



# A Biblical Response to Suanggi in the Arfak Tribe in Papua Island

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## Abstract

The Arfak tribe lives on the island of Papua as a part of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. In 2022 there was a division by adding four new provinces namely South Papua, Central Papua, Highlands Papua, Southwest Papua Provinces in accordance with the laws in force in Indonesia. Papuans belong to the Melanesian race and the Arfak tribe consists of four sub-tribes namely the Hatam, Meyah, Molei, Sough. The Arfak tribe has its livelihoods in gardening, hunting, trading, raising livestock, collecting forest products. Most of the Arfak people are Christians. However, the people of the Arfak tribe still believe in Animism (a belief in a supernatural power that organizes and animates the entire material universe) and Dynamism (a belief that there are powers that exist in natural objects in the world e.g. a rock or a tree might become an object of awe and veneration because it is believed to have great power) which is often termed Suanggi. Belief in Suanggi is in harmony with other religions which are considered to accept Animism and Dynamism in their beliefs such as those evident in Hinduism, Ancient Egyptian Religions, and even Confucianism. This is driven by the search for a figure in power. However, there are differences in the beliefs of the people of the Arfak tribe about the resurrection of a person such as in Judaism Buddhism and some Christian sects. Christianity of course believes in the existence of an Ultimate Person, namely Jesus the God-man as well as belief in the possibility of resurrection in the future life. Resurrection is a certainty in the Christian faith. The Arfak people who are Christians in orientation must also have the belief in death as an advantage towards life in eternity in God's heavenly Kingdom. Christians must follow the teachings of the Holy Bible. As Christians, people who have believed in Jesus Christ should not practice Suanggi in any shape or form because it is based on a malevolent spirit in the folklore of some islands in Indonesia. A discourse on Suanggi and malevolent spirits was carried out in this study using careful reflection on Holy Scripture and other relevant literature from academic books and journals.

**Keywords:** Biblical Studies, Suanggi, Arfak, Papua, Animism, and Dynamism.



## Introduction

In general, the Arfak tribe already follow religion with the majority embracing Christianity. However, some Arfak people also still believe in the existence of Suanggi as an Animist and Dynamist belief (Gravelle, 2010: 6). To be able to understand this, the author uses an ethnological methodology approach to understand the existence of the Papuan people, especially the Arfak tribe community. In this article the author briefly discusses several world religions in order to show the similarities and differences in animist beliefs and the dynamism as manifesting in the Arfak tribe. The article thus provides valuable information to Christians from the Arfak tribe so that they are no longer allowed to practice Suanggi or believe in it. By employing a biblical approach, this article corrects the social behavior of the Arfak tribe who believe in Suanggi, practice Suanggi and it provides Bible based solutions that ensures there will be a positive Christian based revival in the future, a forging of the right attitude in overcoming accusations, hatred and revenge, as well as prohibitions of people who embrace Suanggi practices into the Christian faith after their correct alignment with Christian teachings and the faith.

## Metodology

The author sought to approach Papua, Arfak and Suanggi with a historical and etiological based methodology. In addition, some comparisons are provided between Suanggi and other religions regarding Animism and Dynamism. Then the Holy Bible is used in responding to the Suanggi belief as evidenced in the Arfak tribe in order to provide inputs, solutions and prohibitions to foster behavior that is in accordance with the teachings of the Holy Bible.

## Setting the context

### Arfak Tribe

The Arfak tribe is one of the ethnic groups who inhabit the interior of the city of Manokwari and most of them are in the Arfak Mountains on the island of Papua. The Arfak tribe itself consists of four tribes, namely: Hatam, Meyah, Molei and Sough/Mention (Apomfires & Sapulete, 1993:139). In the explanation of Lekitoo et al.:

The majority of the Hatam tribe are in the foothills of the Arfak Mountains, especially in the south, on the coast of Cendrawasih Bay to the east of the Bird's Head region, to be precise in the lowland areas, the Hatam people are scattered from Rendani, Sowi, Arfai, Andai, Maripi, and along Mupi, Anggrisi, Acemo, Warkapi, Tanah Rubuh Mmubou, Wedoni to Uransbari (Tuwai), Ransiki (Mmujer), and Nenei. In the foothills of the Arfak Mountains to the north, the Hatamese are scattered in Warmare (Mar), especially in the villages in Warmare, Dindei, and Prafi Kampung, and in the Prafi area, including Prafi III. In the high mountain zone the Hatam people are spread across Memambou, Mokwam, Auibehe, Bedan bei, Mbenti, Idabri, Hingk region, the plains of Anggi and the Chatubouw region (Lekitoo et. al, 2015: 247).

