

Cleansing the wounds of war: an examination of traditional healing, psychosocial health and reintegration in Sierra Leone

Lindsay Stark

Traditional healing ceremonies have been lauded as an effective and integral aspect of psychosocial healing and reintegration for children associated with the fighting forces. This article describes the results of a qualitative study of the effects of traditional cleansing ceremonies for girl soldiers who are survivors of rape in Sierra Leone. The principal research question asked how these purification rituals contribute to psychosocial healing and reintegration. Two overarching themes emerged from the data. First, cleansing ceremonies represented a symbolic gesture of community reconciliation in which both the girls and the community had prescribed roles and demonstrated a willingness and desire to be reconciled. Second, cleansing ceremonies allowed for a spiritual transformation in which the girls were able to shed their contamination and leave behind the 'bad luck', anti-social behaviour and negative self-perceptions that they had brought back with them from the war. Both of these aspects of the cleansing ceremony have contributed to the girls' improved psychosocial health and have facilitated reintegration.

Keywords: psychosocial healing, cleansing, girls, reconciliation, reintegration, Sierra Leone

Introduction

Complex emergencies often expose and leave vulnerable those affected to life-threatening

social and psychological dislocations (Ager, 2002). In humanitarian responses, interventions addressing psychological and social factors have become increasingly common. However, controversy remains over what type of intervention is most effective. Proponents of psychosocial interventions tend to fall into one of two paradigms.

The first paradigm (one that has, until recently, tended to dominate approaches and interventions in Africa) supports the medicalization of suffering, exporting Western psychological and biomedical diagnoses and treatments (Summerfield, 1999). This model is based on the Western understanding of trauma and healing. It emphasizes diagnosing and treating symptoms within an individual, and tends to disregard mending damaged social networks or strengthening pre-existing resources in communities that could aid in the healing process (Miller & Rasco, 2004).

The second paradigm (which is based on the assumption that psychological distress has a social and cultural dimension) draws on community resources and supports local coping strategies (Wessells & Monteiro, 2004). According to this paradigm, it is through spiritual understanding that people can find meaning and restore wellbeing in their lives after traumatic experiences. It is a promising alternative for developing culturally appropriate psychosocial interventions

in places like Sierra Leone where, as in many parts of Africa, health is traditionally defined in terms of relationships between individuals and their surroundings, their ancestors, and amongst themselves (Honwana 1997; 1998).

In Sierra Leone, girls associated with the fighting forces were largely overlooked in the demobilization process. These girls witnessed the murder of family members, had their homes burned to the ground, were forcibly separated from their families, and suffered repeated rape and sexual violence at the hands of their captors. Many were not released by their abductors after the war, or failed to come forward out of shame or fear. Additionally, a large number of these girls now have children of their own as a result of rape.

These girls and young women emerged from the war with both physical and emotional wounds. They reported feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness and despair. Reintegration has proven extremely difficult and has exacerbated these wounds. Their families and communities, who saw them as ‘impure’ as a result of the sexual abuse, stigmatized the girls. They were exposed to ridicule for prostituting themselves to support their babies. They were verbally and physically attacked, restricted from mingling with family and community, and prohibited from marrying. Their spiritual pollution was believed to cause misfortune, bad harvests and health problems for both the girls and the broader community.

In the context of relationships between individuals and their surroundings, their ancestors, and amongst themselves, ‘the power of “spiritual” entities remains paramount in both the causation of trauma and in community-based approaches to healing.’ (Honwana, 1997). It is through spiritual understanding that people can find meaning and restore wellbeing in their lives. In this article, the

health impact of cleansing ceremonies on girls who were sexually violated during the war in Sierra Leone is examined and analyzed in terms of physical, mental, spiritual and social health, and reintegration.

