The efficacy of traditional cultural practices in the rehabilitation of victims of torture in Nigeria's Niger Delta

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Key points of interest

- Healing and reconciliation rituals in Nigeria's Niger Delta may allow for community acceptance of perpetrators and help improve the mental health of torture victims. However, results regarding victims must be viewed with caution.
- Traditional forms of justice and reconciliation can facilitate social cohesion between the victims, perpetrators and the community at large.
- There is a need for more community-led programs and policies that empower communities themselves to yield traditional cultural practices in the rehabilitation of torture victims.

Abstract

Introduction: Traditional methods of purification and healing carried out by healers and priests are of utmost importance for the mental and spiritual rehabilitation of victims of torture and perpetrators. The efficacy of traditional practices in the rehabilitation of victims of torture in Nigeria is examined. *Methods:* Data is derived from 60 interviews with key informants and eight Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted with victims of torture, youth militias, priests, secret cults, community leaders, women leaders, youth leaders, security agencies, and others, in local communities in the Niger Delta states of Bayelsa and Ilaje, Ondo. *Results:* By means of reconciliation rituals, both the perpetrators and the victims are re-integrated into the community. The mental healing of victims, who were deeply traumatized by the experiences of torture during violent conflict, is an aspect of community peacebuilding that is at least as important as material reconstruction. Traditional forms of justice and reconciliation that can address the psychosocial trauma of victims of torture may be helpful in the rehabilitation process. *Conclusions:* This paper suggests that healing and reconciliation rituals have been an essential component of rehabilitation processes in many local communities in the Niger Delta region. International, regional and national actors and institutions must recognize the cultural importance of such rituals and their potential relevance and significance for victims of torture, but their complex dynamics need to be better understood in order to safely and effectively apply them programmatically to achieve reconciliation and rehabilitation outcomes.

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Introduction

Contemporary armed conflict in many regions in Africa has frequently been accompanied by severe beatings, rape and other sexual violence, amputations, and other forms of torture. They have been used against civilians by rebel groups as well as by government armed forces. Nigeria, the most populous country in sub-Saharan Africa, has had numerous violent conflicts that undermine peace, security and stability in the country. One major challenge that has arisen from the volatile conflict situation in Nigeria is that torture is increasingly rampant amongst warring factions.

Despite the prevalence of torture in Nigeria, the existing mechanisms to rehabilitate torture victims, as utilized by the Nigerian government, have not been effective (Amnesty International, 2016). Alternative approaches, particularly those that can be implemented in local communities, are evidently needed. This paper contributes to this goal by examining the efficacy of traditional practices in the rehabilitation of victims of torture in Nigeria. How traditional practices were utilized to promote reconciliation between victims and perpetrators is described. The effectiveness of traditional cultural practices in addressing the psychosocial trauma and mental health of torture victims is also analyzed. Based on qualitative data gathered in Nigeria's Niger Delta, this paper suggests that traditional cultural practices that promote reconciliation can help both victims and perpetrators to reintegrate into their communities, and can be integral to the rehabilitation of victims of torture in Nigeria and other post-conflict African states.

Contextual background

'Indigenous' or 'traditional cultural practices' in Africa are part of the cultural traditions of a particular ethnic or cultural group. Many of these practices have existed for centuries and are often applied in conflict resolution at the local level. Contemporary conflict management strategies have had only limited success in addressing local conflict and many members of conflict-affected communities have opted to utilize their rich and vibrant cultural practices to promote conflict resolution and reconciliation, rather than rely exclusively on Western methods imposed by the colonial masters on Africa.

In the oil-rich Niger Delta, the focus of this study, the violent conflict over oil resources has had a grave impact on individuals, their families and communities at large. There have been documented reports of atrocities perpetrated by youth militants and government security forces, which have included murder, rape, maiming and kidnapping (Environmental Rights Action, 2000; Human Rights Watch, 2005b; Imobighe, 2004). In a recent report, it was alleged that suspected militants and pirates in one of the oil producing states, Akwa Ibom State, abducted several market women, who were taken to the militants' hideouts in the creeks. They were sexually molested and photographs of their of their naked bodies were taken at gunpoint (The Vangaurd, 2017). Furthermore, government security agencies have been accused by international organizations, particularly Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, of human rights violations including torture and other ill-treatment against the local people they were meant to protect (Amnesty International, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2005a; 2017;). Since the 1990s, there have been several documented instances of

violations against women by the Nigerian Army in its offensive in the Niger Delta communities of Umuechem and Ogoni, Kaiama and Odi in Bayelsa, Choba in Rivers state, and the Ijaw and Warri region in Delta state, among others (Human Rights Watch 2005b; Odoemene, 2012).

