

Black magic in the Banggai Archipelago and in Balantak

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This article describes black magic in the Banggai and Balantak regions of eastern Sulawesi, Indonesia, as practiced in the early twentieth century. In particular it describes the use of *doti* (poison magically and invisibly delivered that causes sickness and death), how people ascertained its presence, and the means they employed to counteract it. It was usual for corpses to be questioned about the cause of death. Suspected sorcerers were fined and sometimes murdered.

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by
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The lower the degree of spiritual development of a primitive people, the stronger their faith is in the power of mankind to harm his fellow creature by means of magic. This magic is based upon the power, which some people think they possess, to affect the body of others by magic means. Among such a spiritually primitive people, which only possesses a faint belief in the power which governs everything outside of mankind, illness and death are in the first place ascribed to the machinations of one man upon another. Even an angry glance or a wrathful word already have—according to his idea—a harmful effect upon the life of mankind, animals, and plants.

When you have gotten to know the daily life of a primitive people in the homes and villages more intimately, a westerner is amazed by the great measure of mutual envy among the people. As soon as one person is prospering more than another, the less advantaged are jealous and ill disposed towards the happy one. One can only avert such an atmosphere by having everyone share in that prosperity. If they wouldn't do so, they immediately run the risk (that is what they think) of being made ill by an angry glance, a curse, or by application of black magic, so that they would not profit anything from their prosperity. [p. 728]

This fear of arousing feelings of revenge in others has led to all sorts of prescriptions, e.g. that one should always share of the hunt with others who ask for it, that a pregnant woman may not directly refuse anything, and the like.

The distrust in associating with fellow men is so strong that they always suspect the other of having something in mind so as to do harm by black magic. Every involuntary movement of a man arouses suspicion, and at every indisposition they first consider if perhaps magic is involved.

Belief in black magic is very strong among the inhabitants of the Banggai Archipelago and in Balantak in eastern Celebes. It is difficult to find out which methods are applied in exercising black magic. Although everyone has heard enough about it, they hesitate to talk about it with others, especially foreigners. By revealing a lot about it you would run the risk of being suspected to be a practitioner of this art.

In order to do harm magically one needs something that has been in close contact with that person. You could compare this with 'giving smell' to police dogs. A thrown-away

tobacco quid, a piece of fruit in which someone has bitten, a cut-off nail, a fallen out hair, soil of a foot step, all such things can serve to do harm to someone.

In Banggai they usually handle such an object in the following way: they shake a bamboo stalk so hard that it snaps off; they put the object which comes from the person to be injured, or which has been in contact with him, into this bamboo. If they use the soil of a footstep, they first cut it seven times with a chopping knife, then they put seven spoonfuls into the tube. Then [p. 729] *tubele*,¹ a poison with which fish are drugged, sap of the *nggalipak* tree, and chili peppers are added. Then the tube is slowly burned while curses are expressed. This kind of magic is called *binodotanggon*.

One method which is often applied is conjuring an object into the body of another person. Such an object is made strong by means of magic formulas, and then is laid down on the road which the person to be injured usually takes, or they give it a place underneath his house. Such an object, which functions as poison, is called *doti* once it has passed into the body of that person. The word *doti* is used in nearly the whole of Celebes, What it consists of people don't say; everyone seems to have his own way of preparing it.

The Banggai people do not know witches, whose malicious inner being leaves the body in order to prey upon the liver of their fellow man, or werewolves, which can change themselves into all sorts of animals. But when a fly is suddenly settling on someone with a lot of buzz, while everywhere else no flies are to be seen, or when a house gecko falls on the floor of the house with a heavy rap, they are already frightened, and think that possibly in this way *doti* has been carried into the house. When in due course one of the housemates falls ill, then the suspicion has become certainty.

People sometimes use a cat in black magic in order to kill his fellow man. The animal is first spoken to, and they order it to scratch the soul of the person to be injured. After that they secure it in a used cook pot, and cleave the pot and the animal into two halves with one stroke of the machete.

