



## 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.

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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.

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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.

## About the author/s

### Steven Gari

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.

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