A qualitative exploration of how villagers in the remote Highlands of Papua New Guinea are affected by involvement in inter-tribal warfare

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Setting the scene
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8 million people, >800 spoken languages, 87% of the population living in rural areas (1), 7 Psychiatrists (2).

Belief in sorcery. Severe illness caused by sorcery. Less severe treatable by a mixture of traditional/Western medicine (3/4).

Belief system exists amongst educated; 84% of surveyed tertiary education students believing sorcery could cause illness (5).

Medical students, 28% believe mental illness could be caused by sorcery, 21% believed that modern medicine can’t treat mental illness (6).

PNG-trained health workers (n = 209), confidence in diagnosing spirit possession and sorcery was higher than confidence in diagnosing schizophrenia (7).

3) Goddard, M. (2011)
5) Burton-Bradley, B. G. (1990)
Setting the scene

Conflict endemic to the Highlands region (8/9).

Historically, trauma is the leading cause of surgical death in the country's largest hospital (10).

Enga Provincial Hospital, arrow and spear wounds constituted 14% of all procedures (11).

Injury from tribal fighting accounted for 24% of trauma admissions to Mendi Hospital (12).
Setting the scene - the village

The most elderly villagers remember first contact with the outside world as planes flying overhead during WWII.

The wreckages of planes saw metal introduced to this society.

The introduction of Western concepts of health came with the Kuru patrols of Dr Michael Alpers (13).

Democratic elections have replaced the appointment of village chiefs.

Mobile phones are now in use, recharged using copper wire and disposable batteries.

Models of understanding the world have been passed down intergenerationally and challenged by outside influences only recently.

Methods

**Consent** - Contact with Paigatasa village council through the project interpreter, a Paigatasa villager by birth, in order to seek community consent and ascertain feasibility. The council was read a letter in Tok Pisin (also known as PNG pidgin) summarising the methods and aims of the project, and HREC processes and requirements. Community feedback and feasibility were discussed by phone. Village council drafted a letter consenting to involvement.

After the primary researcher arrived in the village all participants consented individually. Participants had time to contemplate a translated participant information sheet which was read aloud in the native language and included information on how to withdraw from the study. Participants were asked to sign a consent form and given translated copies of all paperwork.

**Interview schedule** - semi-structured interview guide, informed by the principles of Patton and Silverman. The interviewer’s conduct was guided by ‘Kvale’s List of qualification criteria of an interviewer’. The interview guide was tested via a pilot interview with the project interpreter. Questions that translated poorly were adjusted iteratively as guided by the project interpreter. Recorded interviews took place in a private environment and typically lasted 1.5 hours. Recordings were destroyed after transcription.

Methods

**Participants** - 7 participants. 5 wars (1984 - 2003). All male. Ages 40-60 years. Between 5-9 children, all subsistence farmers, some income from coffee beans. 4 participants no formal education, 2 completed primary school, 1 partially completed primary school. 6 Seventh Day Adventist. Pseudonyms: Caleb, Yauwii, Arex, Manuel, Amu, Nixaz, and Yosia.

**Analytic procedure** - Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (17). Inductive approach, does not test a predetermined hypotheses, explores the making of meaning for individuals, recognised as experts in their own lived experience (18).

Transcribed interviews, read several times, themes emerged with each reading. Themes grounded to text by, linked to participant quotes. Culturally validated with project interpreter. Clustered by similarity, superordinate themes extracted. Same process undertaken independently by co-researcher (BM) to reduce confirmation bias. Differences in themes were reconciled in discussion with the project supervisor (KA).

Observations - The act of war

Ending war and reducing loss - displacement from lands a big fear, representing the end of intergenerational land inheritance, and threatening clan identity (19). Sociocentric psyche is adopted during wartime.

“I don’t care if I die... I fought for my family and the land and my community” - Nixaz

Most wars ended within a month. Inhospitable conditions in ‘haus man’. Warriors don’t wash. Can only continue until food exhausted. Sleep is difficult, up to 100 warriors. Warriors mind’s turn to the welfare of loved ones, conflict between defender of community and protector of family. Warriors have relatives within enemy villages. Length of war is limited by the time required to achieve ‘payback’. Occurs when an equal amount of loss or suffering is achieved between the two sides, and tended to occur within 2-4 weeks of the onset of war. Sometimes conflict ended by an aggrieved person voluntarily relocating from their community.

