Mental states of adolescents exposed to war in Uganda: finding appropriate methods of rehabilitation

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Abstract

Background: Reintegration after war brings with it enormous challenges. One such challenge is to find appropriate methods of rehabilitation during the reintegration process. This article describes the rehabilitation, using traditional therapy, of formerly abducted adolescents exposed to war events who have experienced psychological distress.

Methodology: In a cross-sectional design, 294 adolescents aged 12 to19 at three rehabilitation centres participated in the study. Two checklists specifically designed for the study were administered to the adolescents and social workers: the War Experiences Checklist and Psychological State Checklist. The War Experiences Checklist includes 54 different war events broadly categorised under nine themes: separation, role in combat, deprivations, rituals in captivity, injury and being a victim of violence, witness to traumatic war events, laying landmines and staging ambushes, participation in violence, and sexual abuse. The Psychological State Checklist consists of 22 items. Structured interviews were used with centre coordinators and traditional leaders to elicit information on strategies of rehabilitation and traditional therapies of rehabilitation respectively. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse data from the checklists while data from the interviews were triangulated and subjected to thematic examination in a multistage analyses.

Results: Adolescents were exposed to disquieting war events and participated in dreadful atrocities. Consequently, many were psychologically distressed with unhealthy mental states that needed cleansing according to the native Acholi traditional practices of reconciliation and reintegration. Four rituals used in the rehabilitation and reintegration are critically examined in this paper.

Conclusion: Although mired in controversy over legitimacy, scope, and disagreement over procedures, the traditional structures for reconciliation and reintegration, such as the cleansing rituals, are still widely recognised and can play an important role in the process of reintegration at the local level.

Key words: mental states, adolescents, war experiences, rehabilitation, Uganda.

Introduction

This section sets the background to the conflict in Northern Uganda involving the Uganda government army, the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF), the Lord's Resistance Movement/Army (LRM/A) and the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A).

Background to the conflict in Northern Uganda

The conflict in Northern Uganda is an intricate one. Two rebel groups have been

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fighting since 1983: the LRA has been fighting against the UPDF in Northern Uganda and Southern Sudan since 1986 and the SPLA fought against the government of the Sudan in Southern Sudan from 1983 to 2005 when they signed a peace accord. Northern Uganda shares a border with Southern Sudan. The LRA has had bases in Southern Sudan and the SPLA had safe havens in Northern Uganda. The government of Uganda has supported the SPLA for a long time and used it to fight the LRA. Until recently, the LRA has had the support of the government of Sudan and has used the LRA in turn to fight the SPLA. Both countries, in effect, were involved in a proxy war with each other. Subsequently, on both sides of the border, two civilian populations are trapped between the fighting forces.[1,2]

The LRA is a rebel group fighting in Northern Uganda where the Acholi ethnic group traditionally live and where more than 90% of the population are internally displaced and are unable to return home due to the war. Led by Joseph Kony who claims to be a spirit medium, the LRA claims it is fighting to establish a government based on the biblical Ten Commandments. The rebel group professes to fight a spiritual war but has committed many atrocities, like abduction of young boys and girls, rapes, killing of unarmed people, mutilation, sexual enslavement, etc. against the people whom they purport to fight for.[3,4]

The SPLA operates from across the border with Uganda in Southern Sudan. They purport to represent the interest of the Southern Sudanese who are subjugated and oppressed by the Islamic and Arab regime in the north of the country. Just like the LRA, the SPLA is known to have forcibly recruited adolescents and children into its ranks and have committed human rights abuses against the civilian population.[1]

The people in Northern Uganda loathe the LRA for its cruelty against them and they do not like the UPDF either for human rights violation against them and for failure to protect them from the marauding LRA fighters who have internally displaced an estimated 1.7 million people, especially women and children. The local people also accuse the government of lack of political will to end the rebellion.[3,5] Although the civilian population in Northern Uganda loathes the LRA for their pernicious activities against them, 85% of the LRA fighters are made up of their own children whom the LRA has forcibly abducted and conscripted into their ranks.[2,3,6]

Abductions of children and adolescents

The most notorious aspect of the conflict in Northern Uganda is the forced recruitment and abduction of young boys and girls and the torture, physical and sexual abuse, and enslavement of those abducted by rebel commanders. To date, it is estimated that the LRA has abducted over 25,000 children.[4] Subsequently, Jan Egeland, the United Nations Undersecretary for Humanitarian Affairs, has described the conflict as "the world's biggest neglected humanitarian crisis". In captivity, the abductees live in constant terror of sudden attacks from UPDF soldiers, sexual abuse by rebel commanders, threat of death, diseases, and extreme deprivations and hardships such as lack of water, food, and clothing, among others. The children and adolescents are forced to kill, mutilate, torture, raid, burn villages, loot and commit other hideous atrocities against each other and against their communities in the region.[1,2,5]