The exercise of black magic is considered so widespread in Banggai that they don't have particular magicians. They suppose that the priests, *talapu*, are acquainted with all sorts of secret means, and they appeal to them in order to receive instruction in [p. 730] magic. People with red-rimmed eyes are immediately suspected as persons who, by their envious and antisocial mind, are particularly out to kill others with *doti*. Moreover, someone who scrabbles about under someone else's house, or walks about on his own, is immediately suspected of bad intentions, and when in due course someone in that house, near where he wandered around, or someone whom he met on his ramble, falls ill, it immediately stands firm that this has come about by the *doti* of the suspicious person. When two men have been quarrelling together, and in due course one of them becomes unwell, they consider it certain that he has been 'poisoned' by the other, especially when the sick is giving up blood, and the nails of his fingers become black. Sometimes

¹ [Editor's note: In the original spelled *toebele*. In all its occurrences the digraph *oe* in vernacular words has been replaced with *u*.]

someone has a dream in which he sees an acquaintance approaching him. If the following day he doesn't feel well, immediately the thought comes to him: "The person, whom I saw in the dream, dealt *doti* to me."

In Balantak, where the poisoner is called *mian padoti*, they claim that more men than women practice black magic. This is perhaps connected with the way in which they say they have acquired this art (except when they have learned it from other poisoners). With that purpose someone goes to spend a night on his own in a lonely place, where a spirit is supposed to be living. During that night he has to face all sorts of terrors: monstrous beings, human and animal, try to drive him away from the spot. When he has resisted all of them courageously, finally the spirit himself will come, and ask him what he wishes. The person who sought solitude then says that he would like to be instructed in the science of black magic. Then the spirit informs him how he should go about harming his fellow man in secret.

This 'playing the hermit' is called *mobaratapa* (Malay *bertapa*, with the prefix *mo*). All tribes on Celebes know this, but among most of them it is employed [p. 731] for obtaining medicine and remedies for the recovery of a beloved person or to make oneself invulnerable and immune to the effect of the black magic of others.

The *doti*, originally a visible object, is sent to someone in an invisible way. The invisible powers should therefore protect mankind against them. One of the domestic deities is charged with this task. The inhabitants of the Banggai Archipelago possess four domestic deities, which they indicate with the collective noun of *pilogot*. One of them is the personification of the physical life of the family members; another one is the power which goes out of all the 'placentas' of deceased and living housemates; a third one is the concentration of everybody's amniotic fluid; and finally the fourth is the magical power which goes out of the collected menstrual blood of all women in the family. *Pilogot* is therefore the physical life and the physical power of the family thought of as a unity.

The fourth *pilogot*, which carries the name of Balani, which means 'courageous, fiery' (Malay *berani*), is appointed the task of forestalling all *doti* that want penetrate into the house in order to do damage. For that reason Balani is not allowed to live in the house, but he gets a residence outside of it. Near the foot of the staircase two sticks are stuck into the soil with a span of space in between, about one foot above the ground. Preferably one takes stalks of the *Dracaena terminalis*, because these plants take root and so needn't be renewed. But one can use other wood too. When the sticks need to be renewed, then this may only happen after celebrating a sacrificial feast (*mabatong*). When one moves into a new house, the sticks are pulled out and are planted near the staircase of the new house. [p. 732]

In this way the two sticks form a sort of porch. At this porch Balani stops the invisible *doti* that wants to go up the staircase. For this reason, sacrifices are now and then brought to Balani, nearly always dogs, so as to keep him fiery, so that he maintains the strength to drive back the *doti*. In normal language: mankind wishes himself inner strength in order to resist the *doti*, which waylays him, so that it does not have a hold over him.

In Balantak there are also spirits called Balani, which are invoked in order to eliminate the *doti*. But here these spirits are not so intimately connected with the essence of man as in Banggai. Here the Balani are independent spirits, which live on the beach and in the forests. When the harvest home is celebrated, or when people go out hunting, they also sacrifice to Balani. By means of an oracle the people are made to know that Balani is asking for a dog, which should now encourage Balani, and at other occasions eliminate the *doti*. In Balantak they express this last thing in the following way: “so that the *doti* eat the dog and not man” (when hearing a particular sound which portends evil, in Balantak a dog is killed too, so that the *mambara*, the evil which emanates from this sound, won’t effect man, but the dog).