Observations - Culturally bound beliefs during war

Organ intentionality - warriors believed that bodily functions such as itching, sneezing or urination predicted the enemy’s location. Ascribed this to organ intentionality, passed down intergenerationally, may offering a sense of purpose and identity in a time of uncertainty (20).

“I urinate. When it drops I feel that somebody is there. My father told me that when this signal comes you are the leader of the battle.” - Yuawii

Paranormal thinking increases in times of stress (21) due to the adaptive utilisation of causal relationships in the setting of incomplete information (22). Culturally and intergenerationally influenced, reinstates a sense of control (23).

20) Lindeman & Saher, 2007
21) Keinan, 1994; Keinan, 2002; Lasikiewicz, 2016
22) Foster & Kokko, 2009; Killeen, 1978
23) Beck & Forstmeier, 2007; Friedland, Keinan & Regev, 1992; McNamara, Green & Olsson, 2006
Observations - Culturally bound beliefs during war

‘Poison’ magic -

“They are called ‘poison people’. They get spit from his mouth, or blood. They wrap it in this special leaf. Then they see that the person is sick. Swelling legs or the stomach swollen up. He cannot eat. When they dry the fluid in the sun the chief will pass away.” - Yosia

The influence of the dead on the living - Participants believed the dead could influence the living directly. Arex conceptualised his desire for vengeance during war was due to the spirit of the dead entering his mind to avenge their assassination. Also believed a living villager may be possessed by the spirit. Other members of the village then follow the possessed person, who will disclose the location of the ‘poison person’. The person identified is often killed, fulfilling the requirement for ‘payback’, and avoiding war. This phenomenon is not unique to Paigatasa (24).

24) Forsythe & Eves, 2015
Observations - The ending of war

The peace ritual -

“They hold a plant. You know this ‘tunket’? The enemy holds, the other enemy holds and they plant it. They said, ‘This will never happen again’. They feast together. The warriors hold a piece of meat like this (gestures with hands out and palms up) and they give it to other people to eat. They were hugging and crying. Now all the peace came and all of them are brothers and sisters in the community.” - Caleb
### TABLE 1. MASTER TABLE OF IPA SUPERORDINATE THEMES FOR THE GROUP

The page and paragraph number grounding superordinate themes to participant quotes are recorded in the table, as indicated by the page number, a dot, then the paragraph, relating to the location of the quote in the transcribed interview text. Accounts of the causes of war and cultural reflections are not included in this table as they represent factual information and observation rather than an exploration of meaning making for the individual participant, in keeping with the principles of IPA.[29] Factual information and observations have been grounded to text in the participant’s Table of Individual Themes below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Themes</th>
<th>Caleb</th>
<th>Yauwii</th>
<th>Arex</th>
<th>Manuel</th>
<th>Amu</th>
<th>Nixaz</th>
<th>Yosia</th>
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<td>2.1</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>14.1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>9.1</td>
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<td>23.2</td>
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<td>4.4</td>
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<td>23.1</td>
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<td>2.3. Shame and guilt as a trigger for transformation</td>
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<td>11.3</td>
<td>20.1</td>
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<td>3.1</td>
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<td>4.4</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>27.2</td>
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<td>5.1. Hopelessness in a conflict prone society</td>
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<td>18.4</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>13.1</td>
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Observations - The effects of war and the making of meaning

Emotions at the onset of war - Anger - Universally felt. Directed at perceived injustice, could only be redressed by enacting ‘payback’.

- Arrived at a mediation meeting to find that one side had come ready for battle.

- “When you get the shield and go to battle, you will shout. When they hear me shout they will think, ‘Oh. That’s Nixaz coming’. I shout when I’m excited to go and fight.”

- Prospect of his birth clan being displacement from traditional lands, inability to support family and afford a funeral feast for the dead.

- Seen in the two youngest warriors, fear of vulnerability if family killed.

- Conceptualising battle as a game, battle as like hunting animals in the forest.
Observations - The effects of war and the making of meaning

**Resolving unwanted negative emotions after war** - Negative affects towards the other turned toward the self.

“Kill them, the same as he has killed me. Make it fair. I don’t have any other feelings. One is dead. I take revenge.... I’ve got my family. So that thought came. I’ve done the wrong thing not to protect my family.” - Amu

Those whose anger was satisfied by taking ‘payback’ took part in a peace ceremony. They felt no animosity towards the enemy after war ended, but did have negative affects toward the self.

