

THE ASISI CULT

The Asisi cult was first notified from Wanigela in June 1932:-
 The Rev. A. J. Thompson wrote as follows:- "Frederick Bogara's father
 of Uaku came to Wanigela with a retinue in ceremonial dress ostensi-
 bly to interview the priest in the first instance. The Priest being
 at Bogara, the visitor sought out Abraham a prominent Church Coun-
 cillor and greeted him and the Church at Wanigela through him. With
 his retinue and in company with the Government Councillors/ and V.C.
 he then visited each village in the neighbourhood in turn seeking
 "baravu purapura. His method of search was as follows:- Whilst his
 "followers were drumming he stood before each house and sniffed. Some
 "houses he passed over without a remark but in each house where he in-
 "dicated the presence of the purapura it was found by the Councillors
 who went up at his bidding. One man noting the method took the pre-
 "caution of removing the purapura from his house and hiding it in the
 "forest but this availed him nothing. The nose of the detective (if we
 "may call him so) led him to the spot where it was hidden and it was
 "discovered. The substances were mostly in corked bottles and all
 "were thrown into the sea. The reason given for this search was, in
 "the man's own words - 'It is not good that we should be trying to
 "injure one-another or to cause death and so I am come to help you
 "to put an end to this practice'. The local people were very much
 "impressed.

"Note:- That the substances were, I have no idea. They were all de-
 "stroyed before I came home."

In September 1932 Alister Kekedo the teacher at Sirisiri reported
 to me that a party of 20 young men had come from the Collingwood Bay
 district for the purpose of smelling out sorcery. Alister stated that
 they owed allegiance to Dipari who lived between Biniguni and Sinipa-
 ra, but that their practice came from behind Uaku. They were very
 ignorant heathen, but continually mentioned God and the Bishop with
 respect. Alister had been going round with them in the hills at the
 head of Goodenough Bay and described their methods. He said that when
 they arrived at a village they told the people to "fall in". They then
 gave a short talk in which they said that they had come in a peaceful
 and friendly way in order to help them. The Government and the Missi-
 on had said that sorcery was bad and should be discontinued, but the Ne-
 guinea people were disobedient and were still dealing in sorcery whil-
 pretending to have given it up. That the Government and the Mission
 had failed to do the Asisi had come to do. The village people were
 then told to bring out their sorcery stones. Such stones as were
 brought out were licked by the Asisi to make them impotent. Ginger
 was chewed and the stones spat upon for the same purpose. The village
 people were then told to fall in again, and after a general inspection
 the Asisi leader went from one to the other of the villagers, taking
 them by the hand. After smoothing the palm of the villager's hand
 with his own palm he would smell the former's palm. He would then as-
 low many stones he had handed over. If the villager had kept back any
 of his stones the Asisi would know of it, as he had just smelt the
 spirits of the stones in the palm of the villager's hand. It was im-

possible to deceive them. Many of the stones had been hidden in the bush in holes in trees; others had been buried. These were smelted out by the Asisi. When a stone had been smelted out they would pass it from hand to hand with expressions of joy, throwing their hands up and calling out "God i yaynuwe!" which no-one in these parts understands. According to Alister one villager was particularly obdurate he had handed over one stone, but the Asisi could smell the spirits of two others in his hand. He acknowledged that No. 3 stone he had handed over to Mark Kerediredi nearly two years ago. No. 2 stone he had just given to the Asisi, but No. 1 he would not speak of. The Asisi 'held court' with this man all the afternoon, but he would not speak. Then Alister held taparoro and while he was preaching he saw a pebble fall from apparently nowhere in front of the leading Asisi man and roll into a tin at his side. At the end of taparoro the leader arose and stretched himself, jumped about a foot in the air coming down with a thud on his feet. Alister says that as he did this over one saw sparks and flashes of light come from the ground as his feet struck it. Everyone was terribly frightened. They resumed the court and the obdurate man said that he had hidden the No. 1 stone some time ago in a hole in a cliff about seven miles away, but owing to a landslide ~~ikayxxxxxxxxxxx~~ he had been unable to get it. Very early next morning the whole party with the villagers set out for the spot indicated and the Asisi leader successfully located the stone, took the Asisi by means of their dabaruma negotiating the landslide and collecting the stone. All the other stones had been handed over to Alister after having been dealt with by the Asisi, but No. 1 was required to be sent to Dipari.

