



Notes on the Religious Ideas of the Elema Tribe of the Papuan Gulf

Author(s): J. Holmes

Source: *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 32 (Jul. - Dec., 1902), pp. 426-431

Published by: [Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2842830>

Accessed: 15/06/2014 11:22

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

NOTES ON THE RELIGIOUS IDEAS OF THE ELEMA TRIBE OF THE PAPUAN GULF.

BY REV. J. HOLMES.

[WITH PLATE XLI.]

THE religious ideas of the Elema tribes of the Papuan Gulf resolve themselves into reverence for certain sacred objects, a belief in the existence of the spirits of their dead, and worship of the beings they regard as gods.

In how great a degree the animal cult of these tribes may be associated with their reverence for their ancestors it is difficult to determine at the present stage of our knowledge of their religious ideas, but it is worthy of notice that the name or word for "ancestors" is practically the same term by which all objects are designated that are held sacred.

The term used by the Toaripi tribe for any animal which they reverence is *ualare*; their ancestors are known as *ulare vilare*; the *u* of *ulare* is a contraction of *ua*, a woman or wife; *vi* is a contraction of the word *vita*, a man or husband. *Lare* in both cases means a name. Thus *ulare vilare* signifies "husband and wife."

A native's explanation why a certain mammal, bird or fish is regarded sacred by him as his particular *ualare* is, that this animal was regarded as sacred by his original ancestor. He assigns no reasons why it was selected by the ancestor to become such. I have not yet been able to ascertain if the spirit of the ancestor was supposed to have entered into the particular *ualare* of the family and thus rendered it sacred. For the present we have to be content with the statement that a certain animal was regarded as sacred by the original ancestor; he never injured or killed it, never ate it as food when killed by anyone else, and because it was held sacred by him, his posterity for all time must also regard it as sacred.

If a man accidentally kills a member of the family of his *ualare*, he sets aside a period for mourning, during which period he fasts from the principal kind of food, eating only enough to keep himself from absolute starvation; he also observes many of the customs of mourning as if he had lost a relative. If on the other hand he kills a member of his *ualare* family in a fit of anger or for any other reason that is not justifiable, as soon as he recognizes what he has done he gives himself over to violent grief, abstains from all kinds of food, isolates himself from his relatives, and ultimately dies of starvation.

The *ualare* with which we are acquainted being all edible, and recognized articles of food among the respective tribes, it is probable that it is permissible to one

man to kill and eat the *ualare* of his neighbour without giving offence. It appears that a son can kill the *ualare* of his father, share the same with members of the family, and join with them in eating it and not give offence to the father, because he has not by any personal act violated his obligations to the object he individually considers sacred as his *ualare*. The beak, feathers, tail or any part of a *ualare* object that lend themselves to decorative or ornamental purposes are sacred to the individual from whose *ualare* they are taken; by him these parts may be plaited and made into ornaments for personal adornment, but under no pretence can a man of one *ualare* use for adornment the parts of the *ualare* of his neighbour without giving grave offence. I am not at present aware whether this cult imposes any limitations on marriage, the distribution of property and the order of succession to tribal privileges.

It is not known that any tree, plant, or inanimate object is regarded as sacred or as the *ualare* of an individual of the Elema district. Such objects as are regarded as sacred and as the *ualare* of individuals, families and tribes are, in every case, edible, and as such, used as food, each representative of a *ualare* abstaining only from such animal as he considers sacred as his personal *ualare*. The man whose *ualare* is a pig never at any time eats pig-flesh; on festival occasions he eats dog-flesh: the man with a dog *ualare* is equally consistent; he abstains from eating dog-flesh, but he may eat pig-flesh whenever he can get it.

Abstinence from killing and eating the *ualare*, by the individual whose *ualare* it is, seems to be observed in a spirit of reverence for the ancestor who held a certain object as sacred, rather than from a sense of dread lest some dire calamity should befall the eater.

