Harnessing traditional practices for use in the reintegration of child soldiers in Africa: examples from Liberia and Burundi

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The changing nature of armed conflict has been characterised by the use of children as soldiers. The disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of these children back into society has become a primary concern for post conflict African countries seeking to achieve a sustainable peace. Studies have emphasised the crucial role of a participatory approach as an important factor in ensuring success in reintegration programmes. However, limited attention has been given to traditional cultural practices, such as ritual and cleansing ceremonies for child soldiers, in addressing psychosocial problems as essential components of reintegration. This paper, therefore, focuses on the crucial role and effectiveness of traditional cultural practices within the reintegration of child soldiers in post conflict Liberia and Burundi. Data are derived from content analysis of studies on the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes. The author argues that traditional cultural practices are integral to the success of reintegration of child soldiers in post conflict African states.

Keywords: Burundi, child soldiers, Liberia, post conflict, reintegration, traditional cultural practices

Introduction: background

As of 2000, more than 300,000 children under the age of 18 were being used as soldiers in hostilities by armies, rebels, paramilitary and militia groups, the world over (Brett, 2000). This high level of incidence occurs for diverse reasons, such as: the lack of adequate protection for children in International Displaced Person and refugee camps (Williamson, 2007); personal gains due to the subsistence level of farming families in rural areas (Furley, 1995; Kelly, 1998); to avenge the death of a family member or relation killed during violent conflict (Sesay & Ismail, 2003); or due to insecurity, fear and anger at the killings of those close to them during the war (Uvin, 2007). Although driven by any of several factors, including cultural, social, economic and political pressures, it is misleading to consider this in any way voluntary (Brett, 2000). As Sesay and Ismail (2003) noted, in most African countries the pattern of recruitment takes the form of intimidation, abduction, force and conscription.

Machel (2000) observed that the child soldiers are relentlessly exposed to extreme violence and suffering, and become increasingly desensitised to the horror around them. In the case of girls, nearly all girls abducted into armed groups are forced into sexual slavery and subjected to physical and emotional violence (Stavrou & Stewart, 2000). The child soldiers are also deprived of their rights to education, care and protection of their families, as well as other developmental opportunities (Betancourt et al., 2010a, c).

Liberia and Burundi have both experienced brutal civil wars that captured international attention, and had to undergo peacebuilding efforts lasting many years, with negative effects of violence spilling over into neighbouring countries (Rufer, 2005). At present,

Liberia and Burundi are still contending with the legacy of bloody civil wars, which led to crimes against humanity and various atrocities, including mass mutilations and the pervasive use of children within armed conflict. As Ginifer et al. (2004) showed, the combatants involved in Liberia and Burundi's conflicts committed widespread atrocities and destroyed much of their country's infrastructure. Therefore, the challenges of gaining acceptance, finding employment and accepting that the war has come to an end are often overwhelming for many child soldiers who grew up knowing nothing other than war (Ginifer et al., 2004).

In Burundi, throughout the 10 years of armed conflict that formally ended with the ceasefire agreement between the government and the last active armed group (Forces Nationales de Libération, FNL) in 2006, both the government forces and rebel groups recruited child soldiers. In fact, it was estimated that between 6,000 and 7,000 children were conscripted (Amnesty International, 2004; Haken et al., 2011; Jordans, et al, 2012).

In Liberia, at least 20,000 of the estimated 48,000 – 58,000 combatants who were disarmed, are under 18, with some as young as nine years old, thus falling into the category of child soldiers, with around half being females (Meek & Malan 2004; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2005; Bragg, 2006).

In trying to create successful reintegration programmes, however, limited attention has been given to traditional cultural practices, such as ritual and cleansing ceremonies. These practices have developed within specific ethnic cultures, since ancient times, and are still applied to resolve conflicts at community levels. Locally, they considered formidable models of conflict resolution, particularly given the ineffectiveness of contemporary conflict management strategies.

Therefore, paper focuses on the important role and effectiveness of traditional cultural practices in the reintegration of child soldiers, with specific focus on post conflict Liberia and Burundi. Data are derived from content analysis of studies on the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes. Further, this paper argues that traditional cultural practices are integral to the successful of reintegration of child soldiers, premised on a participatory bottom-up approach, with the active involvement of child soldiers, receiving communities, local implementing partners and newly established national structures.