But the islanders don’t leave the matter to Balani alone, but act themselves too. For example when someone is spitting up blood or passes blood, it is certain that a fellow man’s *doti* is doing its work. They then speak to the *doti* and tell him to go back to the person who sent it off. Then a bamboo tube with water is cut in two, so that the contents are poured out. They do this, they say, this in order to prevent the dislodged *doti* from coming back to that person. When the sick is not recovering after a few days, they take a dog. If they have taken the treatment of the sick upon themselves, the dog is spoken to: [p. 733] “You, dog, take the *doti* back to his master.” Then they cut off the dog’s head.

In Buko on Peling they speak the following when killing a dog: “Sun and earth, look this way! And don’t let the *doti* eat (digest) this man.” Not until the sick person has recovered does a ceremony take place, in which they have the *doti* go back to his master. For this purpose a dog and a pig are slaughtered. Before these animals are killed, the thunder, the wind and various spirits are called upon and ‘hired’ in order to take the *doti* back. Often a bamboo tube with palm wine or water is cut in two after a ceremony for taking back the *doti*, so that the contents are poured out on the ground. The tube is placed against the staircase of the house, where the sick is; the priest first dances (*balantindak*) around it before he cuts the bamboo in two. They say they do it this way so that the malicious spirits can drink first before they take the *doti* back.

When they call in the intervention of Balani in order to deliver the sick from the *doti*, then the dog is killed at the residence of this spirit, after they have spoken to it thus: “You, Balani, are the way, along which the *doti* has come into our house; take your share (the dog), and have the *doti* turn back.” Or they say to it: “You, Balani, take this dog, and don’t allow the *doti* either to cause the evil by means of man’s voice, or to kill our housemate and deprive you of your share (the dog).”

When they slaughtered a hen in Tinangkung on East Peling in order to find out from its bowels who or what caused the illness and the intestines turn out to be dark-colored, then they are convinced that *doti* is working in the sick. Then they take a black hen by the feet, and swing with it through the whole house, in order to load all the evil in the house onto the bird. Then they take [p. 734] it ten meters away from the house and there the hen is slaughtered, together with the dog, after they have charged both of them to take away *doti*. After that the animals were buried in the ground; only the lower jaw is cut off in order to find out from the nerve cavities in it whether the dog has fulfilled its task. If it

turns out that the jaw has another third little cavity near the two normal nerve cavities on the one side, and if there still blood on it, then this is a proof that the *doti* has not been taken away. In that case a second dog must be killed. When the *doti* has been returned to the person who sent it off, he (the sender) often becomes sick.

In Balantak they too know how to help themselves in cases when *doti* has penetrated into the body of one of their relatives. When the oracle has decided, then what they have to do in such a case is take a small dog, a hen, and a small type of frog (*barangkokok*), all of which are killed. The livers of these animals are prepared and spread out on a tree leaf together with rice and an egg, to which some fruits of the *kalambete* tree, which is poisonous, are added. The dog, before it is killed, is charged to take the poison, *doti*, back to the owner. The priest, *bolian*, sits down near the sacrifice and calls the soul (*mbelalung*) of the person who is suspected of having sent off the *doti*, that he come and eat the prepared food. When after having waited for a while, the priest notices that the one called has come (I could not get to know from where he notices this), he quickly takes out a stick, which he kept hidden, and kills the soul with it. This action carries the name of *mansuai*.

A man from Tinangkung told me that once he had bought a big pig. After a while he fell ill, and immediately he was convinced that someone [p. 735] had sent off *doti* to him, because he was envious of this beautiful animal (it even needn't be *doti*, the jealous person can only have used angry words about this happy animal, which now have their harmful effect in his body). He didn't know anything better to do than having the pig slaughtered, and arranged a banquet from it, to which he also invited the two persons whom he suspected of having sent off the *doti* or having spoken the angry words. By eating along from the pig's meat, they made their own *doti* or angry words powerless. A few days later the sick was recovered as expected.

An inhabitant from Tampodau once told me that after a banquet which he had arranged, he got a serious stomachache. Immediately he was convinced that this was caused by the black magic of someone who had not been invited to the party, and for that reason was angry with the party arranger. Immediately the sick man arranged a meal to which the suspect was invited as well. And behold, a couple of days later the sick man recovered.