A particularly prominent case was the alleged sexual violence against the Ogoni women by the Nigerian army during the highhanded military operation in Ogoniland in the 1990s. The Ogoni women accused the Nigerian army, deployed to Ogoniland in the wake of the Ogoni crisis in 1994, of gross sexual violence in the form of systematic rape, forced prostitution, sexual slavery, sex-related threats, sexual harassment, killing, beating, and destruction of property (Odoemene, 2012). The victimized women appeared before the Human Rights Violation Investigation Panel (HRVIP), popularly known as "Oputa Panel," in January 2001. More than 10,000 petitions from the Ogoni were received by the Oputa panel. However, the Nigerian government has not publicized this and has not convicted any of the alleged perpetrators.

Additionally, no provisions were made by the government to address the psychosocial trauma of the victims of the sexual violence in Ogoni. The Odi massacre that occurred in 1999 in Bayelsa state is a similar case. The rampaging army razed a whole village and were accused of committing grievous sexual violations against the women (Albert, 2003). In Ilaje oil communities, the violent intra-communal conflict between the Ugbo-Ilaje and Arogbo-Ilaje in 1998, over conflicting claims to oil-rich land, led to the perpetration of acts of torture against the local women (Albert, 2001).

Traditional healing strategies were utilized to rehabilitate torture victims and

for transitional justice. Both government and civil society have not provided sufficient support. A better understanding is therefore needed regarding the role of indigenous practices for the rehabilitation of victims of torture and the necessity to provide support to the local communities in their efforts to integrate traditional practices with other conflict resolution approaches.

Review of literature

Researchers and practitioners have frequently emphasized the importance of community-based approaches for the success of rehabilitation programs in post-conflict states (DeCarlo and Ali, 2010; Lambourne, 2004; Osaghae, 2000; Smock and Crocker, 1995; Spear and Keller, 1996; Utas, 2009). Indigenous community-based reconciliatory practices include: the *Gacaca* courts, a form of traditional dispute resolution mediated by chiefs and tribal elders in Rwanda; *Conselho,* a type of traditional psychological healing ritual adopted in Angola; and *Mato Oput,* a process whereby truth-telling forms the bedrock on which traditional justice relies for reconciling victims and ex-child soldiers in northern Uganda. (Boege, 2006; Bradbury, 1999; Dwyer, 2003; Galtung, 2001; Oguntomisin, 2001). However, limited attention has been given to ritual and cleansing ceremonies for victims of torture in addressing the psychosocial sequelae of torture to date (Harrell, et al., 2003; Huyse, 2008; Shaw, 2005). Scholarly analysis is sorely needed to improve our understanding of the efficacy of traditional practices in the rehabilitation of victims of torture in Nigeria's Niger Delta.

Torture and its consequences

Torture and human rights violations commonly lead to anger, pain, resentment, and depression amongst victims (Feeny, et

al., 2000; Mukashema and Mullet, 2010; Paez et al., 2006). Negative emotions could be addressed through reconciliation rituals that allow the perpetrators to admit their wrongdoings, seek forgiveness, and offer reparations. Mukashema and Mullet (2010) have argued that enduring resentment can lead to negative feelings such as guilt, shame, remorse, and powerlessness, which adversely affects physical and mental health. Resentment could also lead to asocial behaviors, involvement in crime, and acts of violence (Staub and Pearlman, 2001).

After examining the relationship between resentment and mental health, several researchers have identified positive correlations between enduring resentment and depression (Brown, 2003; Kendler et al., 2003) and anxiety (Seybold et al., 2001). Other studies have discovered a negative link between enduring resentment and life satisfaction (Toussaint, et al., 2001) as well as psychopathic tendencies and high blood pressure (Muñoz et al., 2005; Witvliet, et al., 2001). Resentment may also be associated with physical pain (Mukashema and Mullet, 2010) and psychological distress (Carson et al., 2005). Other research has shown that shame is a frequent and important response in victims of human rights violations, particularly when perpetrators perform rape after sexual assault (Lewis, 2000; Paez et al., 2006). Feeny et al. (2000) observed that feelings of revenge and anger were positively associated with the severity of post-traumatic stress symptoms among assault victims.

The role of traditional methods in reconciliation & rehabilitation
Traditional methods of purification and healing carried out by healers, priests and other spiritual authorities, may be beneficial to victims of torture and perpetrators (Allen, 2008; Lambourne, 2004; Osaghae, 2000;

Shaw, 2005). The mental healing of those people who were deeply traumatised by the experiences of torture during violent conflict is an aspect of peacebuilding that is as important as material reconstruction (Huyse, 2008). Reconciliation rituals have been particularly relevant in post-conflict situations, when large numbers of perpetrators of violence, including child soldiers, face up to their deeds and are reintegrated into their communities (Boege, 2006; DeCarlo and Ali, 2010; Huyse, 2008). Reconciliation is concerned with conflict resolution and also geared towards reconciling the victim and perpetrator. This process could aid their rehabilitation, which includes medical and psychological treatment treatment for torture victims.

