

Brief Communications

SORCERY ON IFALUK

A few years ago, in reviewing *An Atoll Culture: Ethnography of Ifaluk in the Central Carolines* by my esteemed friends, Edwin G. Burrows and Melford E. Spiro, I noted that the authors had reported the absence of sorcery on Ifaluk. For two reasons, it was hard to accept their findings. First, our general knowledge of supernatural systems of belief tells us that sorcery is almost universal throughout the primitive world; secondly, black magic has been reported for other islands in this part of Micronesia. After fretting for some time over this inconsistency, I feel that I am now in a position to offer data indicative of the presence of aggressive magic in the Ifaluk scheme of things. The implications of my findings go beyond the mere correction of a field report, and Professor Spiro may want to revise his theory of the role of evil spirits as an outlet for personal hostility in the atoll in question (see Spiro 1952). It is true that my evidence does not come from first hand research on Ifaluk itself, for I have not been able to visit that island group during my current field trip to Ulithi Atoll, where this communication is being written. But the two atolls are close both geographically and culturally, and the reader can judge for himself the value of findings uncovered through the indirect means I have employed.

My presentation is chronological. In discussing sorcery with two highly reliable informants, I bluntly raised the question of its reported absence on Ifaluk. The younger man, Iamalamai, immediately expressed astonishment at the allegation. Pressed for documentation of his skepticism he could offer little more than an opinion derived from his general knowledge of this part of the Carolines, as well as visits to Ifaluk itself; but even though I subjected him to close questioning in my search for something more substantial and he was unable to supply it, he remained unshaken in his conviction that his position was tenable even if derived from little more than his knowledge of the over-all situation as he knew it from a few specific places. Then, unexpectedly, for I had never had an open admission of sorcery on Ulithi even after two previous field trips, he cited an instance to show that the black art could be prevalent and yet concealed from the outsider. The example he chose was discrete because it involved two sorcerers from Eauripik and Woleai, respectively, but their conflict had occurred on Ulithi after each had become jealous over the other's skill in canoe building. I listened to this admission with some amusement, for I had previously been led to form the conclusion that the strong palliatives against black magic on Ulithi were to protect one against Yapese sorcerers; but I had read between the lines, as it were, and had accepted this as a diplomatic Ulithian way of avoiding a head-on meeting of the issue.

The older informant, Melchethal, wasted no time on opinion but went straight to the facts. He had made three trips to Ifaluk, the first being about

the mid-thirties during the Japanese administration when he went with his wife to see her maternal relatives. He stayed approximately a year. The second and third times were in the earlier years of the American administration, and on each of these occasions he stayed about three to four months. It is noteworthy that his wife's mother is from Ifaluk, although she had died before he ever went there. It should be apparent that these three trips have given Melchethal, a highly observant and well-informed man, a reasonably intimate familiarity with Ifaluk, which in any case has always had a fair degree of interchange with other islands.

On the occasion of his second trip, which I estimate to have been about 1954, he heard that during the war with Japan, two men from Ifaluk named Ienefel and Therulubwong were on Yap and for some reason became mutually embittered. They performed sorcery against each other. Therulubwong died immediately on Yap, while Ienefel died some months later on Ifaluk. Both had abdominal ailments. On being asked by me if the men might not have learned their sorcery on Yap, my informant said that this was impossible because such magical ritual is passed on only from parent to child. On being asked if the men might not have hired Yapese to do their work for them, he said that while such vicarious aggression is possible this is not how he heard the account on Ifaluk. Without hesitation, he then told of another case he had heard on the occasion of the same visit. A man named Rolemar who lived on the atoll tried repeatedly to seduce a married woman. She would continually agree to meet him in the woods at night but would never keep the rendezvous. After each occasion Rolemar would see her and complain, but she would retort that she had gone to the assigned spot and left when he did not appear. Once, after arranging another tryst, the woman told her husband about the matter. The husband went to the place and put on a wrap around skirt to give the impression he was his wife. When Rolemar approached and discovered that he had been tricked he became so angry that in retaliation he performed black magic against the woman. She died, apparently after a few months, but the sorcerer himself had died shortly before, fulfilling a Carolinian belief that those who sorcerize others are themselves doomed to die—a matter whose logic we need not explore here. Rolemar had a daughter, and she lives permanently now in the village of Mogmog where I make my headquarters while on Ulithi. When my informant suggested that that we should interview her, I decided against doing so on the grounds that it would be indelicate to discuss such an embarrassing episode with a person so closely involved.

Melchethal added that he had become a Christian many years ago and had become so imbued with his new religion that he had accepted an invitation by the new missionary for the islands of the area to convert the people of Ifaluk. This he tried to do during his second visit. Among his arguments to them he said that the people should give up sorcerizing because it was this that made Ifaluk more ridden with yaws and other diseases than other islands. They admitted the great prevalence of black magic and promised to mend their ways. We must note, then, that the matter was openly discussed. Melchethal says

that in doing so he repeatedly used the Ulithian word for sorcery, *hasupsup*, as well as its Ifaluk variant, *hososou*. (On asking him how he reconciled his present disbelief in sorcery with the use of the concept to admonish the people of Ifaluk, he said that he recognized the confusion in logic but had resorted to expediency in order to correct a bad situation.) In any case, there were no protestations of innocence.