However, since 2000, there have been drastic changes in the conflict. Four major factors have accounted for this change. Firstly, in 2001, the United States govern-

ment blacklisted the LRA as a terrorist organization.[7] This subsequently led to the second major reason for the change: an increase in cooperation between the governments of the Sudan and Uganda to rout out the rebels and the cessation of support to the rebels by the government of the Sudan which did not want to be seen by the West as supporting a terrorist organisation. Consequently, many rebel commanders have been killed and large caches of their weapons and ammunitions captured in Southern Sudan and Northern Uganda. This cooperation has enabled the government of Uganda to send troops into southern Sudan to destroy rebel bases there. Thus, coupled with lack of support from the Sudanese government, the rebels have been tremendously weakened. The third reason for a major change in the conflict has been the peace pact between the SPLA and the government of the Sudan that has enabled the SPLM to participate in the government in Sudan leaving little room for the LRA to maintain bases in Southern Sudan. Finally, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has indicted five top commanders of the LRA and has issued an international warrant of arrest for the indicted rebel leaders.[8] This has led to renewed international interest in the war and thus pressure has mounted on the UPDF and LRA from all sides leaving the rebels in disarray.

Literature review

Adolescence is usually recognised as a stressful period of development in which, physical, social and intellectual transformation and adjustments have to be dealt with concurrently. Exposure to war disrupts this transition further and makes adjustment even more complicated.[9-14] This disruption is linked to difficulties with social, psychological, health, and physiological functioning such as depression, withdrawal, alienation, somatic complaints, behavioural problems, attachment disorder, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms and crucial etiological factors in the development of psychopathology in adulthood.[9,15] War experiences like sexual abuse, killings, beating, fighting in battles and exposure to dead bodies and body parts, smelling burning bodies, hearing screams for help, violent death of a parent, witnessing the killing of close family members, separation, displacement, terror attacks, and bombardments are associated with acute posttraumatic stress symptoms and behavioural and emotional problems.[11]

Past studies have shown that trauma due to conflict and violence may have serious consequences for future adult development of adolescents[13,16]. However, other studies have also indicated that it is not always true that all adolescents in difficult circumstances become troubled adults or develop emotional problems; in fact, recovery from emotional and behavioural problems before reaching adulthood is fairly common.[16,17] Cultural differences in registering trauma and methods of rehabilitation may be important in explaining the difference in the studies. Subsequently, it is imperative that the methods of rehabilitation are studied. The use of western therapeutic methods of rehabilitation in non-western settings have been invariably criticised for its medical and individual leaning and labelling of survivors.[18] Yet few studies have explored traditional methods of psychotherapy within the local cosmology in a non-western setting especially in Africa. This article is an assessment of war experiences and mental states and is a critical examination of traditional methods of rehabilitation used by three rehabilitation centres in the districts of Gulu and Kitgum in Northern Uganda where formerly abducted children are being rehabilitated be-

fore reintegration with their parents/guardians or relatives in the community.[19] For example, cleansing rituals are one way that rehabilitation draws on what happened to the children in the past as a means of coming to terms with and making sense of the present.

Methodology

Participants and rehabilitation centres

The study was conducted in three rehabilitation centres in the districts of Gulu and Kitgum in Northern Uganda from August to October 2004. Participants were adolescents who were abducted, lived in rebel captivity, and experienced war situations ranging from one month to ten years (M = 7.8 months, SD = 2.01) and were rescued or escaped within the six months previous to the study: 166 (56.5%) less than a month before, 98 (33.3%) between one and three months before and 30 (10.2%) between three and six months before carrying out the study. A total of 294 out of 852 adolescents resident in three rehabilitation centres: Gulu Support the Children's Organisation (GUSCO) with 249 residents, World Vision Children of War Rehabilitation Centre (WVC) with 438 residents, and Kitgum Concerned Women's Association rehabilitation centre (KICWA) with 165 residents were invited to participate in the study. GUSCO and WVC are located in Gulu District and KICWA is located in Kitgum District. A simple random sampling using random table numbers was performed to select the required number of adolescents from the three centres. Those who were randomly selected were then asked to participate in the study. A total of 294 adolescents aged 12-19 participated (M = 14.6), of which 216 (73.5%) were boys and 78 (26.5%) were girls. Of these, 57 (19.4%) adolescents were from KICWA, 86 (29.3%) from GUSCO, and 151 (51.4%) from WVC. The adolescents identified themselves as Catholics (68.4 %), Anglicans (26.9%), Muslim (1.7%) and others (2%).

