

COMMENTARIES & FEATURES

Chimbu warriors

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Chimbu Warriors 1949

And the end of tribal violence

BY PAUL MAIMA

TRIBAL fights and ethnic violence are no longer predominant in the Chimbu Province.

It was once a hard nut to crack that existed in all societies in Chimbus six districts.

According to a senior statesman and former Ambassador Aiwa Olmi, in the 1960s tribal fights erupted from disagreement in marriages, land issues and domestic animal associated disputes.

The influential leaders in those days were ‘bossboi, tultuls, luluais,’ and traditional inherited chiefs. This is the system from which the modern-day ward committee and council are chosen.

These community leaders played an important role in the cessation of tribal violence in their respective community.

Several factors had influenced the cessation of tribal fights since the Chimbu Province came into contact with the outside world and integration of different cultures and beliefs.

That includes conversion to Christianity, embracing western civilisation such as education, medical expansion, and migration of people into urban areas, change of attitudes, mindsets, intermarriages, and building modern houses in the villages.

Most villages in Chimbu today are structured with local leaders overseeing the social function of the communities. The people generally enjoy a peaceful life with focus on enhancing better socio-economic status.

That was the result of a transformed mindset after decades of tribal clash amongst themselves that resulted in tragic loss of lives, damages to properties and gardens. Most conflicts in recent days are usually solved through their local law and order leaders and committees.

Chimbu’s isolated area and challenging geography has reminded its inhabitants to be resilient.

They have adapted well to the changing environment and have embraced education as the transition to break the barrier of struggles and a catalyst for change to transform their society.

The testimonies of that have indeed reshaped Chimbu's transition from a warrior mentality to being respectful, generous and innovative with an educated population to think big, positive and do better things in life.

Tribal violence in Chimbu Province was obviously consistent and embedded into their culture before Christianity and Western civilisation entered the province in the early 1930s.

With the changing times, every society in Chimbu has adapted well to it.

Tribal fight is now a tale that the young generation of today have learnt that its consequences were costly and immense.

No tribes have won the fight. No new boundaries or territories have been possessed. The result is only destruction and annihilation of human dignity.

The only prize has been the disintegration of their families, tribes, villages and properties. Leaders were injured, casualties of warriors, tribes lost food gardens, commercial valuables such as coffee, and most damaging was education opportunities lost.

There is now a gap of lost opportunities.

The Chimbu were known for their aggressiveness particularly in defending their traditional land boundaries, forest, rivers, food gardens, their families and tribes.

This is where the name warriors were inherited and identified amongst the Chimbu populace in the Highlands region of Papua New Guinea.

The Chimbu communities' live in a structured and organised way of village life. The first explorers into the Highlands region attested to that when they came across the Chimbu tribes.

For centuries since early migration into the mountainous province by their ancestors, there are oral tales of families fighting amongst themselves that resulted in further migration.

Around the time Christianity entered the province, the Chimbu tribes from the six districts settled in their village hamlets normally on the mountain ranges. That was to avoid further confrontation with the warring tribes.

The tribal enemies are within the close proximity of neighbouring villages. A typical Chimbu warrior is of muscular build, tall, aggressive who can carry a shield made from a huge tree trunk on his left hand and a spear in his right hand.

They are the frontliners. The second row comprises men with bows and arrows. The third row of fighters are young men who were learning the art of tribal warfare.

They were tasked to follow tribal men and are duty bound to save the injured, resupply spears, arrows, food, water, and messengers for tactics and positions.

The warriors would all paint their faces in black charcoal with head dress of cassowary feathers, furs and feathers of sacred birds.

Once the village Chief declares a tribal fight, there is an immediate traditional sacred ceremony to initiate the warriors.

Men are all forbidden to go and see their wives or children and all are required by strict regulation to sleep in the men's house during the duration of the tribal warfare.

Someone would shout and all men did their war cry and ran in groups to face the warring tribes who were also prepared for the same deadly game.

During the tribal fights in the 1970s, fighting weapons such as bows and arrows, spears, and fighting shields were used. Those materials were all crafted from various wood and bamboo.

From the eighties, the Bomai region from South Chimbu advanced by buying modern firearms as a means of protection against threats from each others tribes.

Then the village court system was introduced by the National Government to solve tribal conflict in the villages by former Chimbu Provincial member and Gumine MP late John Mua Nilkare. It was proven very effective till today, with community leaders' participation in peace mediation.

The last tribal fight I witnessed during my childhood in my area in Gumine district was in 1984, 1986 and in 1997. On record our Koblaku tribe has been engaged in five tribal wars in 1960s.

Many of our prominent local leaders and many young men have lost their lives prematurely during those years of conflicts.

In the 1980s, during the conflicts there was minimal use of rifles and guns. We migrated to another village while our home turned into a battlefield for the warring tribes.

It's been 27 years now since the last tribal conflict. A confrontation that people decline to engage themselves in the near future.

After 2000, recently reported cases of tribal fights in South Chimbu and few parts of the province are related to national elections. The use of factory-made ammunition also increased.

Christianity and the Australian introduction of education to Chimbu Province have changed much of this culture. From the ashes of tribal warfare, most villages have rebuilt themselves vowing not to engage in the war games again.

Kerowagi district was a hotspot for tribal fights as well. Especially within the Catholic station Mingende and Kup station. I witnessed another fierce battle in Kup between the warring tribes in 1996, while doing grade 11 at Kondiu Rosary Secondary School.

Before independence in September 1975, the Chimbu took a step forward to stop tribal fighting and be prepared for independence.

The Post-Courier reported on September 3, 1975 that six tribal leaders from Chimbu went and met in Port Moresby in an attempt to stop tribal fighting in their area.

They were councillor Kui Dirua and Endemongo Dama of the Endugua clan, Gignai Waine and Du Arme, of the Kuma clan whose clans have been fighting for three years.

The leaders were invited by Chimbu students at the University of Papua New Guinea. According to the report two lecturers from the university and some public servants from the public service board helped pay for the trip.

In Port Moresby, the students wanted their tribal leaders to see how people from many cultural groups live and work together.

The president of the Chimbu Students Association Thomas Tumun said their experience in the city would help settle their disputes when they return home.

The tribal leaders also visited Bomana Police College and saw the riot squad demonstrating techniques of breaking up fighting. Later they met Police Commissioner Pious Kerepia at police headquarters.

Mr Tumun said the leaders returned home before independence to celebrate the day at home with peace among the clan.

Over the years, the brave approach taken by those Chimbu leaders had paved the way for peace to prevail and communities to understand respecting the rule of law.

The spirit of unity, tolerance and coexistence amongst themselves has been paramount in all Chimbu societies and it remains today.