



# The Indigenous Healing of Former Child Soldiers

Charles Wratto

24 March 2017

**In Africa, former child soldiers are often stigmatized and considered impure by the people they once lived among. But religious rituals, in the form of spiritual purification, can help reintegrate former fighters back into communities.**

**Author's note:** The statements cited in the text are a combination of the author's own experiences as a former child soldier and his investigative research works with former child combatants, ECOMOG Soldiers, refugees, military officers, religious and tribal leaders in Northern Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, South Sudan, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire. All respondents, including children currently serving prison term in Giwa Barrack and those in 5th Battalion Operational Ground Headquarters, Gubio Northeast Maiduguri, Nigeria; gave consent for the interviews and publication. Most children in Northern Nigeria pleaded that we tell the world what has happened to them; however, the information they have provided will be published in an upcoming publication.

## Introduction

The involvement of children in armed conflict has raised more questions than answers regarding the future of Africa. Child soldiering is strictly prohibited in international law, yet **over 500,000** children in conflict hotspots are exposed to the worst forms of cruelty on the face of the earth. Governments and international bodies have discussed remedial policies, but have largely failed to formulate effective reintegration initiatives to tackle this serious problem. Part of this failure lies with inability of Western approaches to child soldiering, and more generally African conflict resolution, to address the local and religious settings of the people. This is a problem because whilst the highly religious

### Latest

**An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme**

**Chances for Peace in the Third Decade**

**A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham**

**A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind**

### Most read

**The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities**

**Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug**

nature of African societies can stigmatize former child soldiers, it can also provide a means to reintegrate them back into societies.

This article discusses a study conducted by the Charles Wratto Foundation in rural Liberia using local solutions to address local challenges. Among other experiments, indigenous religious purification rites were performed for the acceptance and reintegration of former child soldiers while tribal leaders and youth were trained to discuss tolerance and lead peace-building activities within their respective communities.

## **Mental health and child soldiers**

Despite the wealth, security and comfort of stable societies, [studies show that](#), on average, an estimated one million people commit suicide every year worldwide. The reasons for these suicides include, but are not limited to, an inability to deal with extreme emotional pain, divorce, physical and mental violence, low self-esteem and substance abuse. According to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, [an estimated 22](#) deaths through suicide take place among US service men and women every day. In comparison, regardless being poorly trained or equipped for battle and conscripted to fight in guerrilla armies where they are subjected to serious mental and physical mistreatments, the development of a high suicide rate, if any, is yet to be seen among former child soldiers, particularly in Africa. Indeed, the harsh realities of war, has bestowed on these children the will to survive beyond our imagination.

Although [researchers in the field](#) of mental health eagerly and [critically examine](#) the behaviours of those formerly associated with child soldiers, it should be noted here that suicidal ideation, which is a thought, and suicide, meaning the action of taking one's own life, are distinct and entirely different.

## **Cartels**

---

## **ORG's Vision**

---

## **Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres**

Despite the evidence, the idea that a child soldier is scarred with mental disability and in no position to function as a normal human being has come to influence our thoughts, communities and, most importantly, our political and educational philosophies. Regrettably, it is based on this discourse that the youth and children associated with armed groups in post war Africa, are, for the most part, marginalized and excluded from national priorities including sustainable reintegration strategies.

### **The relevance of the indigenous approach**

Contrary to the imaginative views of non-Africans, the wars on the African continent are not restricted to the uses of small weapons, drugs or alcohol alone; instead, they involve also **deep-rooted** and extreme tribal rituals practices that demand human or animal sacrifices believed to protect a warrior against an enemy in battle. Against this backdrop, there is no doubt that, from the point of view of a warlord, ritualistic oblations are strategies designed to strike fear and horror into the hearts and minds of their much larger and better-equipped enemy. However, once the gun beat ceases and peace treaties are signed, reintegration becomes a major challenge as the rural communities to which most of these children are returned to, hold religious purification in the highest esteem.

The returning soldiers are considered unholy, and, as such, required to undertake spiritual cleansing in order to sanctify themselves from the evils of war and appease the spirits of dead victims. These ceremonies are significant and symbolic as they acknowledged the vile practices that have occurred, and thus, serve as a deterrent to future reoccurrences. As is the case, refusal to perform these religious appeasements would be seen to contaminate the entire clan and lead them into misfortune. But there is more to the ritual than this. There is also a fundamental and unshakeable credence that the avenging spirits of those killed during the war, but were denied their place in the ancestral world **due to the lack of a proper burial**, possess the ability to harm

their killers and community members. In this sense, it should be noted here that such impending danger, which includes, but not limited to, the reappearance of a victim's ghost to his/her killer cannot be prevented or resolved by Western treatments as they are seen to hold no place in the spiritual realm. Undertaking these ritual rites does not necessary mean a child is mentally unstable, but above all else, it is a precondition for readmission into society.

### **The indigenous methodology applied**

The traditional purification rites performed for the youth and children with military backgrounds were aimed at dealing with their wartime experiences as well as rebuilding their morality for the re-admission into society. Hence, the rituals performed varied depending on the extent of the child's involvement in the war. While some rituals addressed those who participated in the war but did not kill, others were focused on murderers.

