



Inside the Lord's Resistance Army Voices from Combatants



Chloe Auletta-Young and Jocelyn Kelly

Sexual Violence Research Initiative

September 16, 2015

Background

- Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has operated across central Africa for more than two decades
 - 60,000 - 100,000 children abducted
 - Displacement of over 2.5 million people across 4 countries

Background

- The cult-like qualities of the LRA have long captured the attention of the world
- Despite notable efforts to dismantle it, the LRA endures – in part because of the capacity to control new recruits
- Movement into countries that are linguistically, culturally and tribally distinct poses new challenges for the group

Methods

- Focus groups and key informant interviews with former combatants and formerly abducted persons in the 4 countries affected by LRA
- May 2013 and February 2014
- 374 respondents - abductees, combatants, family members, service providers, community leaders
- Thematic analysis undertaken using Nvivo
- Multiple researchers triangulating salient codes

Magical Beliefs

- “Mystical” systems serve highly specific strategic functions in armed groups in Africa
- The importance of magical beliefs in the LRA has been well documented
- Magical rites varied by LRA subgroup, but could include:
 - Ritual cutting
 - Placement of powder, paste, herbs or oil on the body
 - Wearing amulets
- Rites and beliefs used to psychologically control recruits

Magical Beliefs

- Receiving magical rites was associated with negative changes in one's behavior and mental health problems
- Application of magic served consistent, strategic functions:
 - Forgetting home/being unable to escape
 - Seeing others as animals/dehumanizing victims
 - Taking on violent behaviour

Control of Gendered Relations

- Long-term combatants enforce a strict set of rules about gender relations
- Despite the LRA's dispersal into subgroups treatment of women is remarkably similar across all groups



Control of Gendered Relations

- These strict norms seemed served a number of important functions, all of which served to cement cohesion within the group:
 - “Contract out” control of women to assigned commanders
 - Control of STIs/HIV through sexual exclusivity
 - Stable family units provide consistency and order
 - Propagating LRA through pregnancy

Conclusions and Implications

- The control of gender relations and the use of magic are both vital tools in the manipulation of members of the group.
- Results provide insight into functioning of a non-state armed group with notable longevity:
 - Particular insight into mechanisms used to control abductees

Intervention Opportunities

- Important to understand methods of psychological control in order to create effective counseling and reintegration programs
 - Culturally adaptive/context sensitive
- Preventing “the revolving door” of demobilization, and addressing cycles of trauma/violence



www.hhi.harvard.edu