Traditional healing ceremonies have been lauded as an effective and integral aspect of psychosocial healing and reintegration. While the process varies in different communities, there are elements that are common to most of the cleansings. One traditional healer described the process in the following way:

‘The way I saw the girls, I knew I should cleanse them before their minds were set. I went to the ancestors and asked them how to help the girls. The ancestors instructed me in how to cleanse them. I went to the bush to fetch the herbs for the cleansing. I knew which herbs to pick because the ancestors had told me. I put the herbs in a pot and boiled them. I poured a libation on the ground and also drank some of it. After boiling the herbs, I steamed the girls under blankets and over the boiling pot for their bodies to become clean and their minds to become steady. After the steaming, we all slept in the house. The next morning we all went to the bush. In the bush, I gave them herbs to drink. We spent the day cooking, singing, eating, and telling stories. On the third day, I brought the girls to the waterside. I told them that they would not go back to town wearing the clothes that they had worn to the riverside. I washed the girls one by one with black soap and herbs. After the washing, they put on new clothing and we all came to town dancing and singing.’

Most of the cleansings contained similar elements. Almost all ended with traditional healers leading the girls into town and presenting them to the chief. After this presentation, the community would hold a large celebration with music, dancing and a communal feast. This article offers an understanding of how these ceremonies have

helped the process of healing and reintegration for these girls.

Methodology

This qualitative study draws on semi-structured interviews as its main source of data, with participant observation and field notes providing additional contextual detail. From May through August 2005, the author interviewed 121 girls ranging in age from 8 to 30 years old and 17 traditional healers in five districts in Sierra Leone. The data for this paper comes from a sample of 25 interviews with girls from the Port Loko, Tonkalili, Bombali, and Koinadugu districts. In addition, the author was invited to observe two cleansing ceremonies, which provided further data and also informed the analysis.

Sample. Girls were selected for this study based on convenience and criterion sampling. All of the girls in the study were associated with the armed conflict and are survivors of rape. Christian Children's Fund (CCF) has instituted a program called 'Sealing the Past, Facing the Future' specifically targeting this population, and girls were identified and invited to participate based on their involvement in the program. Because of the unique situation of these girls, CCF has embraced a holistic approach to respond to the girls' physical, emotional, social, spiritual and economic needs. The project has provided assistance through treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, raising community awareness, supporting economic development and sponsoring traditional healing ceremonies. Many of the girls interviewed had been cleansed by a family member, a traditional healer or through CCF-sponsored cleansings. Four of the girls in this sample had never been cleansed and serve as a comparison group.

While convenience sampling worked well overall, it did raise a few validity concerns and is one limitation of this study. CCF com-

munity leaders were responsible for selecting girls for interview. It sometimes happened that these community leaders were eager to impress and picked girls who had most successfully reintegrated, and were mentally and physically well. In some communities, where the community leaders were more open and had a good relationship with the translator, it felt comfortable trying to persuade them to find girls with more diverse experiences. At other times, it was felt that to do this would have been inappropriate and would have offended the community leader.

The girls ranged in their levels of education from having had no schooling at all, to having completed some secondary school. As a result, verbal, rather than written, consent was sought and obtained. Through a translator, the girls were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could refrain from answering any questions they chose, as well as terminating the interview at any point. CCF decided that incentives were not appropriate for this setting, because the girls were already receiving substantial benefits from the program. However, it was emphasized that choosing not to participate in the study would in no way affect their access to other program benefits.

While CCF determined that identifying and interviewing these girls was not a security risk, the interviews were sometimes emotionally upsetting for the girls. Some cried while recounting what had happened to them during and after the war. A few girls agreed to the interview, but then did not want to answer any questions once the interview began. For the most part, however, the girls wanted to share their stories, have someone bear witness to what had happened to them, and to make sure that it does not happen again. Some girls waited for hours, foregoing farm work and daily profits, because they wanted to share their stories.

Translation. Because the majority of girls spoke Krio, Mende or another dialect, simultaneous translation was required. This raises further validity concerns. The author worked with four translators who came from the communities where research was based. Because they were not professional translators, but had been selected by CCF based on their language skills, the translators tended to make some common translation errors during the interviews, which may have skewed the data to make the cleansings appear more significant than they were. Sometimes, the translator asked the interviewee leading questions because they knew the type of information that was being sought. Often, translators changed open-ended questions to close-ended questions. For example, one translator shared that he had rephrased the question ‘How did people in your community treat you when you returned?’ to ‘People provoked you when you came back, didn’t they?’ A few times, translators interjected their own questions that were sometimes relevant to the field of research, sometimes not.

