

THE ASISI CULT

The Asisi cult was first notified from Wanigela in June 1932:-
 The Rev. A. J. Thomson wrote as follows:- "Frederick Bogara's father Uaku came to Wanigela with a retinue in ceremonial dress ostensibly to interview the Priest in the first instance. The Priest being at Bogura, the visitor sought out Abraham a prominent Church Councillor and greeted him and the Church at Wanigela through him. With this 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 indicated the presence of the purapura it was found by the Councillors who went up at his bidding. One man noting the method took the precaution 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:- What the substances were, I have no idea. They were all destroyed 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 Sinipara, 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 Mission had said that sorcery was bad and should be discontinued, but the Melanesia people were disobedient and were still dealing in sorcery whilst pretending to have given it up. What 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 ask how 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 smelled out by the Asisi. When a stone had been smelt out they would pass it from hand to hand with expressions of joy, throwing their hands up and calling out "God i yaysuwo!" 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 loa 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 ever 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 ~~ikayxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ 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, two 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 reserved 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 Gayoanaki, pointing out that as these people were casting out evil in God's name, although they were not following 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 Menapi district, part of the Bukawa District right through the Boianai district, through the Degura District as far as Divari, so that he could show everyone "waivine ai gavia" and that the Asisi could turn out "waivine ai diabolio". I immediately sent Alister, reminded 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 gveried the women, according to Francis, professing to extract the parauma from the women, but they did not find many stones connected with baravu. This would probably be accounted for by the fact that Uga more or less marks the line separating the use of stones by barabaravu on the west and the belief in parauma 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 Davokerekere 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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