

From 'saved' to secularised: the challenges facing former LRA fighters after reintegration into their communities

While rehabilitating and reintegrating former LRA fighters, the international NGO World Vision emphasises Christian values of forgiveness. Despite this, few returnees remain 'saved' once they return to their communities. Dr Grace Akello investigates why this is the case, and what this means for reintegration programmes in the future.

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For international NGO World Vision, instilling Christian values in returnees is key to the rehabilitation and reintegration of former Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) fighters in northern Uganda. After being rescued at the warfront, former fighters are taken to the World Vision Centre for Formerly Abducted Children (WVCFAC), where the Ten Commandments and numerous biblical scripts about God's love are engraved on counselling room walls.

After returnees are interviewed and their biodata and wartime history documented, a Christian pastor frequently discusses faith matters. Counsellors preached the love of Jesus Christ and God's forgiveness for returnees' sins. In particular, counsellors emphasise the importance of forgiving captors, for they did not know what they were doing, including conscripting children into a senseless war.

As I have described in [an article previously](#), a successfully rehabilitated returnee deemed ready for reintegration at WVCFAC was one who had listened to the gospel of Jesus Christ, repented their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their saviour. The returnee was registered by the centre as 'saved'. In fact, by my observation, all returnees accepted Jesus Christ as their saviour prior to reintegration, creating a sense of *moral populism*, which is defined [here](#) as "social and political power produced by exclusivist and morally-imbued identities and values".

I observed over 200 LRA returnee adults and children who became born-again Christians during my 12-month-long ethnographic study in 2004-2005. Many 'saved' returnees were reintegrated in the displaced persons camps with people whom they had previously exposed to mass violence. At reintegration, counsellors made speeches concerning the changed status of returnees because they had accepted Jesus Christ and were 'saved'. Communities were then advised to help the returnee live a normal civilian life. If there was a pastor of a born-again church in that community, s/he was asked to mentor a newly- 'saved' member and -advised to shepherd him or her and ensure their Christian growth.

But what happens to these Christian identities after re-integration? In 2018, I conducted a three month ethnographic study with returnees where I specifically enquired about their morally-imbued identity, saved status and whether their morality, behaviour and values had changed after rehabilitation and reintegration facilitated by WVCFAC. And if they were still 'saved', how did their violent past influence their new moral identity and social values?



All returnees were registered by the centre as saved. Image Credit: [StockSnap](#) via Pixabay

The key finding was that, of the eight female and 28 male returnees who were 'saved' adults at reintegration, only one person was still born again. The other 35 returnees had instead embraced new moral identities which contradicted their 'saved' status. They mentioned that the very dynamics in the community prevented them from maintaining their newly-accepted faith. For example, soon after their reintegration, predominantly Catholic families organised a mass to celebrate their return, at which the Reverend Father was invited to officiate. Typically, he reinforced Catholicism through reminding the returnees that they were Catholics, and Catholicism was the only true religion – and what is more, they worshipped the same God as the born-again Christians.

Further, five returnees mentioned that because of the indigenous ceremonies to cleanse them from the *cen* (evil spirits) at reintegration, they stopped being 'saved'; in worshipping other gods during the cleansing ceremony, the Ten Commandments were violated.

Fourteen returnees mentioned that "unlike the World Vision counsellors and pastors who preached love, the village pastors emphasised repentance of sins they had committed as fighters on Acholi people, reminding them about everything they did in the bush and reminding them about enormous suffering in camps caused by the LRA. After many Sunday services with the same message, they left the church". Five returnees had resorted to being agnostic and not attending any religious meeting due to this. In eight conversations, returnees grappled with the idea that at WVCFAC they were told that they were only forced to commit war violence and that they were not responsible for those acts: but the village reverends, pastors and fathers always mentioned that everyone had sinned, and that they needed to repent.

Detachment from Christian values, also called secularisation, I suggest is a new form of moral populism. It is a new moral identity because many former fighters embraced the idea, found it more palatable not to adhere with Christian moral principles. Doing so enabled them to avoid dwelling on their violent past, feel exonerated, and not accountable for the atrocities they committed. Secularisation, and externalising their past ultimately removed obligations to repent, obligations to approach the violated in reconciliation, and ultimately secularisation enabled former fighters to attribute responsibility of their violent past to their LRA leaders and not themselves. On the contrary, village clergy preferred returnees to internalise, reflect on their past and repercussions on the community in which they lived.

The returnees needed to distance themselves from such teachings and only preferred the WVCFAC's way of preaching and counselling in order to become saved. The only returnee who was still saved had become a pastor himself, selecting what to preach. He continued to struggle with his past which, though he believed was forgiven by God, had not been forgiven by the Acholi people. Each time he remembered this, he "prayed a lot for forgiveness".

Generally, I observed changing patterns of moral populism while examining the efficacy of the Christian approach of reintegrating returnees among people who were exposed to war violence. The lack of consistency in Christian approach, the pressures in the community to adhere with other religions and the bluntness of village clergy made returnees reject the very faith they readily accepted when they lived at the WVCFAC.

This demonstrates the importance of community engagement and involving all stakeholders in designing DDR programmes. Doing so will mitigate against the unintended consequences of stigmatisation and disregarding the power of morally-imbued identities and values by the community. Community engagement and support will facilitate returnees' adherence with their new-found faith.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.