Can a name drive peace?

by Miranda Forsyth

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A family in Kandep, Enga Province, Papua New Guinea
Photo Credit: Anton Lutz

What's in a name? Can a name drive peace?

I recently came across a scholar with a fascinating focus: how personal naming practices can be used to promote peace. There is a broad literature on names as social commentary, memory and moral aspiration, but their use as a peacebuilding practice was new to me. He gave me a few examples. A child may be called *Pohisohofa* (meaning listen to the other party)*, or Hodu Haza Hora* (let it not happen again) in Bahumono, a conflict-affected community in southern Nigeria.

I was struck by these examples because I had been hearing about a "same but different" practice in parts of PNG, where personal naming practices are used to keep grievances or unresolved obligations alive across generations. In Enga for example, a child may be called *Liyokata* (wait and harm or kill the opponents or enemy, the one who always waits around to take revenge even after everyone retreated from the battlefield). Or, after a place is burned down or deserted, the babies born may be named *Tapenda*. That name, I was told, will remind the community in the future that the person was born after his place or village was burned down or deserted by their enemy tribe.

The restorative Nigerian examples sent me on a search to find out whether or not names in PNG also carry aspirations of peace, not just grievance.

The anthropological literature on PNG naming is rich and varied. I found that names perform many social functions, and there is enormous diversity across the country. A common thread is that names allocate persons into histories. They can tie a child to land, ancestors, affines, enemies, dead relatives or mythic beings. They encode claims, relationships and obligations.

The mechanisms through which names do this vary. Sometimes names record grievance, as among the Imbonggu of the Southern Highlands, for instance, where William Wormsley's research shows that names can recall tribal fighting, flight after

war or the suspicion of poisoning, encoding a father's intention to recover what was lost, or to one day identify who was responsible for a relative's death.

Sometimes names constitute political property. Simon Harrison's work on the Manambu-speaking Avatip community of the Sepik River shows how ancestral names are bound up with claims to ritual knowledge and ceremonial standing, a symbolic economy through which clans compete over rank and authority. However, rivalry over names is often channelled into debate, performance and cosmological argument rather than violence. Naming practices, in this light, can therefore sustain grievance but can also domesticate it through giving it a public language and ritual form that avoids physical confrontation.

Sometimes names manage dangerous relationships through avoidance rather than assertion. Among the Huli, Robert Glasse records that the name of a killed enemy was deliberately not spoken, since uttering it risked attracting the dead man's vengeful ghost. Among the Mendi, D'Arcy Ryan describes name avoidance around death, ghosts and inter-clan relations, including conventions that buffer tense ties between intermarrying groups. In these cases, the active power of names is managed by not invoking them.

In some parts of PNG, names can also build bridges. Doris Bacalzo's work with Wampar communities shows how namesake relations create obligations across ethnic and kinship boundaries. In interethnic families, a child's names connect them to multiple networks, and namesakes may contribute to school fees, bridewealth, food, clothing or everyday support. Alexandra Aikhenvald's comparative survey across many Papuan languages extends this picture: among the Kamula, a namesake relation generates mutual obligations linked to bridewealth; among the Karawari, a shared name implies shared descent, land rights and marriage paths; among the Manambu and Iatmul, shared totemic names oblige mutual hospitality and care.

What is clear is that personal naming practices in PNG are important in making social meaning, including about what should be remembered and valued. In places where the past has involved conflict, the kind of horrors they remember can be extremely detailed. For example, I was told about the name *Warabao* (meaning surrounded and killed). The context is that in tribal fights, when enemy tribes' men surround a house and kill everyone inside, the widows of those men will name their sons Warabao. This reminds the family and tribe that their father was killed when the enemies came and surrounded the house when they were sleeping and killed them all.

Most peacebuilding work focuses on institutions: courts, compensation processes,

security sector reform, land settlement, trauma services. Naming practices are much more domestic. They are the daily speech through which families and communities tell each other what has happened to them, what debts are still owed and what kind of future they wish to imagine.

I could not find any PNG names that, like Hodu Haza Hora, remember a war in order to refuse it. The anthropological record is far from complete, so they may well be out there and not unrecorded. Yet the record we do have still tells us something. Liyokata and Warabao carry the duty to avenge down the generations; they are part of how a cycle of violence stays alive. But in some places names do the opposite work too. Among the Wampar, the Kamula and others, a shared name ties people together in obligations of care across exactly the lines that conflict tends to harden.

So, whether a child grows up carrying a debt of revenge or a tie of obligation is being settled in one of the most ordinary places there is, in what we decide to call them.

That, to me, is why peacebuilders should pay attention to names. They can alert us to whether a community is still harbouring grievances or starting to release them. Further, if the cycle of violence is being passed on in naming practices, this may also be one of the places it can be interrupted. As the children of Bahumono remind their community every time someone calls their name: “Hodu Haza Hora!” Let it not happen again.

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