On Papua New Guinea, the Ouija board and the Supernatural World

by Bill Corden (March 2021)

Night, Odilon Redon, 1910

We live in a world of life and death. Any contact with departed souls in the Western belief system is through our religious beliefs or our faith.

There's no concrete evidence that there's life after death and only scant belief in the west that spirits can contact us from the great beyond. Such beliefs exist only in cultish setups or in countries where religion is still a system of magic, multiple gods and ghosts.

Many charlatans have been exposed over the years after tricking people with a mixture of seances, plasma and telekinesis to the point where it's considered to be either something of a party trick or something dangerous that you don't mess around with.

I'll get to Papua New Guinea in a while but let's

start out with my own experiences.

We used to play Ouija board when we were kids and played it despite warnings from Mum, Dad and Grandma that nasty things can happen if you summon up an evil spirit by accident. They half believed it, because the concept of evil spirits had been handed down to them over generations that went back to the days of the Vikings and beyond.

Nothing nasty happened until one day my younger brother was playing the game with a friend and while they were supposedly “in touch” with a spirit, a plaster ornament on the mantlepiece shattered. Now it may have been that they nudged it off and it fell to the ground or it might have been that they imagined it but I can tell you this . . . my younger brother was never the same afterwards (he was only about 11 years old at the time) From that day on he reckoned he could see an aura about you and that aura told him the story of roughly what was going to happen to you in the rolling out of your life.

Everybody thought he’d gone off his rocker and to be truthful, he had just a little bit. He became very paranoid and became very religious at a time when everybody in our generation was forsaking religion for hedonism. From attending formal sanctioned religious churches, he strayed off into Spiritualist Churches. Somehow his reputation grew to the point where he was invited over to the States to become a resident member of The Church of Scientology somewhere in California.

Here’s where I have to tell you that Harry was also a master conman and when it came to scamming someone for free room and board he had no equal. His scamming ability quickly outpaced his spiritual ability, he was too lazy to do any work at the commune and he was always first at the table and first in line for free trips to conventions to spread the word. Harry took advantage of the fact that L. Ron Hubbard’s

disciples had a code whereby they couldn’t admit failure in reprogramming their converts but, in an act that should have made the Guinness Book of Records, they assessed him as irredeemable and booted him out after two years. He still proudly claims he’s the only one ever to achieve that distinction.

Be that as it may, he is still a bit weird and still insists he can communicate with the dead, still sees the aura around certain people, though not all of them..

The only other Ouija board experience I can recall, is the one my older brother had in his gloomy little terraced house in the grimy centre of Birkenhead.

He, his wife and friends (one of whom believed in leprechauns) did a Ouija session in the house on a cold wintry night. They got in touch with a spirit who identified himself as Paul Christmas. Paul was living in the very same house but in a different world

They asked the usual questions: give me the date of so and so’s birthday. It spelled it out exactly . They asked for my Dad;s birthday and it was right on the money. Then they asked for addresses of long lost people and got them and, in the retelling of the story, my brother told me that their leprechaun-believing friend collapsed in a heap on the floor, supposedly from exhaustion but just as likely from an overdose of booze.

In any event they were so rattled by the experience that they swore never to do it again, but I have to say that any time I was in that house afterwards on my own I had this strange feeling of a presence there and I was too scared to stay overnight when they were away.

So, you see, there is some history and grudging belief

even in the secular society we have today.

Fast forward to 1993. My younger brother is still “captured by the spirits” and living an aimless life. However, my older brother (to this point unaffected) has ended up in a “stone age” village in Papua New Guinea. He’s the manager of a Highland town called Goroka. How he got there is a story that would take too long to tell, but suffice to say he’s completely immersed in the culture.

He’s married to a local native girl who comes from one of the bamboo-hut villages dotted on the cordillera of mountains surrounding the town (and running the length of New Guinea). He spends his time between the American-style house in the town during the week and the jungle village, which is communally owned by his wife’s kith and kin, during the weekend. He has two kids with her, a boy and a girl, and he had to pay the village two pigs as a dowry.

The village considers the two kids to be their property (not the father’s) and every member is responsible for their care.

The town itself is a collection of tin shacks, a bowling club, some missionary outposts, a supermarket, and an American Hotel called The Bird of Paradise. The town centre is a sort of drifting post for the local villagers who come in to sell their produce, weavings and carvings.

People died regularly in the village square and as there was no such thing as a funeral director; it was up to the people in the village of the deceased to pick them up, throw them into the back of a truck and somehow get them back to the village for burial. These villagers then covered their faces in some sort of yellow ochre or white ash to let neighbours know that they were in mourning. My brother had to pick up one of his own villagers who had died. They wrapped him up and put him in the back seat but the van got stuck in

the mud on the way back and they had to call on other villages to help them pull it out, all with the dead body in the back!

Back in the villages was where the religious belief system really played out. A mixture of animism, ancestor worship and the dead living amongst them, was as firm as Christianity is in the West. Only certain shamans (or witch doctors) had the ability to read signs or get in touch with the other world. The villagers had no doubts at all that there were many gods, both good and evil, and they steadfastly believed that a human form could change its shape into a bird or a beast by catching a ray from the sun.