Mukashema and Mullet (2010) found that renewed interaction in daily life is an important factor that boosts the mental health of victims of the Rwandan genocide. This implies that reconciliation involving the rebuilding of trust between citizens could positively impact mental health and may also contribute to reducing conflict at the community or societal level. Although this suggests that healing and reconciliation rituals may be important in addressing psychosocial trauma and mental health of victims, some have argued that rituals may elicit negative emotions rather than alleviate suffering.

Drawing from Durkheim's (1912) theory of collective rituals, Kanyangara et al. (2007) undertook an analysis of participants in the Gacaca courts in Rwanda and showed that the trials often reactivate memories of the painful past such that participants' perceptions of the emotional climate in their community declines rather than improves. Durkheim's model seems to imply that the collective rituals encompass positive consequences for participants' feelings of

group belonging and social integration. However, Kanyangara et al. (2007), drawing inference from studies on emotional climate (Paez et al., 2005), argued that the increase in negative emotional climate among the survivors may be a response to the reactivation of intense feelings of insecurity, especially among survivors, due to the public exposure of atrocities committed twelve years before.

There may also be processes through which such emotions could be aired, processed, addressed and transformed positively. Indeed, Kanyangara et al. (2007) assert that the reactivation of traumatic experiences, both at the individual and at the collective levels, may be necessary in order to process the trauma and to come to terms with it. Moreover, clinical research by Foa and McNally (1996) found that the reactivation of intense emotion, linked to a traumatic experience, can provide an opportunity to (re)process these traumatic emotions and to transform them. Collective rituals, such as the Gacaca trials, appear to have significant and positive consequences at the social and psychological level.

Significantly, the potential of the Gacaca trial to elicit a positive emotional climate was tied to admission of wrongdoing and pleas for forgiveness by prisoners. This recognized the victims in their status, ultimately rendering community members, who witnessed the trial, more human and generating enhanced feelings of solidarity and social cohesion. The public admission of guilt and the seeking for forgiveness by the perpetrator has the potential to lessen the negative feelings of anger, fear and shame in victims and may increase their capacity to let go of such negative emotions. The willingness of the victims to forgive their transgressors is attributed to the social norms and culture of African societies. In collectivistic African societies, maintaining a good relationship with others and maintaining social norms is of utmost concern for its people (Kadiangandu et al., 2007; Takaku et al., 2001). Therefore, transgression is considered as a threat to interpersonal harmony, thus creating the motivation to forgive in the quest to maintain and restore social wellbeing and harmony (Yee Ho and Fung, 2011).

Igreja (2012) has also observed that local practices of conflict resolution, which create and reproduce basic trust in communities that are deeply divided by political violence, should serve as the norm rather than the alternative. He based his premise on the notion that, in war-torn communities, not all survivors would opt for the official processes of truth-seeking regarding the violent past and attainment of retributive justice. Rather, some may prefer a process that is geared towards forgiveness, reconciliation and forgetting the wrongdoings. This appears to reinforce Utas's (2009) assertion that the traditional healing and cleansing activities for the survivors were vital for their reacceptance and reintegration in local communities, as in the case of the Sierra Leone conflict.

Transitional justice appears "mechanistically conceived, suggesting a past of violence and a present for justice and closure" (Igreja, 2012, p. 408). Narrating the application of indigenous justice and healing practices in Mozambique through the Gamba spirits, Igreja (2012) observed that the spirits were regarded as male soldiers who died in the war. Their culturally meaningful body parts were used in the making of "medicine" to protect war victims against injustices amid extreme suffering. This formed an important aspect of the post-war peacebuilding process in

Mozambique through the establishment of gamba healers, social spaces and mechanisms, aimed at ensuring justice for wartime violations.

Scholars have pointed to the circular inter-connectedness between mental health and reconciliation, arguing that, as mental healing progresses, reconciliation becomes more possible. As reconciliation progresses, mental health increases (Staub and Pearlman, 2001). Mukashema and Mullet (2010) noted that good mental health and the associated positive relationships between people is vital to create the type of conducive environment in which participatory and economically productive societies developed can.