It was critical that the girls felt they could open up to the translator, as well as to the author. Since two of the translators were men, questions as to the extent to which the girls felt comfortable revealing intimate personal and sexual details to them were raised. There were also a few instances when the translator did not speak the local dialect and an additional translator was needed. In these cases, we had to rely on a community leader who lived in the village. However, when such a person was in the room, girls seemed to confide less, especially with regard to their own involvement in the war as perpetrators, not just victims. For example, many of the girls carried weapons, took drugs, and killed. However, if a community leader was in the room, the girls tended not to share

this sensitive information and focused instead on the rape and abuse that was inflicted upon them.

Analysis. Throughout the process of conducting the interviews, the author was conscious of a few themes and patterns emerging before beginning the formal analysis. For example, stigma and ridicule were topics that were often mentioned in the interviews, and that the concept of ‘*noró*’ or spiritual pollution was related to a number of social and health problems. In undertaking the formal analysis of these interviews, the process of *open coding*¹ was used to uncover, name and develop these and other concepts that had originally struck the author as important. The properties and dimensions of these initial categories were identified and compared for similarities and differences.²

The next step was to return to the original research question and condense and organize the categories under a few main concepts. These concepts: ‘war experience’, ‘cleansing’, ‘psychosocial health’, and ‘reintegration’, emerged directly from the research question. In this round of coding, the concept ‘war experience’ referred to the age of the girl when she was abducted, the amount of time she spent with the rebels, her main roles and responsibilities while with the rebels, strategies for survival, and how she eventually came to leave the rebel group. ‘Psychosocial health’ combined psychological and social health and included emotional state and feelings, a girl’s perception of herself, her relationship with the spiritual world and her social relationships with family and community members. ‘Reintegration’ referred to the long-term process and transition where female child soldiers returned to civilian life. ‘Cleansing’ referred to whether or not a girl had been cleansed, how many times, under what circumstances, for how long, to what degree, and with what elements had the girls been cleansed.

After this, the data were examined in terms of the major impacts of cleansing rituals and factors that influenced or affected these impacts. Major impacts included ‘mental health’ – the emotional feelings and self perceptions of the girls; ‘social relationships’ – relationships and interactions with family and community members; ‘*noro*’ – the concept of spiritual pollution and ‘bad luck’ that affected the girls because of rape; and ‘functionality’ – the ability to perform expected social roles. Influencing factors included ‘war roles and responsibilities’, ‘time spent with rebels’, ‘who cleansed the girls’, ‘who decided the girls should be cleansed’, ‘what happened during the cleansing’ and ‘reasons articulated for the cleansing.’ Figure 1 shows an example of one of the data displays.

Results and discussion

The data displays allowed examination of the each girl’s personal narrative, as well as allowing a comparison along these different variables. Utilizing these displays, certain patterns became evident, helping to better understand the full range of experiences and different degrees to which the girls experienced these variables. For example, every girl in the sample experienced discrimination from the community upon returning from the bush. There were no exceptions. This pattern was almost immediately apparent from the data display. However, in examining the display, the author was also able to analyze the full range and degree to which each girl encountered discrimination. This allowed for a richer understanding of the girls’ experiences, as well as an analysis of factors that may have affected, or influenced community relations.

This display also allowed for identification of unusual cases that fell outside of the ‘typical’ experience. For example, while nearly all of the girls were able to reconcile with family

and friends after the cleansing ceremonies, one of the girls, Mabinti, still suffered from mistreatment by her stepmother. Identifying these unusual cases can be just as revealing as identifying the common experiences, and should be examined for potential influencing factors. For example, one thing that stood out as different in Mabinti’s case was the fact that her stepmother had not supported the cleansing. This finding could have important implications if such a program was to be instituted in a less receptive community.

Two overarching themes emerge from the data. First, cleansing ceremonies represented a *symbolic gesture* of community reconciliation. Second, cleansing ceremonies allowed for a *spiritual transformation*. Both of these aspects of the cleansing ceremonies have affected girls’ psychosocial health and reintegration, and are discussed in more detail below.