Two days after the above interview there came additional verification of the presence of sorcery on the atoll. Melchethal reported that over the week end he had decided that it would not be inappropriate after all to question Rolemar's daughter, whose name is Ilchemal, and had accordingly interviewed her at some length. I have trained Melchethal, who has been my principal informant during two field trips to Ulithi, to do questioning for me, and I have complete confidence in his ability and integrity; but in this case I grilled him step by step as to his method of extracting the information, his accuracy in remembering the facts, the veracity and reliability of the informant herself, the names of the persons involved, and so on.

In somewhat condensed form, this is what he reported back to me: The woman, named Ilchemal (whose age I estimate to be about thirty-five), said that both white and black magic exist on Ifaluk and are the same as on Ulithi. On being pressed for instances, she at first pleaded ignorance, but after some persuasion from Melchethal, who is an elderly man and a relative by marriage, she told of a family that several times moved from one place to another on Ifaluk after one of its members became ill or died. This was because it suspected sorcery but could not pinpoint the magician and therefore took this diffuse method of protecting itself. The family had even gone to the trouble of performing divination through the complicated system of palm leaf knots, known in the Carolines as *bwe*. After some further pressure had been put on her, the woman recalled another instance. A female chief called Lawichmel (who is related to Melchethal's wife) went one day to the swamp garden and stepped into another woman's taro patch. The other woman, whose name was Ilemelewer, took the soil the chieftess had stepped on and performed a black ritual over it. The leg of the chieftess became greatly swollen from elephantiasis. The informant said that this story, and the one to follow, were told to her when she was a young woman, at the close of the Japanese administration. There was a beautiful woman named Letamelsei. Her relatives used to sing songs extolling her great beauty, and would even follow her about, singing. This created criticism among the people of Ifaluk, so these relatives called a halt to their singing. But shortly afterwards the girl became afflicted with yaws and lost the flesh from her nose. The people said that this was the work of a sorcerer, although it was impossible to suspect any one person because so many people had been jealous of the girl. Then the informant came around to mention the death of her own father, Rolemar. When he became fatally ill, Ilchemal was a pre-pubescent girl and when she would attend to her father she would hear those gathered about say that he had been sorcerized. He had a swollen leg that exuded much pus (it was not elephantiasis), and he died after two or three

months. Beyond this, she added nothing. The question of Rolemar's own sorcery against the woman who had tricked him was not brought up. The interview between my worker and this informant ended with her assertion that since the present missionary began his activities on Ifaluk, there was no more sorcery, but that before this she had been one of the only eight Christians on the atoll, the others being a man named Uichilior and another named Tawerier, together with his family. It should be kept in mind that the conversion of the people of Ifaluk began after Burrows and Spiro left. Melchethal says that when he went there around 1954 to aid Father Walter in his work, he prepared thirty-seven or thirty-eight people for acceptance into the Church.

There is little doubt that the kinds of evidence I have presented could be expanded by further research on Ulithi, but I shall make only one more observation. After the above data had been collected, I chanced to note that in a tale being told to me by a storyteller, the people of Ulithi engaged a man from Ifaluk to perform some black magic for them. On asking the narrator, who knew nothing of my interest in the matter in question, why they had appealed to an outsider, she answered that it was well known that the natives of Ifaluk and Satawan-itu are the most skilled magicians of all, and that people from other islands know they perform sorcery.

If, then, black magic did exist on Ifaluk in 1947-1948 when Spiro did his research, it would undermine his argument that the people of the atoll, who must avoid open social aggression because intimate cooperation is indispensable in a tiny society, have shunned sorcery and turned to the *alus*, or spirits, in giving release to their hostilities. While I am willing to agree that spirits may have psychological value as scapegoats, I feel that sorcery is fully as important—at least for the time in question, for matters on both Ulithi and Ifaluk are undergoing rapid changes due to acculturative influences. Psychological hypotheses concerning psychological behavior often rest on speculative interpretation of facts, but in this case we are dealing with a question of the veracity of the facts themselves. It would be interesting to know what Professor Spiro, a colleague I hold in high respect, has to say on the subject.

Ulithi Atoll

WILLIAM A. LESSA

University of California, Los Angeles

REFERENCES CITED

BURROWS, EDWIN G. and MELFORD E. SPIRO

1953 An atoll culture: ethnography of Ifaluk in the Central Carolines. New Haven, Human Relations Area Files.

SPIRO, MELFORD E.

1952 Ghosts, Ifaluk, and teleological functionalism. *American Anthropologist* 54:497-503.

SORCERY, EVIL SPIRITS, AND FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS: A REJOINDER

I am not at all sure that my comments will be as "interesting" as Professor Lessa hopes, but as a partner in the Lessa-Spiro mutual admiration society and