The challenges of DDR of child soldiers in post conflict African states

Since the early 1990s, the process of DDR of ex-combatants plays a critical role in transitioning from war to a sustainable peace, because the success or failure of the DDR process directly affects long term peacebuilding prospects for any post conflict society (Knight & Ozerdem, 2004). Integral to any DDR programme, is the need to establish a safe environment which will ensure the personal security of the child soldiers as well as their social, economic and community security (Berdal, 1996). However, the effectiveness of these DDR programmes in reintegrating child soldiers back into a civilian lifestyle, has not been well analysed (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). One of the major challenges DDR programmes face in Liberia and Burundi, apart from funding, is the fact that in the disarmament phase, many fighting forces and groups did not disclose the presence of child soldiers within their ranks, thereby preventing their inclusion in formal disarmament processes (Machel, 2000). Another major challenge is that reintegrating into civil society is considered the most difficult phase of any DDR process (Alden, 2002; Rufer, 2005), with reintegration difficulties falling partly within the scope, and partly outside the scope of any DDR process (Hanson, 2007). In other words, while the term reintegration has commonly been used to cover

all activities after demobilization, in practice, reintegration has been limited to providing reinsertion and resettlement assistance only (Alden, 2002).

Until now, a successful reunification of former combatants with their family was considered a successful reintegration process. It is an important element, indeed, as Betancourt et al. (2010a, c) show that among male former child soldiers who reported higher levels of family connectedness, they were also likely to have lower levels of emotional distress and better social functioning. However, while reunification may be an important component, in itself it is not reintegration. The task of securing the life of an individual, which can be attained by ensuring the security of the post conflict environment, goes beyond family reunification (Maina, 2009). Crucial post conflict determinants of psychosocial adjustment for child soldiers, i.e. dealing with mental health problems such as posttraumatic stress, anxiety and depression, has to do with the degree of acceptance they are able to gain from family members, peers and others within their community (Betancourt, Borisova et al., 2010). Bragg (2006) has observed that community based approaches have been found to lessen distrust, and increase tolerance, between different war affected groups and support the reconciliation process. Therefore, social reintegration should include the sensitisation of communities to assist in reconciliation and aid integration of ex-combatants back into their communities (Porto, et al., 2007).

Regaining acceptance may require community mediation and forgiveness or cleansing rituals. Local involvement also creates the opportunity to deal with issues of impunity and allows communities to feel involved in accepting returning children, who may have perpetrated many atrocities within their communities (Maina, 2009). Key actors within these processes include public officials, community elders, leaders of religious organisations and local nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), in other words, key stakeholders within the community.

However, many reintegration programmes have followed a top-down approach, in which the programmes were organised and implemented by international organisations and the national government, while ignoring the input of the local community (Maina, 2009). However, not all agree with this view; Buxton (2008), for instance, has argued that community approaches are not necessarily appropriate nor easily embedded in certain country contexts, particularly where the ex-child soldiers have no memory of living in the community. For instance, in Sierra Leone, the former head of the DDR commission emphasised the lack of viable communities where former combatants could reintegrate (Harsch, 2005). Another factor, Buxton (2008) opined is that most ex-combatant's preference for urban reintegration can pose operational challenges for community based approaches, which are typically more sustainable and effective in rural areas. He cited the case of Liberia, where there were both difficulties in locating and monitoring urban based ex-combatants, and in the rolling out of community based approaches when the ex-combatants had no history of living in the community of return.

Several other studies on DDR, however, have emphasised the crucial role of a participatory approach that integrates traditional reconciliatory rituals into the reintegration process as major factor in ensuring success in a DDR programme (Meek & Malan, 2004; Boshoff & Very, 2006; Buxton, 2008; Maina, 2009). While acknowledging the fact that much of the literature on DDR is empirical and focused on how programmes should be designed and implemented (Meek & Malan, 2004), these studies also state that more attention should be given to traditional cultural practices, such as ritual and cleansing ceremonies. Furthermore, these can be seen as essential components