Avoidance - Fear of ongoing retaliation was felt by one participant as ‘payback’ had not been achieved and peace never made. The two participants who were adolescents during war never forgave the enemy as they fled, and struggled to forget what had not been forgiven.

“The feelings that I had in the war, the ideas and dreams that I have, my thoughts, I will never forget. So when I become old at the end of my life it will stop.” - Caleb
Conflicting loyalties - community versus clan.

Yauwii struggled to resolve his loyalty to clan versus village as he had an uncle fighting with the enemy. To protect each other, Yauwii and his uncle would sneak away from the ‘haus man’ by night and meet at the border to exchange battle plans. Having family on both sides led to Yauwii and his uncle to advocate for peace.

Caleb was adopted from a different language group at a young age. When war broke out in his birth village his loyalty to his adopted village was in conflict with his loyalty to the clan he was descended from. He resolved to fight in secret for his birth clan.

Yosia decided never to return to war once it had ended. His wife was born in another village and he was afraid that if he died in battle his wife’s claim to his traditional lands would not be recognised. His loyalty to family trumped his loyalty to village.

Amu and Naxiz spoke of psychological tension between their requirement to reside in the ‘haus man’ versus their desire to return home and protect family.
Observations - The effects of war and the making of meaning

Changing identity through war - Trauma and loss necessitates individuals to revise their place in the world, revise their assumptions, and seek meaning (25). The culture around the individual defines what is available for accommodation/assimilation. After war most warriors assimilated the church’s teachings and embraced the newfound social hierarchy this institution conferred. The church provided a refuge from negative emotions such as shame and guilt.

Many who identified as leaders during wartime came to identify as church leaders in later life, filling a newly evolved societal position that required similar skills to wartime leadership such as public speaking and mentoring. Such actions fit with ‘positioning theory’ (26).

25) Ann Barbato & Irwin, 1992
26) Harré & Van Langenhove, 1998
Observations - The effects of war and the making of meaning

**Forgiveness** - The ‘peace ritual’ represented a form of socially imposed forgiveness (27).

Some came to realise that the suffering felt through the death of friends or relatives is the same suffering shared by the enemy.

Arex - transformation from a young formidable warrior to eventually becoming known in the village as ‘The Peacemaker’. Became a church leader who seeks to lead the community away from war. This action parallels the final stage of Mihalache’s (2012) stages of forgiveness; ‘Expansion of meaning’, whereby through self-healing an individual allows others to heal.

Through religious teachings and self-transcendence (28) many found forgiveness towards their enemy and moved towards non-violent conflict resolution.

27) Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; also see Kohlberg, 1981
28) Reed, 1991
Observations - The effects of war and the making of meaning

Balancing hope and hopelessness - Overall hopeful that war would happen less in future. Western education has encouraged youth to seek schooling elsewhere, resulting in increased intervillage marriage:

“It’s hard for them to attack us because they are our relatives.” - Caleb

More careful interaction with other villages. Reflects the kinship of this sociocentric culture, individual is part of a clan, and the clan is part of the community.

Participants felt religious moral teachings may reduce the incidence of war, and that the church offered another avenue of resolving grievances.

Participants thought that democratic elections would see leaders more accountable.

Yosia hoped that improved telecommunications may lead to conflicts being resolved remotely, reducing the likelihood of physical violence.

Younger generation is increasingly adopting Western values, equating this with a movement away from a culture of war.

Ubiquitously participants believed that their area was prone to war:

“We live in a problem country and we are a problem village.” - Nixaz

Arex felt that displacement from land led to an ongoing cycle of intergenerational conflict due to the initial offense never being resolved, and stories of unrighted wrongs being passed down intergenerationally:

“The clan in the new location will still be enemies. They will tell the history and the story and it will never end.” - Arex
Limitations

Attempts were made to limit confirmation and cultural bias as much as possible, however they potentially still existed.

Participants were self-selected and those who were severely traumatised may have chosen not to participate. Conversely, many participants were among the village elite.

Translation may have resulted in a simplification of the richness of emotional language.

It is possible that based on the influence of the interviewer, a Westerner from outside the participant’s culture, that participants may have consciously or unconsciously altered their dialogue.
Funding and assistance

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