In this environment my brother gradually learned that it was very unwise to scoff at these pagan type beliefs. The villagers got very, very angry if you did because it was very real to them. To pass the time in the evenings, the people played games similar to the Ouija board games back home (the villagers had no tv, radio or electricity). These sessions on the board led to a little bit of a conversion in his thinking. In a letter he sent to me, he told me that the board was able to spell out addresses where he had lived at in Australia. It could spell out names of relatives—even when he didn't have his finger on the board—and it was able to spell out dates of birth for other family members far away. The board knew that my Dad had died and where he was now!

It was all very disconcerting, except that the board told him Dad was very happy where he was. My brother is a natural cynic but by the end of these sessions he was starting to believe.

Then came the defining moment! The villagers were preparing celebrations for my brother's daughter's[KM1] birthday and had found a crocheted hat in the corner of one of the huts which they thought would be perfect for the day. The morning came, someone put the hat on the baby and she immediately began to convulse, sweat and scream. Nobody knows

what was happening until one of the elders arrived on the scene and knew right away that the witch doctor had to be called (the nearest hospital was hours away and the baby would have died getting there).

Here we are in a village of bamboo huts in the middle of the wildest jungle, no accepted medicines, death just a part of everyday life. My brother's in a panic thinking that the daughter was dying, when in comes the witch doctor in full regalia. He had a conversation with the frantic wife in the local dialect, which is a very quiet mumbling sound, and then went ahead with his magic. He took a bamboo cane and tapped it gently from head to toe along the little girl's body while chanting what my brother described as a very pleading and mournful sound. The child continued to froth and spasm. The witch doctor then took the bamboo outside of the hut, broke it into pieces and tossed it into the jungle.

The girl, in that instant, stopped crying, stopped convulsing and started gurgling contentedly and everybody gasped with relief. My brother's wife then explained what had happened.

She'd told the witch doctor about the birthday celebrations and about the hat. As soon as he heard about the hat, he knew what was wrong. The hat had belonged to a young girl who had died in the village a few years earlier. When they decided to use the hat for the birthday celebrations, the spirit of the girl got upset because they didn't ask her permission and the spirit took it out on the baby. The reason the chanting sounded so plaintive and so sad was because the shaman was begging the dead girl's spirit for forgiveness and explained that the father didn't understand the rituals that were supposed to be observed because he came from a different land.

That baby is now a lawyer's assistant in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. The son is an electrical engineer with one

of the mining companies. My older brother has since passed away.

But before my brother passed away, I had a chance to visit him in Goroka. I got the chance to visit and live the village for a few months. While there, my remaining skepticism of the occult was swept away.

I flew from Sydney to Cairns, swam in the Great Barrier Reef seas with a kaleidoscope of fish, had lunch on a yacht and enjoyed the pleasures of modern day life without thinking it could be any different anywhere else. How mistaken can you be?

In taking a plane from Cairns to Port Moresby, you fly backwards at the rate of 500 years per hour. From Port Moresby to Goroka, you board a plane that has signs saying “Please don’t spit on the carpets.” That’s because they chew betel nut with slaked lime powder and it turns red. Then they spit it out onto the aisleway in the plane without a second thought, and it’s the reason a lot of them seemed stoned upon first encounters.

Then, as you approach Goroka airport, you see this microscopic strip in the middle of the jungle on the top of the mountain and you pray to your Christian God that you’ll make it down alive.

There was a huge reception at the airport, hundreds of people waving. I felt like I was the Beatles arriving at JFK but no, the Prime Minister happened to be on the same plane and I passed through unnoticed.

The first thing my brother said to me was “don’t make light of their belief systems here, they’re very real!”

When you go for a hike in the jungle you must first ask permission of the gods and you must take some sort of tokenish gift to be left for their pleasure. The natives said

that a can of coke would be as well received as anything. On one hike, I forgot to take a gift and the next day I came down with something that my brother thought might be malaria. After some discussion, they said it was just a mild punishment for a mild misdemeanor. A shaman wasn't needed, all I had to do was beg forgiveness and I would be spared. I did and I was.

The jungle itself is a sticky, humid greenhouse, everything you touch or brush up against has a hook or a burr so that it can easily attach itself to passing invaders. There are no dangerous predators out there but plenty of dangerous insects and biters that can make you very sick. They drive you wild with their constant harassment.

Life in the village took quite a bit of getting used to. There was no running water. If you wanted to get a complete bath, then you had to walk down to the river about 20 minutes away and, because the area is in the highlands, it's ice cold! Food is plentiful in the way of vegetables and fruit (they get four crops a year because they're on the equator) but meat is reserved for special occasions (like the visiting of an uncle) and is usually either chicken or pork. Pigs and chickens share the same living space in the clearing and it's a measure of wealth as to how many pigs you own.

The bamboo huts have grass roofs and woven grass floor mats. When they harvest the bamboo for building they have devised an ingenious way of splitting it.