of reintegration programmes, as it is assumed that these ceremonies address both the psychosocial needs of child soldiers in terms of acceptance and fears of community members. Currently, DDR reintegration programmes for child soldiers typically comprise economic and education support packages, such as vocational training, apprenticeships, micro-finance loans, and formal or informal schooling and less on healing the victims, repairing the social fabric and protecting the peace (Huyse, 2008; Jordans et al., 2012). It is the intention of these programmes to prevent or mitigate the social, economic and psychological sequel of participation in an armed group (Jordans et al, 2012). The objective of reintegration is to reduce the former combatants' ability and desire to become political spoilers, engage in criminal violence, or otherwise derail the peace and recovery process (Hitchcock, 2004; Dzinesa, 2007; Buxton, 2008). However, the success of such endeavours will also depend on the effort expended meeting the needs of the wider community, into which youth combatants and other populations returning after the conflict would be reintegrated, in order to avoid the potential of future conflicts flaring up between groups. It is in this context that Bragg (2006) argued that community reconciliation and thus, mobilising community based capacity, is the essential foundation to a successful reintegration and sustainable post conflict support for war affected youth.

Traditional reconciliation rituals in the reintegration of child soldiers in post conflict African states

Across the African continent, studies have highlighted the post demobilisation factors and interventions that have been associated with successful reintegration, including community sensitisation, cleansing rituals, transitional periods in interim care centres, religious support, psychosocial counselling, family mediation and skills and vocational training (Williamson, 2006; Stark, 2006; Corbin, 2008). The role of the family in reconnecting to children and the use of welcoming rituals or traditional healing practices has been further emphasised to aid adaptation and community reconciliation (Betancourt, et al., 2010; Kryger & Lindgren, 2011; Jordans, et al., 2012).

The reconciliation process usually involves the use of some rituals, rites, symbols, blood pact alliances, marriage, eating and drinking from same bowl, shaking of hands, embracing and exchange of gifts. In the view of Winter (2007), rituals and traditional cleansing have been a part of child soldier demobilisation and reintegration programmes since 2001 in many countries, such as Angola, Mozambique, Uganda, Sudan, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Traditional approaches are anchored in restorative justice, which focuses on the restoration of broken community relationships. This is unlike the retributive justice of contemporary conflict management approaches, which centre on ending the culture of impunity, establishing guilt and sentencing of retribution and punishment with little or no reference to the victims of the child soldiers, their families or the future integration of the child soldiers into their community (Latigo, 2008).

Traditional approaches in post conflict African states

Burundi and Liberia both have a legacy of extremely violent civil wars, where the use of child soldiers have featured prominently. To address this, indigenous cultural practices were applied in both countries. This was done, on one hand, to address psychosocial needs of former child soldiers mainly related to mental health problems such as aggression, depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, likelihood of re-recruitment, and other forms of exploitation linked to their involvement in the armed conflict (Betancourt et al., 2010a, c). On the other hand, indigenous cultural

practices support the the social reintegration of former child soldiers into their communities, where ex-combatants and their dependants are assisted to (re)settle in post war communities (Buxton, 2008). The June 2005 *Transitional Justice Act* in Liberia made provisions for the employment of traditional mechanisms in conflict management and reconciliation. However, indigenous cultural practices were not formally integrated into the transitional justice programmes in Burundi, even though it was applied in the reintegration process for former child soldiers (Huyse, 2008). Additionally, Liberia and Burundi both present examples of countries where the application of traditional practices in the reintegration of former child soldiers have recorded some degree of success.

There is a wide range of different and complex applications of traditional reconciliatory ritual practices in post conflict African states (Huyse, 2008). Particularly within ethnically diverse countries, where each group has developed its own complex system of dispute resolution. In the case of the *Ubushingantahe* traditional system in Burundi, Huyse (2008) noted that the principle covers all national ethnic groups. However, in other post conflict states, such as Mozambique, Sierra Leone and northern Uganda, the traditionally based mechanisms are culture specific and consequently, almost inflexible (Huyse, 2008).