Our present knowledge of the form of reverence for animals found in the district of Elema is too inadequate to enable us to determine its full religious and social significance to the tribes among whom it is found.

The wild boar's tusk, the acquisition of which is greatly desired as a mark of bravery, is not so much coveted as a personal adornment, as for the courage, ferocity, and daring which it is supposed to contain and to be capable of imparting to anyone who secures it. The cleverly made effigies of *ualare* objects which are frequently suspended at the end of the roof ridge-poles in front of certain dwelling houses, are not hung there purely for decorative purposes, but have a meaning intelligible to the initiated, and are sacred to the individual who suspends them in front of his private house.

Tribal feasts are not merely occasions for eating, drinking and making merry. These feasts, as distinguished from family feasts, have associated with them one or more of the many gods of the tribe. An important item in the programme of such feasts is the procession, in the pageantry of which the skilfully made effigies of the various *ualare* are much in evidence. To these is attached such religious significance, that, when the feast is over, they are taken away and burnt almost immediately, lest they should fall into the hands of people who would not respect them.

If the natives of Elema are reticent in giving information concerning their *ualare*, they are certainly communicative enough when approached on the subject of their belief in the existence of spirits (*ove*). The spirit world is a reality to them; each tribe has its own locality for it—it may be away in the west, toward the region of the setting sun, or it may be far back in the mountains of the Gulf Hinterland—but however uncertain they may be as to the precise locality of the abode of the spirits of their deceased relatives, of this one thing they are confident, that the latter still exist and can visit the living who are still in the flesh.

The future abode of spirits (*ove*) is determined by the kind of death the individuals die. The natives of Elema classify the spirits and their future in the following way:—

- ¹(1) Those who die fighting as warriors.
- (2) Those who die a natural death, either from sickness or senile decay.
- (3) Those who have been murdered, or have met with a violent end.
- (4) Those who have been killed by crocodiles, or by snakes.

(1) The spirits of warriors who die fighting are said to be taken to the residence of the god of war, which is supposed to be somewhere in the sky. The god of war is Hiovaki, and he is said to be always present wherever legitimate fighting is going on, that he may assist those warriors who call on his name and receive the spirits of all who are slain in the fight. The spirits of dead warriors are allowed considerable liberty to roam about among their old surroundings, and are supposed to retain feelings of anger against old enemies, to whom they become a source of great annoyance, by making frequent visits at night and tickling their feet, so that they are unable to get any rest in sleep. To rid the village of these troublesome spirits, an occasion is set apart after every fight, when every nook and cranny of the village is switched with flaming fire-brands. When this custom is observed in a beach village, the procession wends its way toward the beach: in an inland village the procession moves toward the supposed locality of the spirits' abode. This procession is accompanied with the beating of drums, the blasts of the conch shell, and much noise and shouting, with a view of so frightening the spirits back to their particular spirit-land that they will never return to annoy the living again.

(2) The spirits of individuals who die a natural death, go away, after being assured that all the ceremonies of mourning have been duly observed, to the particular localities which are claimed by the various tribes to be the abode of such spirits.

(3, 4) The spirits of individuals who have met a violent death from the hands of a murderer, or from a crocodile, are supposed, on the other hand, to roam about constantly and are frequently seen near their former abode. (3) Those spirits

¹ [The apparent cross-divisions in this classification may probably be explained thus:—

(1) The spirits of those killed in battle form a class quite by themselves; (2) natural deaths form a second group; (3) all violent deaths, *not* met in battle, form a third group; (4) certain forms of violent death, by the attack of the animals specified, are apparently regarded as a distinct sub-species of (3).—ED.]