Procedures

Permission was obtained from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology, local district authorities, centre coordinators, social workers and individual adolescents to conduct the study. The Research Committee of Gulu University approved the study. Informed consent was obtained from all adolescents aged 18 years and above. Those below 18 year of age assented to participating in the study prior to the investigators obtaining consent from their parents, guardians, or centre coordinators in situations where their parents or guardians could not be traced. The centre coordinators and social workers at the three rehabilitation centres also agreed to participate in the interviews. The centre coordinators invited the adolescents who accepted to participate in the study. The items in the checklist about their war experiences were read out aloud to them individually and the research assistants filled the checklist for them. Reading the items aloud was considered appropriate because some of the adolescents were illiterate. The questionnaire took between 30 and 45 minutes to fill. The interview with the centre coordinators and social workers took about 30 minutes while that of the elders/traditional leaders who performed the ceremonies took between 45 and 60 minutes. The social workers at the centres filled in the Psychological State Checklist to rate the mental states of the adolescents. It is important to note here that some adolescents and their parents did not agree to participate in the traditional rituals and instead opted to attend Pentecostal Churches and pray for their children instead. It was not possible to establish the number and characteristics of

adolescents or their parents/guardians who did not agree to participate in the rituals.

Measurements

There were two checklists used in the study: one was to measure mental states and the other war experiences. Mental states were measured using a 22-item Psychological State Checklist specifically designed for this study to collect information from the centre about the mental states of the adolescents based on records available. This was filled out by the social workers well versed with the mental states and psychological distress of the adolescents invited to participate in the study. The War Experiences Checklist consists of 54 items structured around the themes of: "separation from parents and relatives", "exposure and role in combat", "deprivations and other hardships", "participation in rituals while in captivity", "injured and was victim of violence and intimidation", "witness to beatings, mutilation, abduction, killings, and village raids", "laying landmines and staging ambushes", and "sexual abuse". Both checklists consist of "yes" and "no" items.

There were two structured interview schedules: one was for the centre coordinators to document the strategies of rehabilitation being used at particular centres. The principle investigator and research assistants visited each centre for at least two weeks to observe the methods of rehabilitation used to corroborate the information given by the centre coordinators and social workers at the centres about the strategies for rehabilitation. The second structured interview was for elders (traditional leaders) to document why and when the rituals were performed, the requirements for the rituals, who performs them and why, the procedure of performing the rituals and their meanings. The protocols were developed for the purpose of this study and were all translated and back-translated from English to Luo, the native language of the Acholi ethnic group and the participants. Both the checklists and interview schedules were developed in collaboration with the centre coordinators and social workers on the basis of assessment tools used by Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the field of rehabilitation such as World Vision, UNICEF, GUSCO, and KICWA, among others.

Demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics (age, religious affiliation, school attendance, whether both parents are living or not, length of stay in captivity, time of rescue, etc.) were included as items in the participants' questionnaires and interview schedules.

Data analyses

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the adolescents' war experiences and mental states. Frequency counts of the endorsements were taken and percentages of the total endorsement by participants tabulated and presented. Data from records of responses from the structured interviews with the social workers, centre coordinators and the traditional leaders or elders who performed the rituals were carefully analysed and transformed into meaningful broader content categories by the research assistants and the principle investigator, to arrive at the methods of rehabilitation used at the centres through group discussions and analysis.

Data from the records about the rituals were examined and triangulated by interviewing other traditional leaders and elders to ascertain whether the reasons for carrying out the ritual, when the ritual is normally performed, requirements, who carried out the rituals, procedure for carrying it out and the meanings were the same. In analys-

ing the themes about the rituals, records of interviews by the different Research Assistants were compared, discussed, and carefully analysed and transformed into meaningful content categories covering why, when, how, and by whom the rituals were performed. Data from the interview were again cross-examined, triangulated, and validated by the research assistants and principal investigator and later all the recordings were compared, discussed, and consensus reached.