Reconciliation with families and communities

Relationships with family and community members were frequently discussed topics among the girls. As mentioned above, not one of the girls in the sample was able to return to her village without experiencing some stigmatization, provocation or rejection from family or community members. Often their reception was mixed. Parents welcomed their daughter home, but the community rejected the girl. Or, parents would shun the girl and it would be left to the larger community to show empathy and caring. Mixed emotions within the family unit were also frequently noted in the matrix. Parents were happy to have their daughter home, but also feared them. Almost half of the girls in the sample mentioned that their family initially welcomed them, cried with happiness upon their return, and tried to help by providing food, clothing, and medicine. However, the same number of girls reported

IMPACT OF CLEANSINGS							
		Relationship with Family/Community		Noro		Functionality	
Emotions/Self-perception		Pre-Cleansing		Post-Cleansing		Pre-Cleansing	
Post-Cleansing		Pre-Cleansing		Post-Cleansing		Post-Cleansing	
Safanatu	I felt discouraged.	My parents welcomed me. The rest of the community laughed at me and called me a 'rebel from the bush'.	When we came into town, the community welcomed us. They were happy with me and calling me names.	Since the rebels 'used' me, I needed to be cleansed.			The first thing I do in the morning is wash my face. Then I greet my family, sweep, fetch water for the family, bathe, go to school, come home and do the cooking, wash the dishes, fetch more water, bathe, then go to sleep.
Aminata	I felt bad during this time because I had left the village and was not used to life here in the village.	When I met my mother and family, they were not happy with me. They thought I was coming to kill them. Some people in the community called me 'killer', but most were nice to me. Everyone was scared of me, though. Anywhere I went, people shouted at me. They would say, 'leave this place, you rebel'.	My parents also felt differently. They felt better because I did not return to the rebels. We came to town dancing and singing. Everyone came and we all ate food.	My bad luck was also affecting my family. People would provoke my mom that she had 'birthed a rebel'. They would say she had a rebel in her house. The bad luck also affected our rice farming. The whole community did not get good yields during that time. The bad luck also affected my chance to go to school.			Now I get to go to school.
Jeriatu	I was feeling bad. My mind was not right because of all of the things I heard. It was not right for them to call me these names and I felt so bad.	My family was glad to see me, but other people were not glad. They called me 'rebel' and were not happy with me. Anywhere I went, people were not happy with me.	If I hadn't been cleansed, I would still have bad luck. People would have continued to call me bad names.				Now I feel happy and my business is flourishing. I am in school now.
Mariatu	After the cleansing it was different. I was normal.	When I saw my parents, they cried because I had been captured and raped. They were afraid of me and felt I had joined the rebels. The rest of the community was not afraid of me.		I wanted to be cleansed to wash away the rebel bad luck.			I am going to school, though, and that makes me feel good about myself.
Fatmata		When I came back from the bush, my parents hugged me, but other people weren't happy. They mocked my parents and me. They were very few people in the town at that time, and they were very angry. They said that I was captured due to my carelessness. My parents defended me.		They said they would cleanse me because of my bad luck. My bad luck came from being used by several men. My bad luck showed itself in different ways. For example, it was hard for me to make a profit. I lost money.			Now I am earning money and have better clothing.

Figure 1:

INFLUENCING FACTORS					
	War roles	Time w/ Rebels	Who cleansed	Who decided	Reasons
Safanatu	I cooked, carried loads, and served as a wife to one rebel.	I was with them for 2 years	The ndigbas (traditional healer) cleansed me.	My parents decided I should be washed and I agreed	I also wanted to be cleansed because of what happened with the rebels. Since the rebels 'used' me, I needed to be cleansed.
Aminata	I looted, burned houses, killed people, and was a wife to one man.	I was with them for 2 years and 2 months.	The sow/ndigba (traditional healer) gave us medicine (herbs) and we played, sang, and ate. Karimoko/Moriman (traditional healer)	My parents took me to a Karimoko/Moriman (traditional healer) so that they could make a sacrifice so that I would not return to the rebels again... I decided to get cleansed [with CCF] and my parents supported this decision since I had killed people.	My parents took me to a Karimoko/Moriman (traditional healer) so that they could make a sacrifice so that I would not return to the rebels again. They did it to change my mind. I wanted to be cleansed to wipe out my bad luck from the killing, rapes, and burning in the bush.
Jeriatu	I was raped...and cooked for them.	I was with them for 3 months		I decided to be cleansed and my parents supported me.	[The cleansing] made the community happy. It was important because when I got back from the bush, I wasn't feeling happy and I was bored. I wanted to be cleansed to take away the bad luck. I had lost my virginity to someone I did not like at all when I was raped. Also, my business was not good and physically I was not fine. My bad luck affected my family because I slept in the same bed as my mother. Her business was also not going well and she was stigmatized for sharing a bed with a rebel.
Mariatu	I cooked for the rebels. When they looted villages, they gave the loads to me to carry. I also laundered for them. I was a wife to one rebel.	I was only with them a short time	the ndigbas (traditional healer)		I wanted to be cleansed to wash away the rebel bad luck.
Fatmata	I was abducted and used as a woman.	I was with the rebels for 2 months			They said they would cleanse me because of my bad luck.