Lekitoo and friends also explained that:

The Meyah tribe in the eastern part of the Bird's Head, Manokwari Regency, West Papua, inhabits the eastern part or the Warmare and Prafi Districts. The Meyah people live in villages along the North Shore of the Bird's Head which borders the Mpur tribal area in the West and extends to the East as far as the center of the city of Manokwari (Lekitoo et.al, 2015: 159)

Meanwhile, the Molei tribe is spread in the western part of the Arfak Mountains or Minyambou District and the Sough tribe is generally located in the north or in the Anggi region (Ompe,



2017: 58; Lekitoo et.al, 2015: 247). Thus the Arfak tribes are scattered over several areas in Papua.

The Arfak tribe men and women earn their livelihoods in jobs such as gardening, hunting, trading, raising livestock, and collecting forest products. The Arfak Tribe community uses nomadic methods in their gardening (Apomfires & Sapulete, 1993: 141). The Arfak people usually use slash-and-burn techniques by cutting down trees and letting the leaves dry so they can be burned. This is done to reduce the level of acidity in the soil element (Ompe, 2017: 58; Lekitoo et.al, 2015: 247). In hunting the Arfak people seek out several animals such as moles, cuscus possums, tree kangaroos, wild boars, soa-soa water lizards and crocodiles (Apomfires & Sapulete, 1993: 141). When the Arfak people hunt, they use tools such as spears, arrows, machetes, air rifles and sometimes they may use traps (Apomfires & Sapulete, 1993: 197). Thus, the game can be consumed or sold to the market. In raising livestock, the Arfak tribe usually also farm with pigs and these can be traded because they are used to celebrate at traditional parties where pork is consumed. In addition, pigs are used to purchase Timor fabrics which are high quality woven fabrics. Likewise, there are those who collect products originating from local forests that can be traded in traditional markets in Indonesia.

### **Suanggi - Evil Spirits**

Toy (2020) asserts that “Suanggi can refer to ancestor spirits, personal spiritual beings akin to angels or demons, or the spirits that inhabit inanimate objects in nature. Suanggi can be good or bad. There is not a clear distinction between “black” and “white” spiritual practices. A person may perform rituals to ensure safety and a successful harvest and at the same time perform rituals to curse an enemy”.

The malevolent spirits called Suanggi may appear as males or females. A Suanggi dance is executed when a person dies of unnatural causes, which the community often believes is a result of disturbing *angi-angi* that is an evil spirit that can cause misfortune for the living, especially women. *Angi-angi* emanates from people who cannot get redemption and find peace in the afterlife. The people of Papua still believe in the existence of Suanggi to this day. Consequently, a Suanggi dance is carried out to repel *angi-angi* and to ward off all evil spirits that can cause harm. This dance is considered to be very sacred. Before starting the Suanggi dance, the traditional elders will perform a special ritual. The dance is typically performed by 16 male dancers and two female dancers. The actions of the dance resemble movements from a shaman carrying out rituals to remedy diseases (West Papua Story, 2021).

Due to its sacredness, a Suanggi dance cannot be performed for any type of business reasons because it possesses super magical value. *Angi-angi*'s main targets are generally women and those who are possessed by *angi-angi* are referred to as *kapes mapo* or Suanggi women. It is believed that some women who die due giving birth can also turn into *kapes* (spirits) that are transformed into Suanggi. *Angi-angi* does not just possess, but it can also be used to curse and harm targeted people. The tribal elders will usually conduct a search to find the victims of the Suanggi. Then Suanggi Dance will be held to expel it. *Angi-angi* is believed to disturb is leftover food and it can take over people who are walking alone in forests (West Papua Story, 2021).