The indigenous cultural practices are similar in the sense that they utilize public revelations through story telling. This acknowledges wrongdoings and seeking of forgiveness as a medium for reconciliation of the parties, the extended family and the wider community, as well as the supernatural. Local cultural practices create a medium through which individual problems become a problem for the larger community, silence about the past can be broken, and a forum can be created for discussing past violent conflict or war time crimes. Formal systems promote silence and generally do not allow for story telling, whereas the cultural significance of the indigenous local practices lies in the fact that that the rituals may serve as vehicles for and agents of justice (Igreja, 2012).

Methodology
Study area
The Niger Delta is comprised of nine states: Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross-River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers. The study was carried out in the oil-rich communities in Bayelsa and Ilaje, Ondo state. Communities selected include Biseni,

Yenagoa LGA (Local Government Area) and Otuosega, Ogbia LGA, in Bayelsa State. In Ondo state, Awoye and Ikorigho communities in Ilaje, Igbokoda LGA, were selected. These communities have witnessed violent communal conflicts in which acts of torture were perpetrated against the local people. The local communities utilized their traditional cultural practices for the reconciliation and rehabilitation of the victims and, in some cases, the perpetrators, who were members of the community. In the local communities, women's sexual purity symbolizes the inviolability of their community and the power of its men to defend its boundaries. This makes sexual violence by outside men a dishonour of individual women, a violation of communal integrity, and a shaming defeat of men in their protective role (Lahai, 2010).

Definition of torture used
The International Committee of the Red Cross's (ICRC) definition of torture was used, which does not require the involvement of the state, in contrast to Article 1(1) of the UNCAT definition of torture.[1] Rape and other sexual violence inflicted on women as a weapon of war are considered as acts of torture and human rights violations (Eriksson, 2010; Koening et al., 2011; Weiner, 2013). Although acts of torture, such as rape and other inhuman or degrading treatment, are prohibited in the Nigerian Constitution, torture is not defined in Nigerian law or criminalized, even though this is a requirement of the Convention Against Torture, of which Nigeria is a state party (Amnesty International, 2016).

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[1] See https://www.icrc.org/en/document/torture-and-other-forms-ill-treatment-definitions-used-icrc

Data and procedures

Data is derived from interviews with key informants and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted with the research subjects. Purposive sampling was used to select the research subjects, which include victims of torture, youth militias, priests, secret cults, community leaders, women leaders, youth leaders, security agencies and oil company personnel in the local communities in the Niger Delta states of Bayelsa and Ilaje, Ondo states. The victims of torture selected include those who were raped, forced into prostitution and sexual slavery, and faced physical battery by security agents and militants. All participated in traditional practices for rehabilitation.

A total of 60 in-depth interviews and eight focus group discussions were conducted with key-informants and victims in the four communities in the two states of Bayelsa and Rivers (see Table 1). All interviews and FGDs lasted 30-90 minutes. Direct observation of the day-to-day realities in the six communities was also utilized.

Several respondents were involved as key informants and were purposefully selected for interview based on their age, occupation and position. The key informants included: community leaders, priests, secret cults, youth leaders, women leaders, victims and perpetrators. Out of the sixty in-depth interviews, 36 of the interviewees were men while 24 were women. Eight FGD sessions were held in total. Two FGDs were conducted in each of the four communities and were conducted separately for the women and men. As stipulated in Table 1, all respondents were age 18 years and above, and their occupations and educational

Table 1: *Socio-demographic characteristic of Respondents*

Respond-ents	Age	Education	Religion	Marital status	Occupations	Num-ber of Inter-views	Num-ber of FGDs*
Commu-nity leaders	60 and above	Primary	Traditional	Married	Farmers, Fisher-men	4	0
Youth leaders	40-49	Secondary, University	Christianity, Traditional	Married	Farmers, Fisher-men, Civil Servant	4	0
Women leaders	40-59	Primary, Secondary	Christianity, Traditional	Married	Traders, Farmers	4	0
Priests, healers and secret cults	60 and above	Primary	Traditional	Married	Farmers, Fisher-men	8	0
Victims	18-39	Secondary	Christianity, Traditional	Single, Married	Traders, Farmers	27	4
Perpetra-tors	18-59	Secondary, University	Christianity, Traditional	Single, Married	Unemployed, Mili-tants	13	4

*Each FGD was comprised of 7-10 participants.

backgrounds were heterogenous. The interviews were conducted with the support of research assistants who were members of the sampled communities. All responses were audio recorded apart from a number of instances where the respondents did not agree to be recorded. The identities of the respondents were kept strictly confidential and their consent was always sought once the purpose of the study was communicated. The fieldwork for this study was conducted in 2012 and a follow-up from June 2016 to September 2016. During the fieldwork in 2012, 35 interviews were generated, while an additional 25 interviews were from the follow-up fieldwork.