Figure 1: (Continued).

that their family members were initially afraid of them.

Relationships were often discussed in conjunction with emotional states, suggesting that these categories influenced one another. Provocation and stigmatization often contributed to the girls' negative emotional states. As Jeriatu described, *'I was feeling bad. My mind was not right because of all of the names I was called. It was not my wish for them to call me these names and I felt so bad.'* Throughout Jeriatu's narrative, she attributed the main cause of her suffering, and her primary reason for the cleansing, to the provocation and rejection from the community. She was not alone. Half of the girls interviewed expressed poor community relations as a reason for cleansing.

When examining how the cleansings aided reconciliation, the data reveal how the community and the girls each played an important part. Community members organized, financed and performed the cleansings. These acts were perceived as signs of caring and concern. Caring was also expressed in family members' decisions to have their daughters, granddaughters and nieces cleansed. For these girls who had been devalued, made to feel 'inhuman' and who had survived months or years of abuse, this gesture was recognized as something the community was doing to help them. As one girl explained, *'My mother said "I will make you feel better again," and took me to a traditional healer.'* (Damba).

The girls either agreed to enter into the cleansing process, or made the decision themselves. The data display (Figure 1) reveals that for two thirds of the girls, their families decided that they should be cleansed. One third of the girls made the decision to be cleansed themselves, and were supported by their family and other community members. The data seem to support the hypothesis that who actually decides whether the cleansings should occur is less important than

whether or not the decision is supported by both parties. As mentioned above, Mabinti's was the only case where a family member actively opposed the cleansing, and her cleansing was less effective than the others. She explained, *'I don't like [my current situation] at all. I am upset. Now in the house, I am treated like an extra somebody. Only my neighbours care for me. I go to school hungry.'*

In addition to the willingness of the girls and family support for cleansings, a few other aspects appear to have been critical in the reconciliation process. First is the act of touch. During the two cleansings that the author observed, it was particularly moving the way in which the traditional healers laid their hands on the girls during the washing. It is difficult to convey the emotion and caring that these elders exhibited when handling the girls. They caressed, massaged and prayed over these girls whose cleansings were necessitated because of such a different kind of touch – rape. That the traditional healers were so gentle and caring and that the girls were able to receive this act of compassion was a manifestation of reconciliation and healing, in and of itself.

The cleansing ceremonies also culminated in a ceremonial gesture of reconciliation. Healers brought the girls from the bush into the village in celebratory fashion and 'reintroduced' them to the chief and to the rest of the community. Celebrations ensued with singing, dancing and a feast. As Aminata described, *'we came to town dancing and singing. Everyone came and we all ate food.'* In West Africa, this act of sharing a communal meal is, perhaps, the critical gesture of reconciliation. In Sierra Leone, family meals are commonly eaten off of one plate or out of one bowl. For a family member to be excluded is grave. Indeed, there were multiple instances before the cleansing when families did not provide girls with food or allow them to eat with

the family. For example, Esther noted, *'the welcome from [my family] was very poor. Since I was captured by the rebels, my family said I was a rebel. They refused to give me food.'*

The ceremonial act of eating together after the cleansing was a sign that the community was now ready to accept these girls as complete and viable members of the community. Girls noted the change. Safanatu shared: *'When we came into town, the community welcomed us. They were happy with me. They stopped teasing me and calling me names.'* Isatu had a similar experience: *'after the cleansing, the community was nice to me and treated me well. The cleansing was to help me feel better and to help the community accept me... I do not feel excluded and everywhere I go, people like me.'* Overwhelmingly, the girls had similar responses of being accepted and embraced by family and community members that previously had neglected or abused them. Only Mabinti complained that her stepmother was still treating her poorly. Everyone else reported positive changes in relationships and felt reconciled with the community.