In explaining Suanggi itself, the Arfak tribe uses their language in mentioning, among others, Mombuk and Merej. Mombuk is Suanggi Rumah and Mombuk refers to a spirit that can disturb families who usually consume meat. Mombuk can become very angry when they are not given meat as food and family members can become ill as a result of this. Children are usually targeted and they experience stomach pains (Lekitoo et.al, 2015: 234-35). Meanwhile Merej (in Meyah) or Mpriet (in Hatam) is Suanggi which is a person/group of people who carry poison drugs obtained from poisonous plants that can kill victims (Salabai, 2009: 21). The poison grows on some trees and it is found by looking for some dead animals thrown at the base at



the tree where it grows. The poisonous plants come from two plants, one called a male (red leaves) and the other a female (white leaves). The leaves are about 20 cm long and 10 cm wide (Lekitoo et.al, 2015: 311). Usually the perpetrator has to smoke a cigarette to see the direction of the wind so as not to be poisoned by the plant. This tree can only be planted in areas that are not easily accessible by anyone because it is a very dangerous tree. When the tree is found, the killer or Suanggi will break some parts of the tree as a sign. When planted together, these will invite lizards to enter the existing flowers. Then one of the leaves is taken with tubers (petatas) so that the lizards/lizards can eat these.

After that, two additional actors or two Suanggi return to divide a leaf from the tree into three pieces using a razor blade and a bamboo clamp. The left, right, and mother leaf bones are made up of three sections. It is believed that the mother of the daun or leaf, will tickle or characterize humans from a distance by flicking poison at the victim with her 'finger'. The leaves are allowed to dry until they resemble ashes before being torched and inserted into the bamboo. Then, the criminal combines the bark and leaves to squeeze poison into the water that has been preserved. Finally, the dregs or the remnants of a liquid left in a container, together with any sediment, are utilized to be smeared on the legs and body so that they become light and can squeeze into even tiny cracks so that they can escape or are challenging to find.

Suanggi have to examine the subject for about a month before killing him or her. As a result, the deadly concoction can be used to pinpoint the precise moment and manner of the murder that is perpetrated. Suanggi must only be committed by persons who have received training. There are various tiers in the Suanggi hierarchy. Dexterity in applying poison also demands training and requires the perpetrators of the crime to be in an adequate physical condition so that they may appropriately execute the killing of a victim. In addition to the preparations, another reason for needing dexterity is that Suanggi practitioners run the risk of being harmed by the toxic medicine themselves if the lack adroitness.

There are several preparations that need to be made before an assassination is carried out. Suanggi must first observe things from a distance and recite a mantra prayer, together with one other actor, and they then together beat the victims with little sticks or toss wood at them that had been covered in a poisonous concoction. Typically this is done behind the victim's back. To avoid the victim from urinating, they must strip them completely. One person places a piece of bamboo containing a dose of the deadly concoction into the offender's mouth. Those who have consumed poison are granted permission to stand up again until a specific period lapses. After being struck with a piece of wood that has been covered in poison, the specified time period is roughly three days (for women) to five days (for men), but it cannot be more than seven days (Permenas, 2022). The bite of a lizard (Merej Fog in Hatam Negrib language) that lives among poisonous medicinal plants covers a portion of the wound left by the poison medication. Food is then provided to lizards in the shape of tubers. The scar can be sucked by the lizard to make it appear to be healing (Lekitoo et al., 2015: 234.-235.5). A lizard can also be inserted into the mouth and the wounded areas are repaired from within by the lizard. Moreover, the lizard will lay colorful eggs (black, plain white and red). This is done to eliminate any indication of a murderer's whereabouts. As a result, the person poisoned will pass away and the individual who killed the deceased cannot be identified in any conceivable manner.

Several poisonous substances are used in the execution of the crimes such as the Numueb tree which has two varieties, one with white leaves and the other with red leaves. Negrib, a remedy for this poison, is similarly derived from the numueb tree, specifically from the leaves that a certain kind of lizard eats. But-nti is derived from a plant called Ayamaru, which resembles a rope. These sections can then be snipped from the rope. The victim will feel agony once the culprit has placed it on the road they may walk on. Moreover, Ngyapu is a lethal substance made from ginger tubers that is consumed. A poison made from bark, bekoungkek, is employed in the same way as a poison. Negrib, an animal waste product, is