Interviews with key informants and focus group discussions provided insights into the nature of the torture experienced and the actors involved. They also elicited respondents' opinions on the knowledge and perception of the measures put in place by the government to protect the victims and punish the perpetrators, as well as the effectiveness of traditional practices utilized in the rehabilitation of victims of torture in their communities. The priests and healers, who performed the reconciliation rituals, shared their experience of how the rituals were carried out and their perceptions of its efficacy. The FGDs also sought diverse and collective perceptions on the application of cultural practices for healing and reconciliation, and its efficacy in addressing psychosocial trauma and rehabilitation of victims. Information was also sought on the effectiveness of the traditional practices in transforming negative emotions of anger, resentment, psychological distress, shame, anxiety and depression in the victims to positive emotions of forgiveness and reconciliation. FDGs provided insights on the state of mental health of the victims. Asocial behaviors, linked to the experience

of torture before and after the application of the traditional cultural practices, were also assessed. FGDs therefore captured views of the local community members on the long-term positive impact of the indigenous method in the life of the victims and their successful rehabilitation.

The field data was transcribed and manually coded in accordance with the themes that emerged in order to reveal the respondents' perceptions and general discourse.

Results

Acts of torture and their perpetrators
The acts of torture in the sampled communities usually took the forms of rape, forced prostitution, sexual slavery, killing, beating, and destruction of property. The most prevalent acts of torture were rape, forced prostitution and beating. The majority of the respondents stated that the victims of these acts of torture are predominately women. According to a local chief in the Otuosega community, security forces are often the main perpetrators of torture against local people, particularly women. Bringing the security agents to justice is challenging because they usually deny that they tortured the local people during their armed offensive in the local communities. Although the government set up a commission of inquiry to investigate the allegations against the military, in some cases it was reported that reports are usually discarded and no efforts made to prosecute or punish the perpetrators.

In the case of violent communal conflicts, members of the communities are culpable. In particular, the youth have been alleged to beat, maim, kidnap, rape and commit other acts of sexual violence against women. The victims of these atrocities are also not offered any protection

by the security agencies and provisions are not usually made by the government for addressing the psychosocial trauma and the rehabilitation of the victims.

The process of traditional cultural practices
In the local communities, the reconciliation ritual is geared towards reconciling the victims and the perpetrator and reintegrating them back into the community. Reconciliation usually takes the form of the perpetrator admitting the atrocities and seeking forgiveness from the victim. It also entails story telling where victims narrate their ordeal and perpetrators admit the offense. Payment of compensation to the victims and ritual cleansing to ward off the atrocities from the community are also part of this process.

Traditional healing and reconciliation processes took a similar form across the sampled communities of Otuosega, Biseni, Awoye and Ikorigho but with minor procedural differences. They required that the community chiefs attain the consent of the community and victims as to whether reconciliation is desirable. The reconciliation process begins with the constitution of a body of elders who facilitate the process of story telling. This usually takes the form of a community gathering, where the victims tell their stories of what the perpetrators did to them. After the perpetrators have acknowledged their wrongdoing and sought forgiveness, cleansing rituals are carried out to cleanse the community of the atrocities. In Awoye and Ikorigho communities in Ilaje, the cleansing ritual is carried out by the cult known as Alaghoro. In the case of Biseni and Ikarama communities in Bayelsa, the high priest carried out the cleansing ritual for the victims and the community as a whole.

The local priest performed ceremonies to "cool the hearts" of perpetrators upon their return to the communities. The consent of the community and victims determines if the reconciliation will take place. The strength of the reconciliation rituals is reinforced by the seeming willingness of both the perpetrators and victims to consent to the reconciliation rituals. The ritual is performed in the community where both the victims and perpetrators belong. During an interview session, a local chief disclosed that the perpetrators and victims always consented to the reconciliation rituals. The respondents generally attributed this to a strong sense of affinity to their roots where they were born and have family members and kinsmen. Consequently, refusal to consent to the ritual practices may lead to community isolation.

Truth-telling forms the bedrock on which traditional justice relies on for reconciling victims and perpetrators (Lomo and Hovil, 2005). Truth-seeking and reconciliation processes were held in the open and everyone who attended had the right to cross-examine victims and perpetrators. The traditional reconciliatory process was specifically designed to reunite and reconcile victims, perpetrators and community members who witnessed and suffered through the acts of violence, rather than to punish wrongdoing. As part of the rituals associated with the reconciliation process, the perpetrator compensates the victims with gifts such as a ram, goat, hen, cow or money. In Otuosega, the local chief alleged that the healing and reconciliation process is not complete until the perpetrator pays compensation to the victim's family. The completion of the reconciliation rituals implied that the offenders have been forgiven for the atrocities perpetrated and would not be charged or convicted in the court of law.