Reconciliation and improved relations also positively influenced the emotional state of the girls. In examining the connection between community acceptance and mental state, Esther put it well when she said: *'I see my family now. After the cleansing, they welcomed me. My family is more interested in me. I feel happy because we are one with the rest of the community.'* Fatmata shared her sentiment: *'I felt relief because I hadn't been mixing with my friends, but after the cleansing they started to embrace me. This provided me much relief.'* These acts of reconciliation that came out of the cleansing process appear to be a major factor in improved psychosocial health.

Spiritual transformation and renewal

Another major theme that emerged from the data was how cleansing ceremonies are a

mechanism for spiritual transformation. Two thirds of the girls in the sample described having *'noro'*, which translates most closely with spiritual contamination, or bad luck. This was attributed to having been raped during the war. As Fatmata described: *'My bad luck came from being used by several men.'* Cleansings have been used in these communities for rape from before the war as well. As Sarran explained: *'If a woman is raped on a farm, the food will spoil. So you have to offer a sacrifice to the ancestors on the farm and cleanse the girl on the farm. . . . If a girl is raped by the waterside, you must offer a sacrifice because the place is polluted and not fine.'* In the wartime context, bad luck was also attributed to having committed atrocities. Isatu described: *'When I was in the bush, all of the things that happened were like dirt. I was cleansed to remove the dirt and all those bad things from me.'*

The spiritual contamination affected almost every aspect of the girls' lives. Girls felt that bad luck affected their relationships, including their ability to get married, or find love. Isatu claimed: *'Because of my bad luck, I was unable to get married.'* *Noro* also was linked to bad behaviour and an inability to function within society. Many of the girls described how they were unable to earn an income before the cleansing. Isatu noted: *'If we tried to undertake business ventures, we wouldn't be successful. . . if we tried to do anything, we wouldn't be successful.'*

Spiritual pollution was also strongly linked to negative emotional states and self-perceptions. Aminta admitted that because of her contamination she *'felt inferior compared to the girls around me. I felt inhuman.'* Fatmata shared a similar sentiment; *'I felt unfit to be in the community. . . . I felt inferior.'* The girls' contamination caused them to feel isolated and separate from the rest of the community, and unable to be a part of community life.

In addition to affecting the girls, their spiritual contamination also affected family members and the wider community.

Aminata explained: *'my bad luck was affecting my family. People would provoke my mom that she had birthed a rebel. . . The bad luck also affected our rice farming. The whole community did not get good yields during that time.'* Jeriatu also felt her bad luck extended to family. She noted: *'my bad luck affected my family because I slept in the same bed as my mother. Her business was not going well and she was stigmatized for sharing a bed with a rebel.'* The bad luck and spiritual pollution that affected the girls and their families was one of the main reasons articulated for going through the cleansing ceremony. Almost every girl mentioned that they needed to be cleansed to get rid of the 'noro.'

In examining the data, it is evident that certain elements of the cleansing ceremony represented a symbolic break from the past and enabled the girls to leave their bad luck behind. The act of washing, for example, appeared to be a baptism of sorts in which the spiritual pollution flowed away from the girls. Fatmata shared: *'I felt that the part of the three days that was the key to my healing was the washing by the stream. I could feel the bad luck leaving me.'* As Isatu put it; *'During the cleansing, I felt my guilt leave me.'* While the healers washed the girls, they prayed over them and scrubbed their bodies with traditional black soap, ash and herbs.

In addition, healers performed special ceremonies to ensure that the washing would be successful. One healer explained how she spread out a mat by the waterside and lit a candle. One by one, she called the girls over to the mat. When a girl sat on the mat, she took some rice in her hand and brought out a live chicken. She then said to herself: *'If the bad luck that I am going to wash away from this girl will work, the chicken will eat the rice. If the chicken doesn't eat the rice, the cleansing will not work.'* These ritual acts assured the healers, girls and the community that the spiritual transformation would be successful.