the source of the poison nengriboi. It works similarly to bekoungkek in terms of usage. The poisonous drug inangbungkek is derived from the woody tree Ibatbou. Injuries will result if it strikes the body, and the wound will enlarge. The kriseyewut tree is the source of krisyeut. This lethal medication needs to be placed in a bamboo box made of woven bamboo that can be closed and opened. It is believed that if opened it allows the victim's voice to be recorded and preserved inside the box. The person is assumed to be dead if the box is opened and there is a broken bamboo inside or blue flies are coming out of it. For the Hatam people, each of these is typically utilized as a poison and also as an antidote. Meanwhile, three poisons from the Meyah tribe are employed, specifically: 1 Mosoku Efey: a lethal substance that is extracted and placed in a bottle. This is used to allow victims who have passed away to resurrect within a set timeframe. Second, Mosoku Efuga is a stick of poisonous dry medicine. The bamboo is injected with this toxin. The offenders typically use air rifles or slingshots to carry out their crimes using it. Finally, a kind of lizard known as a Merej fog consumes the leaves of poisonous medicinal trees (Mosoku efey). Itchy leaves are used to transport the lizard. This lizard then has the ability to suckle the wound of a victim and heal it (Lokitoo et.al, 2015: 234-35).

Suanggi falls under the animism and dynamism categories. There is an underlying feeling of belief in animism that there will be spiritual beings who can serve or oppose human goals (Jirhanuddin, 2010: 53-4). Dynamism is the idea that everything has the potential to impact whether human efforts to live are successful or unsuccessful. Another definition of dynamism is the belief in a sacred, impersonal, spiritual, or corporeal force or power that permeates all things, including people and animals (Honig, 2003:34). Dynamism is regarded as one of the earliest religions practiced by mankind and is intimately associated with a country's founding culture. This conviction enables a person to exercise caution or to view certain behaviors as offensive when they are directed against things, animals, or people who share his or her convictions. So, that person needs to take the proper action in order to avoid having negative or detrimental effects in their life. On the other hand, if these restrictions or taboos are upheld, it will affect success. Fetishes are used and there are items, animals, or people with supernatural abilities that frequently offer protection from calamities, health healing from illnesses, fertility, and grant the user other magical abilities (for example, amulets).

Arfak people believe that Suanggi has a power to be able to resurrect people who have died. Unlike the Buddhist belief that believes in the existence of a new life again in another lifetime, Arfak people believe that a person will be reborn through a continuous transfer of energy between unlimited forms so that what is reborn is not the human person but the qualities or character in another form. The idea of the Arfak people that Suanggi (Mombuk or Merej) is essentially a manipulative manifestation of human belief in other powers mirrors the belief in Animism and Dynamism in ancient beliefs, folk religions, and even world religions like Hinduism (cf. Lontoh & Chia 2023). Here, we observe the human propensity to look for someone in authority. But in their quest, people have fallen into a trap that makes it evident they prefer to believe in a power and in spirits or in powers that are, in fact, beings in the cosmos and they are clearly not believing in the Creator. The omnipotence possessed by God the Creator of the Universe must be greater than mere human creation (Romans 1:18-25). Likewise, as with other beliefs, the Arfak tribe's belief in Suanggi is a big mistake from a Christian perspective. Moreover, it is clear that most Arfak people already believe in the existence of Jesus Christ as the world's Lord and Savior.

### **Suanggi Arfak and the Christian Bible Contrasted**

Arfak tribe believers must have a number of strong qualities in order to respond to the Suanggi practice faced in daily life, including the requirement to believe in death and resurrection to eternity, the proper attitude to overcome accusations, hatred, and retaliation, and the capacity to issue warnings against any Suanggi practitioners. To promote Suanggi's practices and beliefs, this section must address these difficulties.



## **Belief in Life After Death and Eternal Resurrection**

According to Christian doctrine, God judges humans by bringing about their physical deaths as a punishment for their sins. The prohibition against eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was disobeyed by man (cf. Genesis 2:17, 3:19). Every human also experiences death (Romans 5:14). Humans are thus subject to punishment, one of which results in death. Nonetheless, the Christian religion upholds the belief that the dead can really be raised to life through Jesus Christ. The bodies of pharaohs or monarchs were mummified, coated in gold, and interred in the pyramids as evidence of the expected revival of life in ancient faiths, which the Egyptians were aware of in the past. Ismail says:

Ancient Religions believed that humans would be resurrected after death to live forever. When death picks up, someone's soul will rise to the sky shaped like a bird. If his body remains intact after being buried, then his spirit will return to him. Thus, in the eyes of the Ancient Religion people Death's end was not an end, for one would return to life as before. It is this belief that makes them mummify someone's body (Ismail, 2017:113).