Results

War experiences

The adolescents were exposed to a wide range of war events while in rebel captivity. These experiences were grouped into eight categories based on thematic analyses and similarity. The categories included: "separation from parents and relatives", "exposure to and role in combat", "deprivations and other hardships", "participation in rituals while in captivity", "injured and was victim of violence and intimidation", "witness to beatings, mutilation, abduction, killings, and village raids", "laying landmines and staging ambushes", and "sexual abuse" (Table 1). Experiences highly endorsed by participants were: thinking that they would be killed, long distance treks, death threats, seeing dead bodies and body parts. About 75% of the adolescents participated in beating or killing captured escapees, often their village mates, relatives or friends, while 22% burnt houses with people inside and another 5% reported that they mutilated captives. Over 4% witnessed their parents being killed and slightly above 6% killed their relatives. About 18% were forced to lie on dead bodies or carry dismembered body parts, which was believed to imbue courage and make them hard hearted. More than 75% saw people dying of hunger and 16% drank urine instead of water to quench thirst. Sixty-five of the 78 girls in the sample reported that they were sexually abused and none of the male adolescents reported being sexually abused. The war experiences were therefore the basis upon which the rituals were performed. The adolescents who agreed to participate in the rituals attended the general rituals such as traditional African dances and drama, stepping on an egg, burning clothes that the participants returned with from rebel captivity. Girls who were sexually violated and those who participated in killing either intentionally or were forced to kill had to elaborate rituals to cleanse them from the activities they participated in or were subjected to.

Mental states of the adolescents while at the rehabilitation centres

In addition to the war experiences the adolescents were exposed to, a catalogue of signs were used to assess the mental state of the adolescents at the centres (Table 2). In all the centres, at least 94% reported some form of mental state associated with their war experiences. The following mental states were dominant: "hopelessness" (89.8%), "sensitive" (65.3), "suspicious" (63.9), "interrupted thoughts" (57.1) and "depressed" (55.8). Alternately, the following mental states were less reported: "Crying, screaming and groaning" (18.3%), "Aggressive" (16.3), "The social workers found the adolescent difficult to deal with" (14.9%), "Self-destructive" (12.9%), "Paranoia" (12.2%), and "Compulsive behaviour" (11.2%). However, there were gender differences in reporting the following mental states: depression (Boys: 47.7%; Girls: 78.2%), crying, screaming and groaning (Boys: 8.3%; Girls: 46.2%), aggression (Boys: 22.7%; Girls: 7.7%), and "Self-destructive" (Boys: 13.4%; Girls: 6.4%). According to the Acholi traditional culture, these symptoms of severe emotional and psychological distress in the

Table 1. *Categories of war events experienced by 294 adolescents in rebel captivity.*

	n	% (yes)
Separation from parents and relatives		
1. I thought I would be killed while in rebel captivity	291	99
2. I thought I would never see any of my relatives or friends again	288	98
3. I was told that my parents were already dead	254	86.4
4. I dropped out of school	55	18.7
5. I am the only survivor in the family	13	4.4
Exposure to and role in combat		
6. I witnessed people being abducted during a village raid	290	98.6
7. I carried heavy loads over long distances	289	98.3
8. I saw dead bodies or body parts after battles	283	96.3
9. I saw seriously wounded people during battles	279	94.9
10. I narrowly escaped death during a battle	252	85.7
11. I participated in battles with government soldiers	131	44.6
12. I participated in killing a person (people) during battle(s) apart from relatives	116	39.5
13. I was injured or wounded in battle	71	24.1
Deprivations and other hardships		
14. I walked long distances without rest	292	99.3
15. I slept in the bushes	290	98.6
16. I ate grass, leaves, and other wild plants previously unknown to me	238	80.9
17. I was imprisoned in rebel captivity	237	80.6
18. I saw people dying of hunger	223	75.9
19. I was so hungry and nearly starved to death	204	69.4
20. I survived death after a serious beating with wire locks and slapped with hot machetes		159
54.1		
21. I ate one meal a day and sometimes a few times a week	111	37.8
22. I drank urine instead of water	48	16
23. I participated in nursing seriously wounded rebel fighters	47	16
Participated in rituals while in captivity		
24. I was anointed with oil and ochre (sign of cross put on my forehead, back, chest, and back of hands)	290	98.6
25. I was forced to lick human blood to give me courage and keep away ghosts	63	21.4
26. I was forced to smear myself with the blood of a dead person	62	21
27. I was told to lie on dead bodies or carry dead body parts to give me courage	53	18
28. I smeared myself with human blood in order to be brave	47	16
29. I participated in eating cooked human flesh to give me courage	1	0.3
Injured and was victim of violence and intimidation		
30. I was threatened with death if I failed to obey orders	292	99.3
31. I was injured in a Helicopter Gunship attack by government troops	101	34.3
32. I was beaten up and sustained serious injuries in rebel captivity	89	30.2
33. I was injured in battle with government soldiers	76	25.8
Witnessed beatings, death and mutilations		
34. I witnessed people being flogged or beaten	291	99
35. I witnessed people being killed with machetes, or knives	200	68
36. I witnessed people being mutilated	118	40.1
37. I witnessed the family home being burnt	55	18.7
38. I was forced to carry a dead person for a long distance	53	18
39. I witnessed a sibling being killed	15	5.1
40 I witnessed my parent being killed	13	4.4
41. I witnessed children being exchanged for guns and ammunitions	7	2.4