Finally, the fact that the girls left behind their old clothing at the waterside and came to town in new attire symbolized the spiritual metamorphosis that they had undergone. The shedding of old clothing was a symbolic break from the spiritual pollution and so the girls came to town with new opportunities. When the girls described the effects of the cleansing, they often used transformative language, speaking as if they had become someone or something different that they were before. Jeriatu said: *'after the cleansing, there were changes. I was not a rebel anymore.'* Fatmata described a similar transformation; *'before the cleansing, whatever I touched of my siblings, they would say, "Don't touch that. You're a rebel!" Now whatever I touch is OK.'* Esther also felt the change. She claimed: *'I was happy that day because they had removed the bad luck. I felt different. . . I was normal.'* In this way, the cleansing was an act of rebirth and renewal. The girls credited their spiritual transformation to many of the changes that occurred after the cleansing.³ The girls frequently mentioned improved social relations, emotional states, and superior social functioning, and credited these changes to the fact that their bad luck had left them. Aminata shared how her spiritual transformation improved her social relations: *'I saw differences and changes after the cleansing. Before, when I asked people a question, I would get no response. After, people would respond to me. Even my dad sent a message that he is coming to me. He talks to me now.'* Jeriatu also made a connection between her luck and the lack of stigma and provocation in her social interactions. She shared: *'If I hadn't been cleansed, I would still have bad luck. People would have continued to call me bad names.'* She went on to add; *'I would also have no appetite and been very unhappy,'* thus linking her purification to her improved emotional state. Many of the other girls also noted improved self-perceptions and emotional states

through their spiritual sealing of the past. Fatmata said: *'It was a big relief to me... Now I feel big, I feel good... [After the cleansing] I felt normal.'* Aminata stated: *'after the cleansing it was different. I was normal.'* Girls noted that after the cleansing they stopped thinking about the past and felt 'one with the community' and 'like everyone else,' a sentiment that was clearly absent before the cleansing. Loss of 'noró' is also strongly associated with improved functioning. Girls credited their schooling and economic successes to their newfound good luck and cleansing. Fatmata said: *'my luck has improved. Now I am earning money.'* Isatu agreed: *'Things have changed since the cleansing. Now my business is good.'* Many of the girls also credited their improved behaviour in themselves to this loss of 'noró'. Isatu explained: *'I am not behaving in the same way that I used to behave. At first I would abuse people and threaten them when I was mocked, like with a knife. I am not behaving like that anymore.'* Mariatu had similar experiences; *'I felt good after the cleansing. I abstained from drugs and that felt good. I behaved like a good girl.'* By ridding themselves of their spiritual pollution, the girls were able to take up socially acceptable roles that they had not previously been able to fill, and thrive.

Finally, many of the girls believed that the luck improved for family and community members at large after the cleansings. Aminata said: *'since the cleansing, there have been great changes. Now, my family is getting good yields on the farm. My mom bakes bread and gets money. Before, the town was sparsely populated. Now there are more people.'*

The data reveal that across the board, girls believed that they and their families were benefiting from good luck as a result of the cleansings. There were no exceptions. In beginning the analysis, the author had hypothesized that the extent to which one's luck improved might be associated with the length of time a girl was with the rebels and

her roles during the war. However, the data did not show this to be the case, and the girl's spoke of their spiritual contamination and subsequent luck in similar ways whether they had killed and spent years with the rebels, or had survived rape and lived with the rebels for only a few weeks.