In this light, in the case of post conflict reintegration process for former child soldiers in Sierra Leone, for instance, DeCarlo and Ali (2010) observed that the first step in the traditional reconciliation process required that the community chiefs required the consent of the community or disputants as to whether reconciliation is actually desirable. Ceremonies to '*cool the hearts*' of child ex-combatants, on returning to their home communities in Sierra Leone are, therefore, carried out by the broader community (Shaw, 2005). After the perpetrators acknowledged their wrongdoing and sought forgiveness, cleansing rituals would be carried out to cleanse the community of the atrocities. DeCarlo and Ali (2010) argued that the traditional reconciliation process impacted more people in Sierra Leone than the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission,* which gulped several millions of dollars. It is in this light, that they further suggested that that more communities around the world should invest in the promotion of both traditional models that promote accelerated bonding of former enemies and participatory development projects in post conflict communities.

In other post-conflict states in Africa such as in Angola, a type of traditional psychological healing called *conselho* is utilised, which is based on '*the general encouragement given to people to abandon the thoughts and memories of war and losses*' (Eyber & Ager, 2002). Holistic purification and cleansing rituals, attended by the family and broader community, are carried out in welcoming ex-combatant child soldiers back into the community in both Angola and Mozambique (Honwana, 1997). Apart from Angola, in Uganda, the Acholi, a Luo speaking people in northern Uganda has a conflict management institution that is called *Matooput*, which is a process whereby truth telling forms the bedrock on which traditional justice relies for reconciling victims and former child soldiers (Lomo & Hovil, 2005). This reconciliation ritual, involves the drinking of a concoction made from the blood of sacrificed sheep and a bitter root by both the killer and the family of the bereaved, indicating their dispute had been set aside, following agreement about compensation (Bradbury, 1999). Other rituals include *nyonotongweno* (stepping on the egg), which is used for welcoming people who have been away from home for an extended period of time and *Moyo Piny,* a ceremony used to cleanse an area of evil spirits that are believed to have come about due to the occurrence of mass killings or massacres in those areas (Liu Institute et al., 2005; Justice

and Reconciliation Project (JRP) 2007). The process can also incorporate the act of confession, a request for forgiveness, reparations, traditional rituals and punishment (JRP, 2007).

In Acholi culture, the reconciliation process cannot be considered complete unless a perpetrator pays death compensation, or *Kwor,* to the victim's clan (JRP, 2007). By going through the traditional reconciliatory rituals, it is intended that the offenders will no longer be open to fresh charges at national courts and they are forgiven of the atrocities perpetrated within their communities (Lacey, 2005).

Some of the traditional reconciliatory rituals highlighted above have been adapted for the re-integration of former child soldiers in these post conflict African states. The specific application of these traditional reconciliatory rituals in post conflict Liberia and Burundi are analysed in the section below.

Application of traditional practices in the reintegration of child soldiers in post conflict Liberia and Burundi

The first DDR programme for child soldiers in Liberia was initiated after the end of hostilities in 1997, with the goal of dismantling the belligerent parties. However, the hasty nature of the implementation of the programme rendered it largely a failure (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2003; Rufer, 2005). In the words of Wolf-Christian (2005), although The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) claimed that comprehensive DDR was their priority and was successfully conducted, studies showed that they concentrated on disarmament and demobilisation with little or no programme for reintegration. The DDR programmes were even more disastrous in the case of child soldiers, according to Bragg (2006), who stated that the formal DDR programme served less than one third of the estimated 15, 000 children associated with the fighting forces during the civil war;

89% of those children who awaited demobilisation disappeared before the process was completed, and only 78 girls participated, despite much evidence that their presence in the armed forces was significantly larger than first thought. The failure of the 1997 DDR process was largely attributed to the lack of funding and support from donors (Kelly, 1997 cited in Bragg, 2006).

In particular, Kelly (1998) noted that the family reunification component of the DDR programme was left to the international NGOs operating in Liberia who had to trace the families of the former child soldiers. However, the limited knowledge of the local context constrained the efforts of the international NGOs to unify these children with their families. Additionally, the lack of emphasis on traditional healing ceremonies as an integral aspect of psychosocial healing and reintegration for former child soldiers, also contributed to rendering the reintegration process a huge failure (Williamson, 2006).

Therefore, another DDR programme was initiated after the end of the 2003 conflict to address the shortcomings of the 1997 DDR programme. In the 2003 DDR programme, emphasis was placed on the family reunification component, which involved a broad spectrum of both local and international NGOs, with some religious organisations playing an essential role in reunifying former child soldiers with their families (ICG, 2003; Awodola, 2009). However, Buxton (2008), observed that many of the former child soldiers have no history of living in the community of return and, as a result, found it difficult to reunite and adjust to traditional family and community settings.

