

Nobody wins in a tribal fight

by Steven Gari

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As a companion to [today's article](#) on armed conflict in the PNG Highlands, and with the author's permission, we are publishing this edited version of a poem by Steven Gari, written in 2000 when he was working with Oxfam International on a project with Kup Women for Peace. It was first published in a collection edited by Sabet (Elizabeth Cox).

I. Destruction

Where there is a tribal fight, there is much destruction
and social chaos.

There are no police.
So, no law and order.
The gun and aggression rule
and people are frightened and live in terror.

The local, lively
charismatic churches
are silenced.
They look desolate
left in ruin
behind the shadows of confusion.
And cannot provide
the joy, happiness, laughter
and safe haven we expect.

Schools are shut down.
Children are displaced,
dispersed and left helpless.
Health services are shut.
There are no medicines
for the wounded and the sick

including children.

II. Death

People get killed.
They suffer and die.

Tension and violence are high.
Houses are burnt down
and we all crowd up
in the pigs' house.

Coffee trees and other trees
are cut down, everywhere.
The shrubs and forest
are burnt down, everywhere.
Gardens are destroyed
and looted and we have little
or no food to eat.

The entire village is raided
Properties vandalised
and plundered.

The fleeing, the shouting,
the noise, the dying,
the burning, the crying
and all the chaos
are at climax.

The shocking, electrifying crisis
is unbearable and
the people are challenged
to flee or to fight, for survival.

Tribal fights are not good. We all lose.
Nobody wins in a tribal fight.

III. Run or die

I run and run.
But, I don't know where to run to.
My grandfather runs
with his walking stick.

My mother runs
with her string bag and cargo.
Our friends run
with whatever they lay their hands on.

Our enemies, once our friends
also flee, cry and bleed.

We all run.
We run up the mountains.
We run down to Wahgi River.

Our enemies,
once our friends,
shout in triumph
and celebrate their victory
over our loss.

Not long, we shout triumphant
and celebrate our victory
over our enemies,
once our good friends,
now defeated, bitter foes.

Our enemies,
once our good friends.
We are all playing seesaw,
laughing and crying in turn
in the tribal fight.

Our enemies,
once our good friends.
Together we all struggle
to seek refuge and safety.

Tribal fights are not good. We all lose.
Nobody wins in a tribal fight.

IV. The vulnerable suffer

My mother gave birth to my little sister
along the Waghi River.
She is not well.

My uncle, my father's brother, is very sick ...
might die soon.
My cousin is ill
from typhoid and malaria.

My uncle, my mother's brother from the enemy tribe,
died from a gun wound
from our village Rambo
and his machine gun.

Our village Rambo
died from a gun wound
from an ambush.

Our grandmother was tortured,
accused by our village Rambo's family
of practising witchcraft.

We have no new
and better Rambos
to protect us,
guarantee us our safety.

We have no money
to buy food,
not even soap to wash.
We have no safe freshwater source to drink from.

We have no proper shelter.
We all live and sleep crowded in the pigs' house.

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V. Education stops

I want to get my education
and be part of the changing world.
But there is no school
in the village.

My best land is taken
by my enemy.
The land I have now is not fertile

and I do not want to work hard for less benefit.

I don't want to be a grass cutter, a security guard or a cleaner.

I want to be a lawyer or a doctor.

How will I get educated?

We the children

from tribal fighting areas

will never be like the other children

who never have tribal fights.

Other kids who had no tribal fights

to live through

will become lawyers,

teachers, doctors,

accountants and educated elites.

They will make good, educated judgements

and better decisions.

They will make sound leaders.

There will be a gap between us.

Money is powerful

and has bought guns.

Guns are powerful

and have caused destruction,

destroying my village.

The person with money runs away

and lives safely, in town

and sends their children to good schools.

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VI. Production stops

I work. My mother works. My father works.

We all work hard together

but we produce little.

We work to make money

but we cannot sell our produce.

The people and their produce

cannot be transported to town.

The road is blocked.
The roads and bridges need maintenance.
We cannot eat the coffee bags.
We cannot eat all the sweet potatoes and vegetables.
We are unable to buy soap, salt,
new clothes and store goods.

Our lands are not put to good use,
our labour and time are wasted,
our natural resources
not effectively utilised.

Tribal fights are not good. We all lose.
Nobody wins in a tribal fight.

VII. I wish

I wish I could attend a school.
I wish my little sister
did not die.

I wish I could buy myself
a pair of shoes.

I wish my family will soon
have their own house.

I wish I would play freely
and sing, swim,
and go hunting without restrictions.

I wish I have all the basic services
and privileges
like my neighbours
who do not have a history
of tribal fights.

I will make sure my children
will live peacefully
and competitively
in the future
and enjoy life.

Tribal fights are not good.

I see that we all lose
and nobody wins in a tribal fight.

VIII. My aunt's village

One day, I sought refuge
at my aunt's village.
They never had tribal fights.
They live well and in harmony
with their neighbours.

They have a big house
with many things
collected over time.
They have electricity,
a car, a television and radio.
They have many plates and cups
for everyone including visitors.
My aunt's children eat plenty
of good nutritious food
and they grow faster.
Her children wear good clothes,
own bicycles and
are healthy and playful.

Her children have laptops,
tablets and phones
and many complicated electronic devices.

Her children have their own bank account
and cards to access savings.

Her children go to colleges and universities.
Her young children will follow their bigger brothers and sisters.

I see my future as gloomy and shaky.
I am ashamed of my tribe
who are fighting constantly
and living in misery.

Tribal fights are not good.
I see that we all lose
and nobody wins in a tribal fight.

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Steven Gari is the founder of a peace building organisation, YAKA, which for more than a decade has worked on reconciliations with various warring clans and community initiatives in the Simbu province of Papua New Guinea. He previously worked for Oxfam International.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/nobody-wins-in-a-tribal-fight-20240301/>