One surprising finding that the data revealed was that the girls believe that additional cleansings would be beneficial and further improve their luck. As Fatmata said; *'I believe in the washing and think if it was repeated, it would be a good addition.'* Isatu reiterated this sentiment, saying: *'I would like to get cleansed again to get more power.'* This interest in additional cleansings merits further investigation to determine if and how additional cleansings would further benefit the girls. It is also worth noting that the girls who had not gone through any cleansing still felt that their spiritual contamination was affecting them. Miatta worried: *'If I am not cleansed, the bad luck will run after me. I will not profit from anything I try.'*

Conclusions and questions for further research

To date, there have been few formal studies of community-based approaches to psychosocial healing in resource-poor settings. Cultural differences thwart efforts to apply Western models 'off the shelf,' and attempts to use Western methods exclusively can silence local knowledge, block the recovery of traditional methods, and promote psychological imperialism.' (Wessells & Monteiro, 2001). In fact, the data from this study suggest a need to re-conceptualize the concept of psychosocial support. In addition to the cultural component of healing that most psychosocial paradigms use as a jumping off point, this research suggests that spiritual dimensions and issues pertaining to reconciliation are also a fundamental part of the definition of psychosocial support. Up to now, these

dimensions have been neglected. However, the data show that spiritual healing and reconciliation are central to life in rural Sierra Leone. As spiritual degradation and the lack of community reconciliation are often primary sources of stress, these dimensions must be incorporated into definitions of, and programs for, psychosocial assistance. Community-based studies such as this one have other important implications for humanitarian aid organizations. Because they are scalable, these types of interventions allow more community members to receive treatment than Western models that tend to focus on one-on-one interventions. They also support local knowledge and put the power in the hands of paraprofessionals and local healers. Most importantly, they appear to be effective in mitigating psychosocial trauma and fostering community reconciliation. While this study offers a preliminary look at one program, it seems to support the recent literature that argues for more culturally appropriate and community-based interventions.

This study also raises a number of additional questions for future research. One question, for example, is whether strengthening traditional systems like cleansing ceremonies might have the unintended consequence of also strengthening harmful traditional practices such as female circumcision. In many communities, the healers who cleansed the girls were also responsible for female initiation that includes circumcision. It is possible that empowering these healers has raised their profile in the community to perform other traditional ceremonies. It is vital for international organizations to have a full understanding of the effects of supporting these local traditions. Another question that this study raises is how these girls will fare in the long run. To date, no longitudinal research examining life outcomes of female former child soldiers has been undertaken.

Such studies would be beneficial. Finally, it would be worthwhile to attempt to replicate the findings of this study in other psychosocial programs around the world.

While many unanswered questions remain, this study seems to point in a positive direction. The large majority of girls interviewed are feeling happy. They are in school, or running their own businesses. They have been accepted back into their families and are considered viable members of their communities. Like the name of the program that CCF started for them, these girls have been successfully able to seal the past and are now ready to face the future.

References

- Ager, A. (2002). Psychosocial Needs in Complex Emergencies. *Lancet*, 360, 2128-2130.
- Honwana, A. (1997). Healing for peace: Traditional healers and post-war reconstruction in Southern Mozambique. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 3(3), 293-305.
- Honwana, A. (1998). *Sealing the Past, Facing the Future*. London: Accord Publications.
- Miller, K., & Rasco, L. (2004). *The Mental Health of Refugees*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Summerfield, D. 1999. A critique of seven assumptions behind psychological trauma programmes in war-affected areas, *Soc Sci Med*: ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.
- Wessells, M. G. & Monteiro, C. (2001). Psychosocial interventions and post-war reconstruction in Angola: Interweaving Western and traditional approaches. In: D. Christie, R. V. Wagner, & D. Winter (Eds.), *Peace, conflict, and violence: Peace psychology for the 21st century* (262–275). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Wessells, M. G. & Monteiro, C. (2004). Healing the wounds following protracted conflict in Angola: A community-based approach to assisting war-affected children. In: U. P. Gielen, J. Fish, & J. G. Draguns (Eds), *Handbook of culture, therapy, and healing* (321–341). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

³ In examining the relationship between ‘*noró*’ and my major codes, there appear to be strong interconnections, emphasizing the importance of spiritual relationships in these communities.

¹ Open coding is the process of developing categories of concepts and themes from data not based on prior assumptions.

² The author relied on Atlas.ti 5.0 throughout the data analysis process for keeping track of codes, quotes and memos.

Lindsay Stark, MPH, currently works with the Program on Forced Migration and Health at Columbia University. She is a researcher and project manager for a USAID-funded initiative on the care and protection of children in crisis-affected countries. Email: ls2302@columbia.edu