According to Awodola (2009), a significant aspect of the 2003 reintegration process was the inclusion of a psychosocial component, which included ritual and traditional cleansing ceremonies for former child soldiers. The indigenous religious rituals provided community acceptance for

the child, assuaged the ill spirits associated with the former child soldier's actions during the conflict and reconciled the child with ancestral spirits. The religious rituals and reconciliation that involved a sense of forgiveness through religious or cultural ceremonies or rituals, and family reunification were considered the most important reintegration factors by the communities and families in healing and post conflict recovery in Liberia (Verthey, 2001). This is in agreement with Huyse's (2008) assertion that reintegration and cleansing rituals in Liberia fully prioritise bringing together returning rebels, their families and their victims.

The *Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission* of June 2005 made provision for the employment of traditional mechanisms of conflict management (Huyse, 2008). However, the reconciliatory rituals have been criticised on the basis of the need to guard against any potential harmful effects of the rituals, and misgivings about the extent to which such a ceremony can '*cleanse*' a former child soldier (Verthey, 2001). Nevertheless, the traditional reconciliatory rituals have achieved a major success in addressing the psychosocial need of the former child soldiers and reintegrating them into communities, and therefore, should be an integral aspect of the reintegration process.

The ability of the child soldier to gain acceptance from their communities, after the atrocities committed, would significantly aid their mental health and stability. In this sense, regaining acceptance gives former child soldiers a sense of belonging, healing from war related trauma and enables them to engage in sustainable employment and livelihood, as was the case in Liberia, Burundi, Angola, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, northern Uganda, Rwanda and other post conflict states. However, Buxton (2008) showed that the preference of many of the former child soldiers, who had lost touch with their local communities, to resettle in the capital Monrovia where such traditional

practices have been eroded by Christianity and Islamic religions, thereby reducing the numbers of those who participated in traditional cleansing and healing ceremonies. However, those former child soldiers who opted for urban centres also have the tendency to become political spoilers and live a life of crime (Hitchcock, 2004; Dzinesa, 2007; Buxton, 2008).

In the case of Burundi, an analysis of the DDR process by Amnesty International, (2004) showed that in October 2001, the government and UNICEF signed an agreement on a programme for the DDR of child soldiers. Additionally, Uvin (2007) stated that apart from the fact that the child soldier DDR programme was facilitated by UNICEF and the National Structure for Child Soldiers (SNES) in 2003, the implementation of the programme was largely sub-contracted to ten provincial partners, including NGOs and church agencies, among others. The *Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers Global Report* (2004) indicated that, while psychosocial support and medical care were provided for those with severe illnesses and injuries, the traditional practices of reconciliation rituals and cleansing ceremonies for child soldiers was not formally integrated into the reintegration process in Burundi. Although the traditional practices have been able to address the mental health trauma and ensure that (former) child soldiers regained acceptance in post conflict Liberia and Burundi, the failure of the Burundian government to formally integrate the traditional practices into the reintegration process, unlike in Liberia, undermined the extent to which the traditional cultural practices were utilised in the reintegration process in post conflict Burundi.

Thus, Huyse (2008) observed that in Burundi, the traditional *Bashingantahe* institution (described below) has not yet been accepted as a vital component of dealing with the legacy of an almost continuous and brutal conflict, and was not formally nor informally involved in the actual

programming of transitional justice. In fact, Huyse (2008) further noted that there is no reference to that effect in the 2000 *Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement*, and it also has no place in the law on the proposed national truth and reconciliation commission (*commission nationale vérité réconciliation*).