In Banggai there are also people who, in cases of 'poisoning,' make a promise (*bapusi*). They do this when they think they know by whose machinations the illness came about. Then the father or brother of the sick person says: "When you, unknown person, sent off *doti* to my son (brother), from which he has become ill, I will give you a pig, when you have him recover again." When the sick person indeed recovers, he slaughters a little pig. Before the pig is killed, they call out: "Hello, unknown person, take your pig." The person called often doesn't know anything about this, and they eat his pig themselves.

As has already been mentioned, when someone has fallen ill of any disease, they first think of black magic as the cause of the illness. Also at the death of young and strong

people, the suspicion arises among the family members that [p. 736] the dead is the victim of their fellow man's machinations. When blood is coming out of the nose of the corpse, or when the corpse turns black, then this is a sure sign that that person died by the working of *doti*. Often the sick person informs the people sitting around him that he is sure that he has been made ill by means of *doti*. He then usually mentions the name of the person whom he suspects. The suspect passed along his house a couple of days ago; he acted strangely; he didn't want to comply with the invitation to come upstairs; and fifteen minutes later the sick man felt himself become unwell.

Or he tells you that he has been to a particular village, where so-and-so proceeded prominently against him: he had hardly come home than he felt a burning pain inside, which could come from no one else but from that so-and-so.

When people are convinced that someone has died from black magic, but they don't have indications as to who the culprit might be, they try to get to know this by auguring. Every Banggai and Balantak has a list of suspects in mind, who at some occasion have been mentioned as practitioners of black magic. They augur (*bapulos*, *momulos*, Banggai and Balantak) with the hands, and they mutter in them in order to ask that the oracle may indicate whether the *doti* is from a particular suspect; then they place the tips of both middle fingers upon each other, and expand the span of the right hand three times on the left arm. From the end they then measure three spans back; if the fingertip of the right hand reaches over the one of the left hand, then this means an affirmative answer to the question asked. If the fingertip of the right hand cannot reach the one of the left hand, or if both tips come and lie exactly on top of each other, [p. 737] then this means a negative answer to the question. In the Banggai Archipelago this kind of auguring with the span has a special name: *tutuboi* in Banggai, *tutube* in Sea-sea.

The Banggai priest, *talapu*, also knows a type of auscultation of the heart. With his fingertips he feels the region of the heart, and then fixes the spot where the heartbeat is most clearly noticeable. If this is so on a particular spot, then he ascertains that *doti* is the cause of suffering.

Not so very long ago, no corpse would leave a house before they had first questioned it about the cause of its death. Among the Banggai who had become Moslem, who therefore don't use a coffin for the corpse, the bier upon which the dead had been laid was taken upon the shoulders by four men. Among the heathen two men took the carrying pole, which had been tied to the coffin with the corpse inside, upon their shoulders. Then a priest or an old man questioned the corpse: "Has *Pilogot* (the Moslems say *Allah ta'ala*) taken away your life?" If the corpse did not move, this meant a negation of the question. Then they would go on: "Did you die from *doti*?" If the bier or the coffin then swayed from one side to the other, this was considered as an affirmation of the question. There are areas where after this they went on with questions by mentioning the name of someone who had already been suspected several times of practicing black magic, in order to find out this way on whom they could vent their feelings of revenge. In other areas they didn't do this.

In Kindandal I was told that the corpse moved lengthwise if it wanted to answer a question negatively. If it wanted to affirm a question, it moved sidewise. This questioning, like other ways of auguring, is called: *bapulos* (*pinulos* 'being augured').

In Balantak questioning a corpse after the cause of its death seems not to [p. 738] have taken place as regularly as in Banggai. They only did so when in one house some had passed away shortly after one other. Then the corpse was taken downstairs in its coffin and they tied a stick to it lengthwise. With this stick eight men lifted up the dead. Then came the priest, *bolian na mena*, who serves especially in case of death, and whose principle work consists of keeping the soul of the deceased out of the hands of the malicious spirits which would waylay it. This *bolian* questioned the corpse whether the dead had died from the working of *doti*. If this indeed was the case, the coffin began swinging heavily. In this way they tried to find out who had dealt him the poison. At the funeral of such a deceased person, a dog was killed and its blood was brushed onto the poles of the grave-hut. They did this, "so that the bones of the next of kin would not hurt" (presumably the intention of this is that the *doti*, which killed this person, should not affect and make ill the next of kin too).