Alister, in reply to my questioning, said that there was no dancing or decoration, nor was there any demand for food, or pigs, any extortion of any kind whatever.

As there seemed to be some difference of opinion as to whether these Asisi were respectable people or no, I preached on that occasion both at Sirisiri and at Gaycanaki, pointing out that as these people were casting out evil in God's name, although they were not followers with us they were to be respected. On the other hand Christian people were not to follow them and become Asisi. We had all we needed in the Church, and to follow the Asisi was tantamount to saying that the Asisi were superior to the Church in the matter of dealing with sex. I told Alister to notify four young men, Christians, to stop following the Asisi.

Early in November, I received a note from Alister saying that he was planning to go round with the Asisi, they having asked him, a tour which included the Kenapi district, part of the Bukawa District right through the Eolianai district, through the Dogura District as far as Divari, so that he could show everyone "waivine ai gavia" and that the Asisi could turn out "waivine ai diabolo". I immediately sent Alister, reminding him of what I had said when I was at Sirisiri and dressed him down.

A few days later, I heard that the Asisi had recently been

at Uga, Francis reporting it to me on my visit there. On inquiry I found that the party consisted mainly of young men from the Sirisiri and Gayoanaki districts mostly baptised. The description was very different from that Alister had given. The party had come with drums, all being decorated and painted. They queried the women, according to Francis, professing to extract the parama from the women, but they did not find many stones connected with barava. This would probably be accounted for by the fact that Uga more or less marks the line separating the use of stones by barabarava on the west and the belief in parama on the east. The Asisi party also made demands on the Uga people and extorted cooking pots, beads and other New Guinea decorations and food. In one case they went to the extreme of snatching an ornament from a woman's ear. They were also accused of behaving loosely at night.

I was fortunate enough to overtake these people, some at Sirisiri and some at Gayoanaki, where I dealt with them respectively, i.e. the Christians. They agreed to restore what they had extorted, and decided to drop the Asisi cult. At Gayoanaki after I had dismissed the Christians concerned, a decorated native came to the verandah of my house and saluted. I asked him what he wanted, and he replied by placing a sorcerer's stone on the verandah and commencing a violent spasm of shivering. I told him to stop, but he shivered all the more violently. I then jumped off the verandah and he took to his heels and disappeared in the bush. On inquiry I found that these spasms had characterised Asisi proceedings throughout.

A few days later I heard that the A. R. M. at Baniara had arrested several of this last party of Asisi, for disturbances at Giwa and Davokerakere some few weeks previously. While being unable to get anything very definite, I gather that at Giwa they had thrown women into what appears to be a hypnotic trance, the method of restoration being a violent twist of the big toe. Extortion seems to have been prominent at the affair at Giwa also.

It is to be borne in mind that the favourable reports of the Asisi cult in the early stages came from teachers who naturally would be keen on the destruction of sorcery. In their presence, too, it is probable that the Asisi would not engage in things of which the Mission would disapprove, such as extortion or hypnotism. There is little doubt that in its latter stages the cult was nothing but a form of terrorism. I have a letter from a boy signed-on in Milne Bay beseeching me to use my influence to get him paid-off so that he can look after his people when the Asisi arrive at his village, many miles away from the district in which the Asisi were last at work. Whether, as has been claimed, in its early stages it was an honest attempt to wipe out sorcery, or whether, as I am inclined to think, it has been a manifestation of one form of sorcery against another, Satan divided against himself, it is a hopeful sign for the downfall of his kingdom and the extinction of what is one of the great evils of New Guinea.

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Ralph Wright
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