

INGSA CASE STUDIES

***RAWHITIA:
HEALING PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA AFTER CIVIL WAR THROUGH
EDUCATION***

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Context and background

Rawhitia is a multi-ethnic, developing African country with the largest ethnic group, Majoritans, comprising 45% of population, followed by Minoritans (30%), Microritans (20%) and a small number of other minorities. In 1961, at the height of decolonization, the former European colony of Rawhitia (formed in the 1880s out of several smaller Majoritan and Minoritan kingdoms) declared independence. At that time, domestic institutions were weak and few Rawhitians had had tertiary education – those that had been educated in Europe were almost entirely Majoritans. While tensions between ethnic groups were present even then—exacerbated by the governing practices of the colonial power which clearly favoured one group—the growing economy, largely based on Rawhitia’s rich natural resources, and optimistic public sentiment in the aftermath of decolonization ensured a long period of relative peace. However, a decade ago the decreasing demand for some of Rawhitia’s main agricultural exports affected its economy, causing high inflation and high unemployment. In an environment of regional political instability and an economic slump, domestic tensions started to rise at the same time as the governance weakened. The political consensus that had allowed for multi-ethnic government at the time of independence started to fracture. The Prime Minister (a Majoritan) and Deputy Prime Minister (a Microritan) fundamentally disagreed on the organization of the economic activity, with the Deputy PM arguing for a stronger role of the state and PM for the liberalization of the market. The Deputy Prime Minister resigned, and soon afterwards the national consensus was replaced by ethnic political parties.

The balkanization of the political scene created a fertile soil for the ethnic tensions to exacerbate. Young men, many unemployed, formed into ethnic gangs and started to inflict harm on other ethnicities. At first this was minor in nature (theft, graffiti, taunting) but it soon led to skirmishes. The murder of a senior Microritan religious leader in one of these skirmishes was the spark that started the civil war, fuelled by ethnic political parties seeking to win votes in the political vacuum. The Rawhitian national army sided with Majoritans, as the officers had traditionally been recruited from that ethnicity. Those not involved in the mutiny, created militias to support their own ethnic parties. Soon Minoritans and Microritans declared their own independent territories and established armies. Over the period of four years the war was fought across the whole Rawhitia. Minoritans and Microritans established an alliance which was initially weak and poorly equipped, but as arms were supplied from another nation with historical and cultural relationships to these

two groups the alliance had grown stronger. Majoritans not only controlled critical resources but also led the internationally recognised government which had the support of international institutions. Effectively the country was now split in three.

Early in the war, the town of Arge, at the eastern borders of Microritan territory, was encircled by the forces of Rawhitian national army. The army's claim was that it was there to guarantee the safety of the Majoritan population in the town (comprising about 30% of population, while 70% were Microritan). The United Nations sent a Protection Force that proclaimed Arge a safe zone. The status quo persisted with both the Rawhitian army and the UN forces camping outside the town, and the town population surviving on meagre supplies provided by the UN. This stalemate lasted for years. But four years into the war, a battalion of the Majoritan army launched an offensive. The UN forces withdrew. Majoritans captured all the Microritan men over the age of 14 in the town (8,000 in total; some were fighting with the Microritan forces out of the city), took them into the forested area outside the town, executed and buried them in a mass grave. In spite of attempts to cover up the crime, reporters attached to the UN discovered it quickly. The discovery led to a change of the prevailing international viewpoint on the resolution of Rawhitian conflict. The three sides were persuaded to cease hostilities, meet and sign an agreement as the foundation of a new political order in Rawhitia, with more political autonomy for Microritans and Minoritans through a federal system of government. The agreement was followed by elections at which a coalition government was elected. The coalition is led by a new party without obvious ethnic affiliation, New Rawhitia which has tripartite leadership involving the President, Prime Minister and Minister of Finance. The key perpetrators of the war crimes have been arrested and are currently being trialled, with the input of international organizations and experts. While there are criticisms of the new political structure and the transitional justice processes and mechanisms, there is an overall agreement that the intentions are good and that this is the only way to maintain peace and rebuild the country.