which have been expelled from their human existence by the violence of murder, are said to be always a source of annoyance to the murderer. (4) Those which are fated to wander because they were killed by a crocodile, often reside in the crocodile that ate the former body. These spirits are sometimes seen by their relatives, as bright fire-light in the eyes of these particular crocodiles, but only by such relatives as have the special kind of eye to see apparitions. These spirits are said to be most malicious, and to attack whom they will. This they do in all manner of ways; sometimes they use sticks and flog people unmercifully; at other times they creep in when everyone is asleep, and sprinkle icy cold water on the sleepers' feet, arousing them in a fright and prevent them sleeping again that night. When a spirit becomes a nuisance, the people whom he troubles wait for his return, and then take a canoe and paddle away up the river or creek, the spirit following. They leave the canoe and get into the bush, where he gets bewildered, as his crocodile-affinity cannot find its way about the bush; the crocodile-spirit being now lost in the bush, the party who came out to lay it ultimately return to the village and are not troubled by it again.

Dreams are associated with spirits (*ove*) and are said to be the communications of spirits who have wandered from the body whilst it was asleep and have had conversation with other spirits. Great importance is attached to dreams, and sometimes trouble ensues in consequence: so great is the inclination to believe that dreams are purely the information obtained by wandering spirits from other spirits. When there is a probability of dreams being realised in facts, it is a common thing to speak of the dreams until they are known to everybody; if they should become true in detail, the dreamer is soon regarded as a man with whom it is advisable to be on good terms.

The natives of Elema make a distinction between spirits that are gods (*harisu*), and spirits that are only such (*ove*) and not gods. The former are spirits, either good or bad, possessed of certain attributes that do not belong to spirits who shared in a human existence. These *harisu*-spirits that are said to be gods, are classified in their turn, and to each is assigned its respective sphere of work, having complications both unintelligible and mystifying to more enlightened minds.

The great and good spirit generally accepted by all the tribes of Elema as god, is known as *Harisu* or *Harihu*, and is recognized by all as an invisible spirit, the only true and kind god. Of his attributes not much is said except that all good things have their origin in him; he is loving, pitiful and kind. He is said to have a messenger named *Harohoha*, whose special work it is to make known to certain individuals of each tribe the will of *Harisu*. The men who are supposed to receive these communications from *Harisu*, through *Harohoha*, are sorcerers, known as *Ferevita*, *Merovevita* and *Kikavita*. These names may have some significance: *Fere* means "betel nut," *Vita* is the term used for "man" or "husband"; *Merove* is the name for the rattan-like creeper of the forest, and *Kika* is the name of all trees and shrubs of the bamboo family.

The pageant of the warriors' feast is supposed to represent, in effigy, all the *ualare*, spirits (*ove*), and gods (*harisu*), of the tribes by whom the feast is made, but it does not seem that any attempt is ever made to make an effigy of the supreme Harisu or of his messenger Harohoha.

The divine injunctions of Sinai, adopted in the Christian religion concerning God, as to the reverence and regard due to Him and His name, are quite intelligible to the tribes of Elema; the name of Harisu is above all names, the one to be held in respect, as also must be the name of Harohoha. It is permitted to a favoured few to be named Harohoha, but such individuals must not under any circumstance be generally spoken of as Harohoha, neither must they be spoken of in names common to the tribe; a substitute is provided in the term *Farevita*, which means "a man of renown."

The god of evil, named Karisu, is represented at the warriors' feast by a man, having his legs encased in dressed paper-mulberry cloth, dyed very black with charcoal. His head and neck are hidden in a hideous, grimacing mask, and the remaining part of his body, from the armpits to the hips, is cunningly protected with a thick belt, so padded outside or made on the outside, that the toy arrows constantly discharged at it from toy bows, do not penetrate the belt to the body.

The principal part Karisu has, in the procession, is to harass everyone who comes within his reach; he carries a large bow and arrow, and pretends to pick a quarrel with anyone likewise inclined.

As Harisu is said to be the supreme god of all the minor gods who work for the welfare of mankind, so Karisu is supposed to be the supreme god of all the minor malignant deities. He directs them to cause sickness, disease and death, and all calamities are the result of his evil advice and counsel to his subordinates.

