit him, but they only visible to some and invisible to others. Here, when the reporter says that the group seen at the door were *masalai*, he is explicating one group's view as one of two possible interpretations. Thus, and very much unlike a typical news report, the narrative draws attention to the uncertainty of any one explanation. It does not put emphasis on particular people's views, indicating to readers which perspective is the most reliable. Rather, the sources for this story are positioned conspicuously as all equally unauthorized knowers, and the reader is asked to decide whom to believe.

[Slide — **The byline?**]

The article concludes with a statement that distinguishes the report from straight news:

> **Kaunsola Aglua Daka [sic] i bringim kamap dispela igo long Simbu Nius na tok lukaut bilong em igo long arsait lain istap namel long ol Kombuku bilong Kunabau olsem ol mas raun stret long bush bilong ol na noken brukim lo bilong tumbuna, nogut bai ol kamap birua bilong masalai gen.**
> Councillor[4] Aglua Daka [sic] revealed this to *Simbu Nius* and his warning for outside groups living among the Kombuku of Kunabau is that they must

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[4]A councillor (*kaunsola*) is an elected representative of a rural community.

> travel straight through their bush and they should not break the traditional
> laws, or else a spirit attack will happen again.

Under this final sentence is an apparent byline "By: Agua Daka." The same name is also listed on the *Simbu Nius* masthead as a driver for the newspaper.[5] Details on how this article was composed are impossible to reconstruct, but it seems that in one way or another Agua Daka is able to play a dual role in this story, speaking as both a reporter and a source. He interviews himself. He thus also straddles two distinct ontological commitments.

From this position, he specifies the importance of *masalai* in these stories for readers. People who read them should not simply be informed of the deaths and illnesses, or the *masalai* who caused them, but should see them as warnings about their own behavior. The use of *bilip* as a frame changes the relationship between Daka and readers. If there are many possible, equally credible and equally uncertain explanations of these events, then readers must choose what to believe. They cannot however take the view that it does apply to them; there is no opportunity for secular readers to lift *masalai* to the semantic plane while leaving their own ontological categories unbracketed. *Bilip* expands to afford egalitarian and reciprocal recognition of divergent realities.

[**Slide — Conclusion**]

Conclusion: PNG's complex civic competences

The ontological micropolitics at work here can be related in a more general way to tensions over models of what Cramer and Toff (2017) call models of "civic competence" in democratic societies everywhere. Cramer and Toff argue that liberal societies tend to favor an "information-based" model of what counts as legitimate public participation. In this model, public debate should take place in the context of absolute epistemic trust in media institutions (Hochschild and Einstein 2015). Yet, necessarily, people evaluate knowledge from particular, situated perspectives (Cramer and Toff 2017). Different people will reach divergent judgments about both the accuracy and relevance of knowledge they receive. The information-based model of civic competence thus also entails a degree of what Daukas (2006) calls "epistemic exclusion," that is, the denial of people's capacity to be knowledgeable.

In another, equally important way, however, the dynamics of Tok Pisin ontological micropolitics work differently than in liberal multicultural societies. While in some ways PNG has cultivated a national identity as a creole society, and often invoked Tok Pisin as a symbol of this national culture, it has also enforced what I have called "ethnographic citizenship" as a basis for recognition by the state (Schram 2018, 203). If Tok Pisin is a site of colonial and postcolonial double consciousness, it is not so much because people's ontological commitments are denied, but that their own knowledge of themselves is alienated from them. Tok Pisin is doubly common property and communicative capital.

In closing then, I want to mention one especially difficult problem raised by this topic. In this paper I have not considered the knowledge and experience of people who are ac-

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[5]The same person is mentioned elsewhere in the paper as the elected councillor of this community, and so "Aglua Daka" is in fact a typo (Simbu Nius 1987, 1989).

cused of *sanguma* in the public of their local communities. We can't think then that the asymmetric semantic ascent applied to people's accusations of *sanguma* is the only kind of epistemological exclusion in play here. People accused of *sanguma* deny the accusation, but are often not heard or recognized. Violence of this kind is not only horrifying but acutely unjust. Understanding both the reasons for and solutions to the problem of sorcery killings are both very difficult tasks, and call for sensitive research and deep reflection. What I would like to add based on this study of public talk of the occult is simply this: In an environment in which the statement "*Sanguma* is a belief" is the only valid form the topic of the occult can take, then the statements "*Sanguma* is real" and "I am not *sanguma*" are both rendered invalid. If there is any hope for justice, then when people say they are not *sanguma*, their words need to be affirmed by everyone, including people who do not share the same ontological commitments.

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