Besides the compensation to the victims, offenders are made to face moral

and social sanctions, which may entail shaming rather than the imposition of physical punishment. Compensation is not actually regarded as a material fine, but as a form of reparation to the victims and their families. However, the process of establishing guilt and holding perpetrators accountable for their wrongdoing could be viewed as a sort of punishment. This perhaps implies that, although local cultural practices are geared towards restorative justice, there are some punitive elements inherent in it since accountability for wrongdoing is key to the mechanism. As such, the local traditions tend to display complex elements of both restorative and retributive justice. This buttresses Durkheim's (1964, p. 25) contention that, in African indigenous judicial and legal structures, the purpose of collective decision to punish those who deviate from the norms of the traditional society is not only to bring justice to bear on the offender, but also to give credence to the collective conscience espoused by the community.

Efficacy of traditional cultural practices
The perceptions of the respondents were sought on the effectiveness of traditional practices in addressing psychosocial trauma of torture victims. To ascertain the efficacy of the traditional mechanism, it is important to observe the psychological status of the victims and how easily they adapt back into normal life after the traditional rehabilitation process, which is geared towards transforming their negative emotions to positive emotions and enhancing their psychological status.

The indigenous reconciliation rituals were generally perceived to assuage the ill-spirits associated with the atrocities inflicted on the victims and to reconcile perpetrators with the community ancestral spirits. It also appeared to pave the way for community acceptance of the perpetrators and minimize any stigma that the victim may otherwise have been subjected to. The traditional cleansing rituals prioritize bringing together the victims, perpetrators, their families and the whole community. In the long run, the rituals were generally perceived to have the potential to enhance the social and emotional wellbeing of the victims and perpetrators by transforming their negative emotions to positive ones. Also, the warm acceptance of the victims back into the community, without any stigmatisation, aids their healing process.

The psychological status of the victim is assessed through observing their emotional state and capacity to integrate fully and lead a normal life after the reconciliation rituals. In the follow-up interview in 2016, a respondent in Biseni community, a female victim, reported that she had adapted well into the community and her tailoring business was thriving. In Ikarama community, a male respondent and one of the perpetrators of torture, stated that he felt a sense of belonging after his acceptance back into the community which was facilitated by the reconciliatory ritual. In Awoye, Ilaje, the local healer reported that the victims have been able to adapt well into their communities without showing any sign of shame or anger towards the perpetrators. From observation and responses during the FDGs sessions, the victims of torture did not demonstrate any sign of shame such as stigmatization by the community. According to one of the victims, the ritual process attested to the level of support they enjoyed from the members of the community. The admission of guilt and reparation by the perpetrators greatly aided the recovery process. The perpetrators acknowledged the positive impact of the reconciliation rituals.

One of the perpetrators in Otuosega claimed that the rituals process helped them to come to terms with their crimes and feel a sense of remorse. They were reported to be willing to seek forgiveness from the victims and offer gifts as a form of reparation.

The responses from the male respondents during the FDGs sessions revealed that they associated major positive effects of the reconciliation rituals with the victims' capacity to forgive their wrongdoings and their acceptance back into the community. The womens' responses during the FDGs sessions showed that they attributed, as a major positive impact of the process, the capacity of the ritual to provoke feelings of remorse in the perpetrators. This made the perpetrators acknowledge the pain and suffering that they have inflicted on the victims.

The non-vilification of the victims, particularly those raped during the conflict, and the acceptance of perpetrators back into their communities after the atrocities committed, significantly aided their psychological status and wellbeing. It gave them a sense of belonging, healing from the torture and war-related trauma and enabled them to engage in productive life. The respondents alleged that after the reconciliation rituals, the victims did not show any sign of depression or poor psychological status. In the words of a key informant in Ikorigho community:

> "*Those that participated in the reconciliatory ritual have not displayed any sign of ibanuje[2] or other negative emotions including asocial behavior. They have been living harmoniously with other members of*

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2   Ibanuje is a local traditional word for sadness, which describe what Western medicine would call depression.

the community, carrying out their daily activities without any rancour."

Discussion

Recent studies have increasingly focused scholarly attention on the importance of traditional cultural practices in the rehabilitation of victims of armed conflicts as well as perpetrators; however, some scholars have questioned their applicability. One of the criticisms has to do with the contention that the traditional reconciliation rituals are more of a collection of remedies with no clear formula. Allen (2008) has described the traditional practices as no more than vaguely formulated conceptions about African ways of doing things. However, he acknowledged the potentials of the traditional reconciliatory process, suggesting that it could become laudable if it can be codified and formalized into a more pseudo-traditional system.