The Arfak people must keep in mind that believers will experience an eternal resurrection even if they only experience a temporary one brought on by Suanggi medicine. For believers, death is gain (Philippians 1:21). There is hence no reason to be overly terrified of dying. The inevitable final chapter of physical life is death. So, a believer's life does not end with death. Christians will have eternal life. Jesus tells his followers not to be terrified of those who have the ability to end human life. Instead, one should be afraid of God, who has the ability to extinguish both spirit and body (Matthew 10:28). Both family and personal death are within the control of God. The appropriate attitude to have when dealing with death, is just as Job did when dealing with the deaths of his children. Job's attitude of resignation to God's omnipotence illustrates the existence of his faith. Thus, we need to stop doing wrong things while harboring mistrust or preparing for retaliation (Job 1:20-21). Similarly in James's counsel, he indicates that God is forgiving to those who are diligent like Job (James 5:11). Hence, it requires patience and persistence to wait for God's assistance so that every believer has the strength to cope with difficult situations. Because believers have trust in the resurrection at the end of time, grief for the deceased should be properly handled.

## **The Right Attitude in Overcoming Accusation, Resentment and Revenge**

You must have a love-first mentality if you want to be a believer. In his sermon on the hill, Jesus explained that the best course of action to cope with individuals who do acts of evil is to refrain from combat (Matthew 5:39). Paul's instructions on how to live as a Christian, include thanking those who persecute you and cursing others (Romans 12:14). Christians ought to repay evil with good (Romans 12:17). As a believer, avenging the evildoers must be via deeds of goodness (Romans 12:19-20) and this is due to the fact that taking revenge is both God's and not just any believers' right (Romans 12:19).

By engaging in the Suanggi practices, one is committing murder by planning and carrying out the crime. God has always punished those who commit murder and this is similar to how Cain treated Abel, his own brother. Cain was cursed as a result of this foul deed of killing his brother Abel (Genesis 4:10-12). The Ten Commandments include a prohibition against murder (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). The practice of divination among believers is believed to be wrong before God because it is considered as a form of abomination. Believers should neither come to do any evil, and neither should they become spellcasters, sorcerers, fortune tellers, diviners or magicians. In carrying out Suanggi practices, it means that one has carried out the same evil actions as those mentioned above (Leviticus 20:6; Deuteronomy 18:10-12). The fact that a female servant was in possession of a divining spirit worried Paul as an apostle. Paul exorcised the spirit from the woman in the name of Jesus (Acts 16:18). Jesus possesses



a power that is unmatched by anything else and thus Paul could expel the spirit with assurance. This implies that other Christians also possess the same ability and can communicate with incredible power to drive malevolent spirits away. Paul was bitten by a viper on one occasion but was spared death (Acts 28:3-5). This demonstrates Paul's and other believers' inclusivity as children of light. As a result, a believer must have trust in the existence of God, who walks beside him or her. in order to prevent Suanggi plans from other people affecting their lives.

As Toy (2021) says: "... God is the giver of life, and that God is at work in the reality of our world both spiritually and materially. All humans and spirits are agents in the drama that unfolds in history. This drama is witnessed by the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and continues to unfold today. We live in the already and the not yet—living in the tension of a world radically broken and yet radically redeemed".

## Conclusion

Suanggi, also known as Mombuk and Merej (Mpriet), is one of the Arfak tribe's fundamental beliefs. It falls under the animism and dynamism categories and is practiced in Papua. Hinduism and other existing religions are manipulative versions of other religions, as are other worldviews. It is important to acknowledge the existence of the Arfak people's confidence in Suanggi. But it is important to recognize that natural forces have their limitations and that demonic forces exist. Only God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the triune Godhead offer us true life and spiritual and physical healing. The Suanggi are akin to the demons in the New Testament, and they work against goodness, a sound and valuable life, and they are anti-Christian in disposition and deeds. The demons may have some powers, but they are useless when facing the power of the *Paraclete* - Holy Spirit. The universe is completely under God's control. Hence, adherents should not have confidence in other religions, such as Suanggi. Christians need to have faith that there will be a resurrection that results in eternal life. To defeat mistrust, hostility, and retaliation, Christians must adopt the proper mindset. Christian behavior must be genuinely loving. Christians are no longer permitted to practice suicide or to procure a suicide. *Agape* love is required by all believers. The family is the foundation for creating a life of love in daily life. Peace on earth can be achieved through harmony in small families, large families, and the entire community when there is belief in the atoning blood of Jesus Christ Our Lord and Saviour.

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**Conflict of Interest Statement:** *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



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