Bashingantahe is an institution that dates back to the 1600s and is comprised of an inter-ethnic council made up of elder tribesmen who have a *'highly developed sense of justice and fairness'* and whose focus is *'primarily on reconciliation, peacekeeping, social cohesion, and harmony'* (Huyse, Salter & Ingelaere, 2008; Haken et al., 2011). As Haken et al. (2011) stated, since the *Bashingantahe* are made up of community members who personally suffered through the violence and turmoil, they are keenly aware of the interests, needs, fears and grievances of the communities they serve. In this light, Haken et al. (2011) postulated that the *Bashingantahe* system of justice epitomises the balance between traditional mechanisms and modern practicality needed to engender reconciliation in Burundian culture for reason of their ancient roots and subsequent experience during communal violence,

The decisions of the *Bashingantahe* were specifically designed to reunite and reconcile parties in conflict, not simply to punish wrongdoing. To this end, penalties were usually designed to shame the guilty parties through moral and social sanctions, rather than to impose physical punishment or material fines (Ntahobari & Ndayiziga, 2003; Ntahombaye & Nduwayo, 2007; Haken et al., 2011). In order for reconciliation to gain momentum in Burundi, these cultural traditions must be taken into account. In this sense, Huyse (2008) argued that if there is to be a Burundian truth or common narrative about the violence perpetrated during the civil war, it will have to start at local level.

In recognition of the substance and importance of traditional reconciliatory practice,

Haken et al. (2011) asserted that the government should recognise the cultural importance of the *Bashingantahe* and formally integrate it to achieve a sustainable transition from war to peace. The reintegration and reconciliation of ex-soldiers, former child soldiers and displaced persons, through the *Bashingantahe,* recreates social relationships and communal bonds and is an essential component for sustainable peace in Burundi (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Huyse, 2008). As Haken et al. (2011) further argued, the government needs to consider it vital to the reintegration of former child soldiers in Burundi (Haken et al., 2011). The internationalised calls for the inclusion of traditional reconciliatory practice confirms Galtung (1996) and Douma's (1999) assertions that experience has shown that peacebuilding actors leverage at the social level reintegration process, that require local expertise, is limited.

Discussion

However, in spite of these challenges, Uvin (2007) argued that the reintegration process in Burundi was considered highly successful, contrary to the widely held perception that former child soldiers may have become social outcasts, systematically rejected by both their families and communities. This can also be contributed to the same *Bashingantahe* justice systems, as these were practised in the communities without the support nor monitoring of the governmental and DDR implementers.

Those who considered it a success have pointed to many of the former child soldiers being meaningfully engaged in occupational activities or skills, such as woodworking, selling clothes in the city, farming, taxi-vélo or running a small boutique (Uvin, 2007). In line with this assertion, Jordans et al. (2012) pointed out that in spite of the significant socio-economic adversities, structural marginalisation and continued community violence in Burundi society, with the support from reintegration

services, former child soldiers have integrated seemingly well.

Thus, Jordans et al. (2012) rightly argued that successful social reintegration had a buffering effect for current mental health problems of former child soldiers arising from the normalising and equalising effect of performing occupational activities, like their non-recruited peers, and brings an associated sense of recognition and utility within their respective communities. It is in this light that Betancourt et al. (2010) noted that, with increased community acceptance, the former child soldiers showed significant improvements in socio-economic functioning and mental health status. Indeed, Jordans et al. (2012) argued that *'successful reintegration is about the 'equality' in opportunities, participation, wellbeing and social functioning of former child soldiers compared to those of their never-conscripted peers'*.

As previously discussed, the challenge of gaining acceptance by former child soldiers in their communities, where atrocities were perpetrated during the civil wars, was addressed by the *Bashingantahe* justice systems in re-establishing social cohesion reconciliation between the Hutu and Tutsi (Jordans, et al., 2011). Similarly, Huyse (2008), noted that the *Ubushingantahe* in Burundi involves a more or less balanced mixture of reconciliation, accountability, truth seeking and reparation (Huyse, 2008). The traditional practices are also gender sensitive, even though gender traditionally based systems of dispute resolution are, by and large male dominated, in Burundi more women are invited to become *Bashingantahe*. This reduces the extent of female marginalisation.

However within Burundi, in most political circles, there is a clear aversion towards a formal mobilisation of the *Ubushingantahe* within the broader policy of justice after transition, whereas the *Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act of June 2005* provided for the application of traditional reconciliatory practices in Liberia (Huyse,

2008). In Burundi, instead of emphasising the symbiotic relationship between Hutu and Tutsi, politicians were focusing on ethnic cleavages in order to consolidate political power; particularly the perception by the Hutu controlled government that the *Bashingantahe* is still in the hands of the Tutsi (Ntahombaye & Nduwayo, 2007; Huyse, 2008; Haken et al., 2011).