They just bind a few poles of it together and throw it into the middle of the main road (which happens to be the only road) and then they wait for the passing freight trucks to drive over it. The poles miraculously split right down the middle. Each hut in the village is occupied by a separate family and, believe it or not, they have padlocks on the wooden doors.

Inside they have a camping type set up. There are no

cabinets and the shelves are all makeshift. Some of them have single gas burners but most of the cooking is done over a firepit which sits in the very middle of each hut. Cooking is very exotic with meals prepared by stuffing a bamboo tube with vegetables, ginger and whatever meat's available, then throwing it on the fire. When the leaf cap pops off the tube, it's done. It's served on a banana leaf and you eat with your hands.

Then comes the evening's entertainment and you've probably guessed that it isn't Jeopardy on TV. No, this is ancient ritual entertainment by way of storytelling from travelling poets and actors from other villages. Most of the stories I heard on one particular night were about tribal wars and cannibalism. My brother told me that most of the older men in the village had been cannibals in their day—the last reported case was only some twenty years earlier. He reassured me that it had been outlawed to which I responded "so is speeding, it still happens!"

At the end of the day, the village chief goes to the edge of the mountain close to the village and hollers out the news of the day to the neighbouring settlements. Everybody knew for hundreds of miles around that Ron's brother was visiting!

I slept very uneasily for a few nights with the pot boiling in the middle of the hut and a bunch of ex-cannibals sleeping just outside. Another problem was that there was no chimney in the huts so, when they lit the fire, there would be a cloud of smoke about 3 feet off the floor. It was fine for them because most of them are only about 5ft2 or 3 and their heads are below the cloud when they sat down to eat but me—being 5′ 9—had to sit there with my nose right in the middle of it coughing and spluttering my way through the meal.

The villagers begged my brother to tell them a story, which he did in the language they could all understand,

“Pidgin”. And he told them the story of the ‘Pied Piper of Hamelin”. Well, I’ve never in my life seen such sobbing and heartbreak as the villagers displayed after the end, where all the children are gone. They were inconsolable, men and women both. Then he told them the story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs as an encore and they discovered that they could go on living. They wouldn’t let him stop after that, even the few teenagers were enthralled by the stories.

Travelling over any distance by vehicle is a dangerous proposition and you can’t go without a local diplomat to get you through. He knows of all the tribal wars that are going on. He knows who to speak to if there’s trouble afoot and he knows what to do if you get in a jam.

On one trip we travelled the high-risk road from Goroka to Madang, passing through an area where there had been lots of “blues” or tribal fights in the past few weeks. All along the route there were people walking, carrying their billums and veggies on their backs. We were absolutely flooring it through the dangerous areas and missing the people at the roadside by just inches.

I started to get really scared and said to my driver (a native guy/spy in my brother’s employ), “Slow down, you could hit these people and kill them. What happens if we do that?” He just looked at me straight in the eye and said “You die too!”

They have the payback system there. If you kill one of theirs, no matter what the reason, then they have to have one of yours as payback. And don’t think you can escape by driving faster up the road.

Remember the cordilleras I mentioned earlier?

Well if you hit someone, the natives have a voice telegraph system that works like this: One of the offended villagers goes to the top of their particular mountain and

shouts across the valley to tell the next village what's happened and to throw up a road block. Sound travels at 761 mph so you've only travelled maybe 20 miles before they've had a chance to set up a road block at the next village (and remember there's only one road!). From there on in you're dead meat, so they say. They drag you out of the car and attack you with machetes and there's no way out.

If you're lucky and there's a police station in between, you're supposed to drive to it and ask them to lock you up in the securest place they've got, but your chances of getting out alive are pretty much zero.

As you can see, I made it out of there without incident. Madang wasn't really worth the drive and the stress and, to top it all, I had my passport and wallet stolen there.

Goroka wasn't a place where you'd want to stay for any extended time and pretty soon I decided I would cut my trip short but it's not that simple. I went to the airport to book the flight but the girl behind the counter just said "No you can't go, you must speak to Margaret. Margaret was my brother's wife.

So I'm rebuffed at the ticket desk and when I went back to the hut, I found out that the villagers were having a leaving party for me, planned for the day before I was originally scheduled to leave—a whole week away. It turned out to be a very long week but, in the end, the party was one of the sincerest acts of sorrow I have experienced in my life.

They gave me gifts of carvings, they gave me bows and arrows they had made from the jungle. They cried and they sobbed that I had to leave and said it was as if I was dying as I would never come back again. I've never seen crying like it and I felt ashamed for wanting to sneak out early.

I have the arrows displayed on my living room wall; the ebony bow I am looking at as I type. Somewhere in one of

the closets is a billum they made for me, but I'm scared to use it for fear that I will unwittingly disturb one of their ancestors.

Whenever I see documentaries on Papua New Guinea, I have a feeling of kinship with the people from my experience there. I have even deeper feelings when I realize that I have a nephew and a niece living there, somewhere out of the frame that's showing, and I have a very strong sense that I have left something of my own spirit back in that valley of ghosts.

Table of Contents

Bill Corden is a happily retired sports columnist living in Vancouver, British Columbia. Now he writes, plays music and makes people laugh.

Follow NER on Twitter @NERIconoclast