The god to whom creative and protective powers are assigned is named Ualare. He is said to have created the sun, moon and stars, the sea and dry land, and everything that lives in the sea or on the land, with the exception of certain kinds of animals and foods. Kivovia has a prominent place among the minor deities of the good and supreme god Harisu. He is said to have created the sago palm, the betel-nut palm and many other good things. He had a wife named Moru, and to them was born a son named Lavaosiaka. They are supposed to have lived in the district of Namau, of the Purari delta. It is claimed for Lavaosiaka that he was the creator of the dog. Raupu and his wife Mori-oi are said to have created the pig; they lived at the village of Kaipi in the Elema district, wrongly named Karama in the maps of New Guinea.

Malignant and evil-disposed gods, the subordinates of Karisu, are many, and, according to native ideas, those have frequently to be appeased by sorcerers. Of these, Kovave is much in evidence; he is the mountain god, and to him is supposed to belong absolute power to help or hinder all travellers into the interior. He can cause sickness and lameness to all travellers on land; if he fails to protect them from snakes they will be bitten and die. He can endanger their lives by causing the bush natives to be hostile to them, or he can induce the sorcerers of



2. DANCE BELT.



1. *Tiparu*.



5. OROKOLO MEN.



6. OROKOLO MEN.



3, 4. RAIN GODS.

THE NATIVES OF THE PAPUAN GULF.

the bush tribes to use their spells against them as visitors, that they may not live to return to their relatives again; he can reduce them to a state of starvation and exhaustion; and every kind of calamity he can bring upon them if they do not keep on good terms with him. This they can do by making him ample presents of food on the annual occasion of his visit to their villages.

During the north-west monsoon many of the tribes of Elema send large canoes of sago to the various villages of the Motuan tribe, who live in a coast district about two hundred miles east of the district of Elema. Prior to setting out on this journey, Avaralaru, the god of the north-west wind, has to be conciliated. To this end the village sorcerer is engaged at a good fee to intercede with Avaralaru and the god of the sea, that they may give to the voyagers a safe journey and bring them back safely to their village and friends. Two old men, who are considered to be sacred during the voyage, are specially commissioned to accompany these expeditions, that they may use their influence in appealing to the gods of the winds and the sea to refrain from bringing any calamity upon the party.

Another malignant god is named Saukoro; he is said to reside in the hollow trunks of trees, and is cruel in the extreme to all persons he may succeed in waylaying. He kills and quarters them, as men kill and quarter pigs. His special mission has not yet been ascertained, but it is said that he is very cunning in alluring men into his power by making a certain kind of light which throws spell on all who see it. So fascinating is this light which he causes to appear in the branches of the tree in which he resides, that individuals are said to go toward it and are unable to return when they would gladly do so, to avoid all the cruelty of Saukoro.

Oalea, the god of *tiparu*, the bull-roarer, and Hiovaki the god of war, have a prominent place in the past history of the tribes of Elema, and in some respects influence their social life to-day. It would, however, lengthen this paper unduly to do either of these deities credit and represent them as they are supposed to be by the natives of Elema.

A comparative study of revered animals, spirits and gods, and of the religious ideas associated with them by the various tribes of Elema, can alone give us an approximately correct estimate of the importance attached to them and their direct influence on the social and moral life of these tribes.

That a form of animal cult is recognized by these tribes—not as elaborate as what is found in North America—is probably beyond dispute; that they believe in the existence of the spirits of their dead is evident by the provisions they make for the comfort of such spirits, supposed to visit them occasionally from the spirit world; that they recognize gods as rational, intelligent beings, possessed of supernatural power for good or evil, is indicated by their regard and reverence for such gods as are assumed to be kind and good, and their fear, awe, and anxiety to appease such gods as are supposed to be the authors of all forms of evil, calamity, sickness, disease and death.