In the case of the Gacaca trial in Rwanda, Kanyangara et al. (2007) argued that the local mechanism rekindled the wounds of the past, yet such reactivation is required as a process for the victims to come to terms with the traumatic experiences and begin healing. They observed that the indigenous rituals have a profound impact, both at the social-psychological and at the emotional levels, by fostering social cohesion. Negative feelings associated with the act of torture such as feelings of anger, shame, resentment, fear and anxiety have been found to impact negatively on mental health, leading to stress, high blood pressure, depression and psychopathic tendencies (Brown, 2003; Muñoz et al., 2005; Toussaintet al., 2001). Foa and McNally (1996) have shown in clinical research that a preliminary and necessary condition for victims to come to terms with their negative emotional climate requires the

reactivation of intense emotion linked to a traumatic experience.

Kadiangandu et al. (2007) emphasized the importance of interpersonal forgiving in human relationships, arguing that it constitutes a strategy that allows feelings of relief from resentment and other negative emotions toward transgressors that one has to interact with. This helps to justify the submission by Mukashema and Mullet (2010) that reconciliation fosters societal cohesion and development when there is the existence of mental stability and good social relations among the people. As Kanyangara et al. (2007) have observed in the case of the Gacaca trials in Rwanda, the reconciliation rituals exacerbated feelings of guilt among perpetrators, thus creating suitable preconditions for them to express regret, to ask for forgiveness, and to be ready to contribute to material compensation for the victims. Other studies have argued that local reconciliation rituals create a safe and legitimate social space for victims to come to terms with the painful memories of the atrocities and serve as a pivot for achieving positive resolution (Igreja, 2012). These community-based approaches for healing and reconciliation are considered to be relatively reliable in building trust and increasing tolerance between the victims and other members of the community (Bragg, 2006). The traditional cultural practices, such as ritual and cleansing ceremonies. are seen as essential components of the healing and rehabilitation process. They are crucial to addressing the psychosocial trauma of the victims (Meek and Malan, 2004; Spear, 2002;) as they are geared towards enhancing the recovery process of victims.

Scholars, such as Buxton (2008), have raised the contention that the traditional cultural practices are not universally appropriate or applicable in all contexts, in light of cultural nuances. This may be so, in particular cases in which the perpetrators are not members of the communities. In the case of the Niger Delta, where the security agencies are often regarded as the perpetrators of atrocities, it may seem impossible to apply the traditional practices for reconciling the victims and perpetrators who are the security agencies. This is because the security agencies are not members of the victims' community. Nevertheless, it is asserted here that it important to highlight the usefulness of traditional healing practices in addressing the psychosocial trauma confronting the victims of torture. Furthermore, government support for the community-based approaches may, in the long run, lead to the formalization of the reconciliation rituals, such that the security agencies who perpetrated such acts of torture may be compelled to participate in the traditional healing and reconciliatory process.

In the case of atrocities perpetrated by youths, who have lived in the communities before their conscription into the military, the traditional cultural practices have been relevant to the healing and reconciliatory process for both perpetrators and victims. One of the operational challenges to the application of the traditional reconciliation rituals for ex-militants, according to Buxton (2008), has to do with the ex-combatant's preference for urban reintegration rather than the community-based approaches, which are typically more sustainable and effective in rural areas. Citing the case of Liberia, he argued that most of the ex-combatants who joined a rebel group at a very young age may have no history of living in the community of return, making it difficult for them to easily return and live in these communities. This may not apply in the case of the Niger Delta militants who have lived all their lives in the local

communities before joining a militants' group. As Zartman (2000) noted, the healing rituals can sometimes offer ex-militants the opportunities to repent and become valuable members of the community again.

The apparent weakening of traditional institutions—custodians of the traditional practices, customs and norms—and their subsequent loss of legitimacy perhaps threatens their future legitimacy in reconciliation and rehabilitation. Huyse (2008) draws attention to the issue of politicization of the traditional leadership, which has resulted in problems of weakened credibility, inefficiency and corruption. Osaghae (2000) argued that the politicization, corruption and abuse of traditional structures as a result of government politics and loss of moral values make traditional authorities susceptible to corrupt practices. In particular, traditional rulership may considerably reduce the potential of the traditional mechanism of conflict regulation, which largely lies with the local leaders. Huyse (2008) also noted that the legitimacy of these traditional cultural mechanisms may have been compromised by the role that traditional leaders played as actors (in most cases under duress) during.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the traditional cultural mechanism is still vibrant in many local communities, as exemplified in the case of the Niger Delta. The local traditions have provided succours for the people in the face of the ineffectiveness of contemporary mechanisms and, in particular, the lack of political will by the national government to provide adequate protection and preventative programs for victims and prosecution of perpetrators. The traditional mechanism focuses largely on restorative justice rather than punitive. This contrasts with Western judicial

methods which center disproportionately on establishing guilt and executing retribution and punishment with little or no reference to the victims, their families, or the future integration of the victims into their community (Zartman, 2000).