Problem

Ten years have passed. The town of Arge has become a symbol of a new Rawhitia: a place to show a peaceful coexistence and cooperation can be developed despite the recent history of ethnic conflict. Efforts are ongoing to build bridges between the ethnic groups, initially through various free time community activities: youth camps, art programmes, public celebration of shared holidays, and other voluntary activities. These are visited, but the majority of the population is still reluctant to participate – parents are still wary of their children mixing with the other ethnicities.

The attention is now turning to Arge's schools, seen as sites where a new generation will be raised in the spirit of not only coexistence but also reconciliation and trust, while recognizing and respecting differences. The children are currently divided into separate Microritan and Majoritan programmes, the main difference being that their education starts with their native language and script, although they learn both. Recent events are not taught in schools and, in the absence of new textbooks, Rawhitian history prior to the conflict (including the colonial past) is taught from the old, pre-conflict material. Both Majoritan and Minoritan children receive subtly different views of their past and culture in schools and in their communities and families.

There is a push (by the international community in particular but also by the new coalition government) to establish 'intercultural' schools built on the principles of trust and reconciliation. This project would be supported by a reformed curriculum, which would be used in the whole country, but it would be first rolled out in Arge's intercultural schools.

The national Ministry of Education is now recruiting experts (educationalists, historians, linguists, anthropologists and others) to lead the educational reform. The reform would include the production of new educational material (e.g. history textbooks) as well as the development of a broader approach that would make rebuilding of trust and relationships a central theme permeating all parts of the curriculum. There is support for this initiative in the public and in the academic community, but also a pushback by some experts. Leading historians and linguists, from both ethnic groups, are arguing that they have no independence in their project and that the politicians are telling them what to think about the objects how to do, rather than trusting the experts to do their job.

Within the local community there is a widespread fear that not enough time has passed and that the Microritan children will suffer additional trauma if forced to socialize with Majoritans, some of whom are children of the war criminals. Their fear is supported by psychiatrists and psychologists working with and studying the post-war mental health. Many among the children are suffering from mental health problems caused by the war, siege and loss of family members. The rate of suicide, particularly amongst Microritan adolescents, has been high and is not showing signs of decline. There is widespread substance abuse. A particularly vulnerable group are the children of rape victims from the war, largely Microritans, who are marginalised by most. Their mothers have remained psychologically scarred and socially isolated. A few NGOs have tried to give them support and counselling. The mental health resources are stretched.

At the same time, human rights lawyers as well as a number of educational experts and social psychologists, are strongly advocating the integration of the Arge schools, as well as a broader educational reform. They are stating that, while they accept and understand the reservations of the

families, educational reform is a critical part of a humanitarian response to conflict and an essential part of post-conflict transformation. The longer the wait, they argue, the bigger the obstacle to the integration and the higher the risk of another conflict in future. Rather than waiting for experts to resolve, or narrow, disputes about contested events and questions, they are recommending a pragmatic approach and push for the reform (and new materials) to take place in a timely fashion.

The tensions are growing. Both Majoritan and Microritan veterans' organizations has scheduled marches to coincide with the memorial day of the Arge massacre. The President of Rawhitia, a physician by training, is worried about events that could threaten the fragile peace, yet is also committed to continuing the peace process, building trust and achieving reconciliation. He is asking the Prime Minister to convene an advisory council of scientific experts to help by assessing available scientific evidence regarding the conflict management; risk of exacerbating trauma and also the management of the public perception of the risk.

Notes for the mentors

Stakeholders from whose perspective the problem should/may be considered:

1. Government of Rawhitia
2. Local community, e.g. school boards, parents' organizations, youth workers, teachers
3. Experts from different disciplines: psychiatrists, paediatricians, social workers, psychologists, historians, linguists and others
4. Media: national TV, radio, newspapers
5. Social media: YouTube, Facebook
6. Veterans associations

Considerations:

1. What is the question that science/research can answer? What are the questions that are beyond the science's purview?
2. How can we reconcile the difference in views (likely to be) offered by different disciplines: education, psychology, psychiatry, history, human rights law? Understanding the causes of difference in views (Different questions? Different levels of action, e.g. individual vs group?)
3. How to communicate scientific evidence involving a contested issue in a politically charged atmosphere?



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