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	n	% (yes)
Participation in beatings, mutilation, abductions, killings, village raids		
42. I participated in abduction of other people and village raids	230	78.2
43. I participated in beating and killing captured escapees	219	74.5
44. I participated in burning houses without people inside	90	30.6
45. I participated in burning houses with people inside	66	22.4
46. I participated in killing my own relatives	18	6.1
47. I participated in mutilating body parts of people captured	14	4.8
Laying landmines and staging ambushes		
48. I participated in ambushing a vehicle	65	22.1
49. I saw a vehicle with passengers blown up in a land mine blast	50	17
50. I witnessed people being blown up in a land mine blast	49	16.7
51. I participated in laying land mines	16	5.5
Sexual abuse (only girl participants reported sexual abuse)		
52. I was sexually abused by rebels or fellow abductees	65	83.3
53. I have child (ren) with rebel fighters	38	48.7
54. I was sexually abused by fellow abductees	13	4.4

Table 2. *The mental states of the adolescents as recorded in their files (N = 294).*

Signs used to describe the mental state	Males (n=216)	Females (n = 78)	Total	%
1. Worried and upset	198	72	270	91.8
2. Hopelessness	201	63	264	89.8
3. Sensitive	140	52	192	65.3
4. Suspicious	128	60	188	63.9
5. Interrupted thoughts	139	29	168	57.1
6. Depressed	103	61	164	55.8
7. Absentmindedness	133	28	161	54.8
8. Lack of concentration	129	28	157	53.4
9. Irritation	109	28	137	46.6
10. Memory problems	113	23	136	46.3
11. Tense	116	18	134	45.6
12. Calm	101	28	129	43.9
13. Passive	83	38	121	41.2
14. Hallucinations	67	21	88	29.9
15. Phobic	53	21	74	25.2
16. Incoherent speech pattern	48	20	68	23.2
17. Aggressive	49	6	55	18.7
18. Crying, screaming and groaning	18	36	54	18.3
19. Difficult to deal with	31	13	44	14.9
20. Paranoia	28	8	36	12.2
21. Compulsive behaviour	21	11	33	11.2
22. Self-destructive	29	5	24	8.2

adolescents are taken to be a sign of contamination, that the gods were unhappy, and of being possessed by "cen" (bad spirits), the spirits of those they have killed or harmed. They are therefore thought of as "contaminated" where this can come out anytime to cause unpredictable conduct that might harm others.[20,21] Consequently, there was need to cleanse them of these "bad spirits" and reconcile them with the community.

That the adolescents were forcibly recruited into rebel ranks gives a strong motivation to forgive, reintegrate and reconcile them with the community they committed so many crimes against.

Strategies for rehabilitation at different centres

For the purpose of this study, the following general rituals were performed to most of those who returned from rebel captivity and agreed with the practice: traditional music, dances, and drama. Besides these general rituals, this study will focus on four major rituals: stepping on an egg, burning of clothes, ritual for sexually violated girls, and ritual for those who killed deliberately or were forced to kill while in rebel captivity. Traditional leaders and elders from the Acholi Council of Elders (Rwodi Moo), under the tutelage of the Paramount Chief of the Acholi, were the ones who normally conducted these rituals using traditional leaders and elders from the communities.

Traditional music and dances

Native Acholi traditional music and dances were performed in all three centres. The music and dances performed are the common ones normally performed in communities in the Acholi area where the adolescents originate. The adolescents at the centre sing songs of forgiveness, reconciliation, and perseverance. All Acholi traditional dances are normally accompanied by songs, ululations, drumming, and an array of traditional instruments. The traditional dances include *Laraka raka* (a native courtship dance), *Bwolla* (a native royal dance), and *Dingidingi* (a native dance for young girls). These dances are usually performed with elegance, pride, joy, and gusto intended to promote positive self-image, rejuvenate the sense of pride, make them happy, and boost their self-esteem apparently dampened by the traumatic experiences they underwent while in rebel captivity. The adolescents also learnt to be together and cooperate for the purpose of being happy and making other people happy, contrary to what they experienced while in rebel captivity. This is therefore a general therapy where most adolescents at the centres participate irrespective of what they went through while in rebel captivity.