With hindsight, it is impossible to ignore the relevance of the traditional cultural practices in the reintegration and rehabilitation process in post-conflict communities, given numerous evidence of its usage, and the level of success achieved in many post-conflict states in Africa (Boshoff and Very, 2006; Maina, 2009; Meek and Malan, 2004; Rufer, 2005). Utas (2009) documented the case of the Sierra Leone healing complex involving the herbalists who handled direct medical healing, the Karamoko/Mori-men (Muslim teacher/specialist in Muslim medicine and divination) who dealt with psychological healing, and the churches' involvement in social healing of survivors of sexual abuse in the aftermath of the war. He notes that the healing ceremonies played a central role in the individual psychological healing of young people who were sexually abused during the war.

Nevertheless, the extent to which traditional practices have gained acceptance as a viable mechanism for reconciliation and rehabilitation in post-conflict communities is debatable. This may have informed Gordon's (2011) emphasis on the necessity of initiating programs aimed at cultural revitalization and sensitization of certain estranged groups, especially those ex-militants, who have lost touch with their communities. They were conscripted into rebel factions at a very young age and have consequently lost touch with many aspects of their traditional cultural practices. It would be unrealistic to expect them to unconditionally embrace

traditional practices. Rather, it is important to sensitize and orient them so that they can eventually embrace those aspects of traditional culture that they feel are relevant to their particular situations.

Another important issue is the procedural methods by which cultural rituals and ceremonies are currently conducted. One aspect of the healing and reconciliatory process is the payment of symbolic compensation, which is an important prerequisite for reconciliation in many African cultures. Challenges are inherent in the cases where many victims and perpetrators are involved in the reconciliatory process. Such a situation necessitates a large amount of symbolic compensation that may be too expensive for the concerned people to procure. This constraint can be addressed if communities are supported by the national government, local and international NGOs, and multilateral organizations, including the United Nations. Provision of logistic support, which may be a kind of reparation fund for the communities, can significantly address this challenge.

It is also important to emphasize that, as an integral aspect of the rehabilitation process for victims and perpetrators, the traditional reconciliation rituals need to be anchored within a participatory, bottom-up, approach in which the communities steer and lead the process. In some cases, some aspects of the traditional mechanism may require modification to enable flexibility in the use of traditional rituals for effective rehabilitation.

The analysis of the Niger Delta context strengthens the views expressed by Allen (2008), Lambourne (2004), Osaghae (2000), and Shaw (2005), who state that local cultural practices are vital to boosting the mental health and spiritual rehabilitation of victims and restoration of societal cohesion. The findings also reinforce the idea that healing and reconciliation rituals can be meaningful and impactful in post-conflict settings where perpetrators need to be accountable for their wrongdoings and both victims and perpetrators need to be reintegrated into their communities to live normal and socially productive lives (Boege, 2006; DeCarlo and Ali, 2010; Huyse, 2008; Kadiangandu et al., 2007; Utas, 2009).

Conclusion

As perceived by community actors themselves, traditional healing and reconciliatory mechanisms have been successfully applied in the rehabilitation of victims of torture, as the case of the local communities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria exemplified. Traditional methods of purification and healing carried out by customary healers, priests and other spiritual authorities are of utmost importance for the mental and spiritual rehabilitation of victims and perpetrators. The mental healing of victims, who were deeply traumatized by the experiences of torture during violent conflict, is an aspect of peace-building that is at least as important as material reconstruction.

This study suggests that healing and reconciliation rituals have been an essential component of rehabilitation processes in many local communities in the Niger Delta region. It calls for national governments, and regional and international institutions to recognize the cultural importance of such rituals and their potential relevance and significance for victims of torture. However, before formally integrating healing and reconciliation rituals into standard rehabilitation and support programmes, more research is warranted. While healing and reconciliation rituals for victims and perpetrators of torture in this

study appear to recreate social relationships and communal bonds, the particular dynamics, risks, and potential outcomes of such rituals and practices across diverse cultural, political, and economic contexts in Africa will vary. In some contexts, it is conceivable that perpetrators could benefit from social reintegration, but victims could also feel threatened, disbelieved, or forced to forgive. We also need to better understand when rituals create a mere veneer of healed social relationships rather than real reconciliation and when they (inadvertently) reproduce previous conditions of gendered inequality.

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