Another identified challenge in the application of the traditional reconciliatory ritual lies in the fact that many of these traditional reconciliatory rituals are regarded as a collection of remedies with no clear formula. This is the basis for critique such as that of Allen (2008), who described traditional justice as no more than *'vaguely formulated conceptions about African ways of doing things'* (Allen, 2008). In spite of his criticism of traditional reconciliatory process, Allen (2008) also agreed that the application of traditional rituals is not impossible, if it can be codified, there is external support and figures of authority are created to perform them in such a way that they can be formalised into a more pseudo-traditional system.

This brings to the fore, as Gordon (2007) stated, the need to initiate programmes aimed at cultural revitalisation and consultation of estranged groups, such as former child soldiers, who were conscripted into armed conflict at a very young age and have consequently lost touch with their cultural belief systems, including aspects of traditional culture. Therefore, rather than asking them to unconditionally embrace traditional practices, there is a need to engender appreciation, so they can eventually embrace those aspects of traditional culture they feel are relevant.

Additionally, there is a need to alter the methods and procedures by which cultural rituals and ceremonies are currently conducted. For instance, the payment of symbolic compensation, a prerequisite for reconciliation in many African cultures, would be near impossible due to the large

numbers of people who have been killed. Therein lies the point where international NGOs and the United Nations can assist in providing logistical support for symbolic compensation through a reparations fund.

It is, however, vital that the traditional reconciliatory ritual be anchored within a participatory, bottom-up approach, in which the communities steer and lead the process while being incorporated as an integral aspect of the reintegration process for both former child soldiers and adults. Also, the traditional mechanism can be modified where necessary to enable flexibility in the use of traditional rituals for effective reintegration. In this light, more could be done to use local knowledge on the reconciliation rituals and allow the community to own and control the process. Para-legal institutions and healing rituals can sometimes offer ex-combatants opportunities to repent and become valuable members of the community again (Zartman, 2000).

However, there are opposing voices; Huyse (2008) highlighted the challenges to the application of the traditional reconciliatory rituals, such as the politicisation of the traditional leadership resulting in problems of weakened credibility, inefficiency and corruption. This, in turn, may considerably reduce the potential of the traditional institutions of conflict regulation, as they depend on local leaders. In some instances, he further noted, the legitimacy of these tools has been compromised by the role that traditional leaders played, in most cases under duress, during the conflict. Lastly, the insistence of international law on the duty to prosecute may restrict the policy choices national authorities can make.

Conclusions

It is evident that there are challenges in the DDR programmes for child soldiers that need to be addressed to ensure the human security of former child soldiers. There is a need for rigorous research on the reintegration process of the DDR programmes for child soldiers in post conflict African states, given the importance of this critical aspect of reintegration.

Traditional reconciliation rituals are a viable and community based process that should form an integral aspect of the reintegration process, for former child soldiers as well as adult ex-combatants, and serves as a complementary mechanism to the contemporary peacebuilding process in post conflicts societies, considering its crucial role in addressing justice, psychosocial needs and promoting community reconciliation. Indeed, Maina (2009) pointed out that reparative justice derived from traditional mechanisms is survivor focused, as it encompasses the needs of all people within society who have survived conflict and are now required to build a political community together, regardless of their divergent pasts. There needs to be a shift in analysing psychosocial aspects involving traditional reconciliation rituals and cleansing ceremonies. Such psychosocial aspects of reintegration, rooted in traditional cultural practices, should be given priority given the severe psychological trauma that former child soldiers are known to have endured, and programmes seeking to rehabilitate them have to be therapeutic. Therefore, traditional reconciliation practices such as cleansing rituals should complement state organised and/or internationally sponsored forms of reintegration processes for former child soldiers, as well as for retributive justice and truth telling for dealing with the legacy of civil war and genocide.

Indeed, as Kofi Annan, the then UN Secretary General, in his August 2004 report on the Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies reiterates; 'due regard must be given to indigenous and informal traditions for administering justice or settling disputes, to help them to continue their often vital role and to do so in conformity with both international standards and local tradition'.

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