Drama

The adolescents at the centres performed several plays and role-plays. Again, the themes in these plays are on reconciliation, forgiveness, and perseverance just like in the songs and traditional dances. The drama is intended to change the attitudes of the adolescents and to heal the social dislocation and personal vendettas associated with the war and eventually enable them to live in harmony with each other and the community to which they are to be integrated. The plays are coloured with humour to make the adolescents not only laugh but also be happy again after years of unhappiness and suffering in rebel captivity. Although this is a western therapy, it has been adapted to the local reality and culture.

Traditional cleansing rituals

In this article, four traditional cleansing practices are reported. Many other traditional practices besides these are performed in communities. Stepping on an egg and burning old clothes are general practices for all who were abducted, missing, or who have stayed in an unknown place or in the wilderness for long, and who are believed to be contaminated with some alien spirit. However, there were specific rituals for those sexually violated and those who killed intentionally or inadvertently. These four traditional practices are described below.

Stepping on an egg

In ancient Acholi tradition (native tradition of the participants), any member of a community who stays away from home as in having been lost, abducted, missing, or simply stayed away for long, is believed to be contaminated with alien spirits. Therefore, upon return, at the entrance to the courtyard, the individual is made to step on a freshly laid egg of a hen put between a plant (locally known as "pobo" – a slippery and smooth plant used as ropes in local construction) split into two. The egg is subsequently broken by the footstep and the person enters the compound. At the entrance of the parents' house, water is poured on the roof so that it drips on the returnee as he or she enters the house. The following day, a goat is slaughtered, local beer is brewed, and villagers are invited to celebrate and welcome the individual back into the community. This ritual is performed by the elders in the home and is meant to decontaminate and purify the individual. The egg symbolises a fresh start, a new beginning, and the beginning of life. It also symbolises purity and innocence. The slippery local plant symbolises a smooth return and the water washes away the impurities and cleanses the individual.

Burning clothes

In all the three centres, the clothes that the adolescent returned with from rebel captivity are burnt. Just like in stepping on the egg and breaking it, burning clothes believed to be "contaminated" or "tainted" represent a break with the past and thus, the individual has a fresh start in life. The rebels usually loot clothes from the villages or remove clothes from those whom they have killed. They distribute the clothes to the combatants or those in captivity. Burning these clothes therefore accentuates a break with the past life while embracing a new identity and viewing themselves using new "spectacles".

Traditional cleansing ritual for a sexually violated girl

Any act of rape or forceful carnal knowledge of a girl or woman was treated with disdain and perpetrators were severely punished and reprimanded in the Acholi tradition. Such acts were associated with bad luck and misfortune on the part of the girl or woman violated and therefore the girl or woman needed cleansing. Usually a girl directly, or through the mother, confesses that she has been violated. A meeting of traditional leaders and elders is convened to establish the truth and decide on what to do. Once the elders or traditional leaders establish the truth and the perpetrator is known, a ritual was performed to cleanse both the girl and boy of the shameful act. The elders on both sides would gather in the village, usually in the home of the village elder, and the perpetrator was required to produce a goat.

The boy or man who violated the girl was required to hold the head of the goat, admit his guilt, and say that the goat will die for his own fault and that the goat will wash away his sins. He then spits in the mouth of the goat. At the same time, the girl or woman who was violated also spits in the mouth of the goat and holds the hind legs of the goat. The goat is then slaughtered and the waste matter from the stomach of the goat is smeared on the back of their hands and legs and on the chest to cleanse them of the act both were involved in. The elders eat the carcass and bless the girl, wish her good health, and assure her that nothing bad will happen to her now that the ritual has been performed. The bones from the carcass and the water used for washing hands are poured on their legs. Compensation in the form of

cows or goats, as decided by the elders, is given to the girl's parents, or husband in the case of a married woman. Thereafter, the boy is strongly reprimanded and warned never to indulge in such acts again. The parents of the boy or man are asked to teach their child to behave well. However, if the girl was related to the boy (incest), the same ritual was employed but no compensation was involved. In former days, if the girl was of the age of marriage, the boy or man was forced to marry her if there was no blood relationship. However, in circumstances where the perpetrators were unknown or were known but unable to appear before the elders or traditional leaders such as in the case of the adolescent girls, a goat was slaughtered to cleanse the girl of the "bad spirit" associated with the sexual violation. The Acholi people considered any sexual act in the bush as a bad omen, especially on the part of the girl. The goat is slaughtered, waste matter from the goat is smeared on the girls' hands, feet, and chest and the girl is blessed and reassured by the elders of a normal life without the torment of the "bad spirits" associated with her past ordeal.

