Inside the Lord’s Resistance Army
Voices from Combatants

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Background

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

• The cult-like qualities of the LRA have long captured the attention of the world

• Despite notable efforts to dismantle it, the LRA endures – in part because of the capacity to control new recruits

• Movement into countries that are linguistically, culturally and tribally distinct poses new challenges for the group
Methods

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

• “Mystical” systems serve highly specific strategic functions in armed groups in Africa

• The importance of magical beliefs in the LRA has been well documented

• Magical rites varied by LRA subgroup, but could include:
  – Ritual cutting
  – Placement of powder, paste, herbs or oil on the body
  – Wearing amulets

• Rites and beliefs used to psychologically control recruits

(Cline 2010; Titeka K in Allen & Vlassenroot, 2010; Wlodarczyk, 2004).
Magical Beliefs

• Receiving magical rites was associated with negative changes in one’s behavior and mental health problems

• Application of magic served consistent, strategic functions:
  – Forgetting home/being unable to escape
  – Seeing others as animals/dehumanizing victims
  – Taking on violent behaviour
Control of Gendered Relations

• Long-term combatants enforce a strict set of rules about gender relations

• Despite the LRA’s dispersal into subgroups, treatment of women is remarkably similar across all groups
Control of Gendered Relations

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

• The control of gender relations and the use of magic are both vital tools in the manipulation of members of the group.

• Results provide insight into functioning of a non-state armed group with notable longevity:
  – Particular insight into mechanisms used to control abductees
Intervention Opportunities

- Important to understand methods of psychological control in order to create effective counseling and reintegration programs
  - Culturally adaptive/context sensitive

- Preventing “the revolving door” of demobilization, and addressing cycles of trauma/violence