During these ceremonies, the former soldiers were isolated from their communities and taken to shrines and secret locations of spiritual significance, where they were given sacred herbal medicine to drink. There, the healers spoke to ancestral spirits who were believed to be unhappy and pleaded forgiveness on behalf of the youth and the community through incantations. Furthermore, they were taken to streams for sanctified baths and were told not to look back upon emerging from the river. Doing so was considered a way of reopening the door to the evil war spirits and inviting them to harm the person. Their clothes and other objects from the war were burnt or washed away in a river to symbolize an end to a life of violence and the beginning of a new peaceful life.

In addition, the healers pleaded with the spirits of the dead, asking them to forgive the community and the perpetrators which included protecting them from harm and illness. During the Liberian civil war, brutality grew to its worst when every rebel group attempted to instilled terror and wanted be viewed as the most dreaded fighting force in the country. Children lacking military experience were ordered to eat the hearts of their captured enemies if they desired to be invisible to bullets. However, given the scarcity of finding an enemy's heart, the definition of an "enemy" was redefined from anyone opposing you in battle to those outside your ethnicity. Needless to say, this led to the deaths of many innocent people falsely accused of being "enemies." Informed of these experiences and aware that the bleeding spirits of those innocent souls will hunt their killers, the healers performed separate ceremonies to appease the dead upon request by each perpetrator.

## **Conclusion**

There is nothing wrong with Western approaches to conflict resolution in themselves. Nevertheless, the concepts and contexts under which they are employed to address conflicts in Africa undermine the social and religious settings of the people. Consequently, scarce and precious resources are wasted and achieving the overall objective of sustainable peace in a timely fashion becomes a major challenge. It is a known fact that Africans are extremely religious with each tribe having its own religious structure established on a set of beliefs that is impossible to separate from daily life. That being said, they have welcomed new ideas and foreign assistance.

However, foreigners could be exploited if they ignored the traditional structures or the systematic realities of the communities they find themselves in. For instance, the assumption by most donors and international organisations that



children formerly associated with armed groups are mentally ill and need the help of Western psychiatrists isn't just a delusion, which deepens the wounds of fragile communities, but more than this, it provides a platform for children, who were never recruited to fight as soldiers, to exploit humanitarian organisations due to a pre-meditated notion of the situation. NGOs will be told what they want to hear by those with no military background in an effort to claim the benefits of a child soldier. After all, they are all victims of war. Lets not forget, Western veterans were born and raised in much more stable societies while the children in armed conflict were born and raised in dreadful environments which they considered normal.

Here, they mastered the art of survival when serving not only as combat soldiers, but as leaders and strategic decision makers who have developed a high sense of intelligence and a reservoir of knowledge that can be put to constructive use during peace time. For this group of children, reintegration programs organized by representatives of foreign donors are perceived as dangerous and unnecessary given that these programs differentiates them as evil monsters, which doesn't just ruin the possibility of future career opportunities, but also exposes them to retributions and increases family shame.

While a few find it challenging to adjust in society, the vast majority, including female fighters, concealed their true identities and reintegrated into society without the help of internal or external bodies. For the girls who wish to have a family, this remains a personal and well-kept secret as associating themselves with armed groups could destroy the chances of having a future husband. In addition, both girls and boys, some of whom may have financial means or a place to stay, do so with the knowledge of being perfectly fine and thus, see no

reason to attract stigmatization and societal imagination by seeking medical or psychological assistance.

Children endure harsh realities during their time in combat, but regardless of the brutality involved, these experiences do not lead all child soldiers into psychological crises. Naturally, we would imagine post-traumatic disorders occurring given that we are so distracted and disconnected from these realities due to the very nature of our lifestyle. As a result, the inability to live without certain preferences limit our vision to either recognize nor connect with those possessing outstanding survival qualities and resilience.

*Image of demobilised child soldiers in Democratic Republic of the Congo.*

*Image credit: L.Rose/Wikimedia.*

**Charles Wratto is a former child soldier and a Ph.D. candidate whose research focuses on Child Soldiering, Youth Peace-Building and Indigenous Dispute Resolution Mechanisms on Sub Saharan Africa. He is currently a lecturer assistant and an associate researcher at the Babes-Bolyai University's Conflict Studies Centre, in Romania. As a former child soldier, and now a peace activist, Charles has experience working with youth and children in armed conflicts, victims of war as well as community and religious leaders on issues relating to youth participation in post-conflict reconstructions. He has given public lectures at several universities and organizations across three continents and spoken at numerous conferences on the use of children in war and its impact on our society. He is also the founder of the Charles Wratto Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to rescuing and helping war affected youth and children. In January 2014, "Think Outside the Box," a Romanian New Agency, named Charles one of the four heroes of the year.**



## Share this page



## Contact

Unit 503  
101 Clerkenwell Road London  
EC1R 5BX  
Charity no. 299436  
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

## Follow us



Registered with  
**FUNDRAISING  
REGULATOR**

## Useful links

[Login](#)  
[Contact us](#)  
[Sitemap](#)  
[Accessibility](#)  
[Terms & Conditions](#)  
[Privacy policy](#)