Cleansing ritual after deliberate killing and manslaughter

In the traditions of the Acholi, the taking of human life is abhorred. An elaborate cleansing ritual therefore followed deliberate or inadvertent killing. Normally, the following four steps are involved in the process after seeking neutral third party mediation acceptable to both sides.

a) Acceptance of responsibility by establishing the precise truth about the incident, that is, exactly how the incident happened and asking for forgiveness.
b) The guilty repenting and asking for forgiveness
c) Payment of compensation in the form of animals (or daughter in ancient times) as is the practice and agreed upon by the council of elders (locally known as "Rwodi Moo" in Acholi). This compensation is usually used to marry another girl whose first child will be named after the person who was killed so that the deceased rests in peace.
d) Reconciliation (locally known as "Mato Oput"). Mato in the native Language of the Acholi means to drink, and Oput is a plant commonly found in the Acholi region. Wherever the plant is found, many others are found in the same place. It is this togetherness that is cherished by the Acholi to symbolise coming together. The root of the plant is also bitter symbolising the bitterness, pain, suffering, and death that occurred between the two parties.

After all these steps have been followed – acceptance of third party mediation, acceptance of responsibility, knowing the precise details of how the incident happened, and acceptance to pay compensation – a day is appointed to perform the reconciliation ceremony ("Mato Oput"). The mediator then invites both parties to the ceremony usually held by the roadside away from homesteads. Each party approaches the venue from their side of the road. The elders come with the roots of an Oput plant that they have dug from the wild. The outer cover of the roots of the Oput plant is pounded by a virgin girl and mixed with water and local brew and put in calabash. The elders and the mediators stay by the roadside waiting for both parties.

When all is ready, the elders dispatch messengers to call each side to approach the venue. The aggrieved side approaches in an aggressive manner while hurling insults and swearing at the party that killed their

child. The side of the perpetrator accepts responsibility, asks for forgiveness, and agree to compensate. However, the perpetrators will also say they are ready to fight should the other party fail to accept their terms. At this point, the elders come in and hold a long stick (locally known as *layibi*) between the two parties and ask them to restrain themselves, stop, put down their spears, and accept reconciliation. They then point their spears downwards to pay heed to the council of elders. Both parties bow their heads and pass the long sticks to the other side. Each side will have come with a sheep. The sheep will be put side-by-side (touching each other) facing the opposite direction.

Both sheep will then be cut completely in half while the blood from both sheep will drop in the concoction (the outer cover of the root of Oput plant pounded and mixed with water and local brew made from sorghum) already in the calabash. Each group will select an agreed number of members who will bend with both hands behind their backs to drink from the concoction in the calabash. If the deceased were male, they would drink three times each and if the deceased was a female, they would drink four times each according to tradition. The sheep will be shared between the two parties. The head from one sheep and the bottom from the other will be given to either party who will go ahead to cook it. After each party has cooked, they share the food and eat together, thus the broken relationship has now been normalised and restored. They can now greet, shake hands, eat together, intermarry, visit, etc.

Since both parties have now drank from the same calabash, the elders' curse whoever will use the spear against each other by bending the blade of their spears symbolising an end to hostilities. The party whose son or daughter is killed receives the compensation and that marks the end of the ritual. However, if the compensation were to be used for any other future activity such as in payment of dowry, etc., it must be cleansed. In case of the adolescents returning from rebel captivity, the ritual was performed reconciling them with the community who have borne the brunt of the war: mutilation, deaths, rapes, and destruction to property, among others. Symbolic compensations are used instead of what used to be. Elders are used to represent the community, thus the adolescents are reconciled with the community.

Discussion and concluxion

This study set out to assess exposure to war experiences, mental states, and methods using traditional therapies for rehabilitating adolescents exposed to war. Traditional music and dances, drama, and traditional cleansing rituals are used in a programme of rehabilitation before the adolescents are reunited with their parents or guardians in the communities. The adolescents are reconciled and accepted by their communities after the traditional cleansing ceremonies and are subsequently reintegrated into the community. This comes in the wake of criticism against the use of western psychotherapies in non-western settings.[18,22]

Mental states

War impacts on the mental health of adolescents in many ways. In the case of the participants in this study, worries, hopelessness, sensitivity, suspicion, interrupted thoughts, among others, were reported. Also commonly reported were gender differences in the manifestation of mental states. Girls surpassed boys in showing depressive symptoms; crying, screaming and groaning while boys manifested more aggression and self-destructive behaviours. This is consist-

ent with past studies in Palestine, Sierra Leone, and Bosnia Herzegovina.[11,13,19,23-25] Among the girls in this study were those who returned with children fathered by rebel commanders. These child mothers will face the added burden of looking after the children, discrimination against them and their children, and their children being living reminders of their ordeal in captivity. This is probably the reason why girls surpassed boys in reporting distress symptoms. Adding further strain, formerly abducted children may find themselves in a discriminatory and insecure environment because of the uncertainty about when the war will end.