When many agreed that one particular person practiced black magic, and he was said to have already gotten a couple of victims, they began to fine him. In Banggai the fine was a pig and seven carry baskets (*bois*) of yam; in Balantak the fine which was inflicted upon the poisoner was steep, sometimes as much as 300 guilders. They say that there are means through which a master of witchcraft gets rid of his pernicious art. Someone who claims to know such means is sometimes called upon in order to cure a suspect.

When the suspect denied his guilt, and if he didn't want to pay the fine, then very occasionally it happened that they allowed him to prove his guilt or innocence by means of a trial by ordeal (*bagunsal*, diving, putting one's hand into boiling water, holding a glowing piece of iron). But this seems seldom to have [p. 739] happened. If the accused kept refusing to pay the fine, then he was killed.

In Tinangkung they had a way of auguring that was used only to find out whether or not someone was a practitioner of black magic, a method which is not known in other parts of this archipelago. In this case a machete was buried in the soil lengthwise in such a way that only something of the edge stuck out above the soil. The suspect had to place his foot lengthwise on the edge and stand on it. If the sole of his foot turned out to be wounded, he was guilty. They decided in advance how much the accusers would have to pay, if by means of the test it was proved that they had accused that person falsely.

If one of the leaders, *basal* or *tonggol*, heard of the plan to kill a poisoner, then he sometimes persuaded those bent on revenge to go and rob the goods of the accused, but to leave his person undisturbed. In such a case a sacrifice of a pig, goat, or hen was made in order to make the black magic of that person powerless, so that he could not do any more damage. If they were going to kill someone, it was strictly forbidden to take away anything from out of his house. They probably thought that along with the possessions of

the person killed his inclination to kill others through black magic would pass on to the murderers too.

Usually they did not proceed to killing the suspect until they were convinced that many believed in the person's guilt, so that revenge seldom followed. Most of the time one or two persons, brothers or cousins of the last person said to be killed by the suspect, proceeded to that. They didn't need a lot of people to carry out such an act, because the houses stood by themselves, spread out. If they were offered resistance, they always had [p. 740] to deal with just a few. Moreover they chose the most suitable time.

Before they went and killed the poisoner, some would kill a dog near Balani's residence at the foot of the staircase so as to obtain courage; others would satisfy themselves with a betel nut sacrifice (*sinolong*). This and what follows only applies to the inhabitants of the Banggai Archipelago. If, after killing a culprit, they found a dog of his, then this animal was killed too. If this happened, a couple of housemates went to meet the murderers with a dog, and then this animal was killed by them, before they were allowed to return to their own home. This dog carried the name of *posusuli sabung*, i.e. 'in order to have the *sabung* turn back.' *Sabung* is flying against something, like two cocks which fight with other. In this connection one could render *sabung* with 'feeling of revenge,' i.e. the feeling of revenge of someone defeated. This feeling of revenge accompanies the murderers to their home, and this feeling could possibly incite one of the murderers into stabbing one of his housemates. The dog must take this feeling of revenge back to the person defeated. When I asked if they had ever heard that the murderers took the scalp of the defeated, they were very amazed and answered: "Well no, because in that case the lust of killing people by means of black magic would pass on to him who took the scalp!"

It sometimes happened that the person who had the obligation of killing someone who had been named a poisoner, who had killed his father, his son or his brother by means of *doti*, lacked the courage to commit the murder. Then he hired someone who made his handiwork of such executions. These people carry the name of *talenga*, which means 'champion' in related tribes. The rent was one or two gongs. Sometimes someone would persuade a young [p. 741] fellow to kill the poisoner, under the promise that he then was allowed to marry his daughter without paying the bride price.

As all deliberations about killing a suspect took place in secret, nobody knew whether or not they might be assaulted on a favorable day. They therefore continually lived in anxiety and were always on their guard.