Rehabilitation methods

The successes of western therapeutic methods have come under scrutiny in several non-western theatres of war recently. Evidence emerging from a study on the impact of the traditional methods of rehabilitation and reintegration at the rehabilitation centres in Northern Uganda suggests that the children who spent time in the centres, including those who participated in the rituals, might have better mental health and psychosocial well-being compared to those who have not gone through the centres.[26,27] Many of the formerly abducted children and some of their parents and guardians besides the community believe in the traditional rituals. This is consistent with studies carried out in Zimbabwe and Mozambique where adolescents exposed to similar violence were subjected to similar traditional healing resources of rehabilitation and reconciliation.[22,28,29] If the traditional methods of rehabilitation prove to be successful, it will be very useful in the healing process of not only individuals but also members of a community traumatised by violence within the local cosmology. The traditional methods such as compensation may perhaps settle the indebtedness of one lineage or community to another. Thus the transgenerational nature of such violence, personal vendettas, and societal dislocation resulting from the conflict can then be settled.[30-33]

Limitations of the cleansing rituals

Although traditional structures have a big role to play in reconciliation and reintegration at the community level, there are many inherent weaknesses. Forced migration has led to scattered settlements in displaced people's camps, leaving the traditional leaders with no homogenous communities to culturally supervise. Poverty and material deprivation consequent upon the unending war have left the traditional structures fragmented and weak. Both the traditional leaders and the community are too poor to provide the material requirements for the rituals. Often the NGOs have come in to support the traditional structures, but this is not sustainable. Another weakness is the disagreement over who the real traditional leaders are. Some people in the communities regard the current traditional leaders as people who are interested in material gains from NGOs and government.

There is belief in some parts of the community that the scales of the atrocities and war events spanning over two decades are unprecedented, overwhelming and beyond the scope of traditional structures. For instance, the international dimension of the conflict is beyond the reach of traditional structures. Another factor is that, it is simply not easy to establish who killed who in the circumstances, as it is enormously difficult to establish the truth due to the scale of the war, spiritual nature of the conflict. A lot remains to be known about the war. In addition, the majority of the perpetrators were children forced to commit gross and horrendous crimes against their own communities,

thus making it difficult to distinguish perpetrators from victims.

Another complexity is that, while in rebel captivity, many hideous rituals were also performed on the children and many have bad recollections of such rituals. It is therefore difficult to determine whether the rituals currently performed represent the belief systems of the adolescents or reinforce what they have gone through already. Also, although the fundamentals and interpretations are alike, there are minor procedural disagreements regarding the rituals, as the elders do not completely agree on the procedures. There are minor variations from one community to another.

In spite of these inherent weaknesses and some disagreements, many people still believe in cleansing rituals as methods of reconciliation, and reintegration after decades of psychological trauma. Because the society to which the adolescents are to be reintegrated are still very communal in nature, the communal approach and nature of the traditional rituals are more meaningful and important for repairing damage caused by decades of war and maintaining social cohesion. Subsequently, at the local community level, traditional structures offer the possibility for reconciliation and reintegration.

Limitations of the study

The present study is based on cross-sectional data. It is important to recognise that no conclusions can be drawn about causality or directions of influence. Another limitation of the design was that the detection of mental states as well as the methods of rehabilitation was made on the basis of self-reported evaluations and observations, which may have caused some bias. In addition, our sample comprised a specific sample of Ugandan adolescents who have been exposed to violence. Generalizing the findings beyond the sample would only be possible after several replications with similar samples and populations, while including longitudinal studies. However, if these results can be established, they carry important implications for the focus and content of intervention for, and prevention of, mental health problems of adolescents after the experience of traumatic events.

Suggestion for further research

This study is a precursor to longitudinal studies that are required to address the effectiveness of the traditional therapies for rehabilitating adolescents exposed to violence and cultural coping mechanisms and how these can inform interventions. Also important to study are other rituals not included in this study.

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