

Contextualising Ebola rumours from a political, historical and social perspective to understand people's perceptions of Ebola and the responses to it.

Rosie Wigmore

University of Sussex

In the week of September 7th to September 13th, Sierra Leone reported five EVD cases. Generally, the WHO, based on their reports, appears to have adopted good practices to control this outbreak and to achieve zero cases. The WHO initiated Phase 3 of its response, which incorporates managing the emerging vaccine trials and providing support for survivors. The WHO strives to ensure that 'the concerns of affected communities...are well understood...that they are fully engaged in implementation' and that the capacity of local leaders is supported and built upon through deployment of anthropologists, epidemiologists and social mobilisers (Ebola response phase 3, 2015: 4-6).

However, on-going issues that have arisen from the start of the outbreak in Sierra Leone continue. For example, contacts¹ are still hiding (NERC Evening Brief, 2015) and unconfirmed reports suggest contacts are using illegal routes to escape into Guinea to avoid quarantine (IOM Sierra Leone Ebola Response, 2015: 2). Misunderstandings between quarantined individuals and the Ebola response² continues, particularly over release dates, and herbalists have reportedly treated recent cases (NERC Evening Brief, 2015). Interestingly, what is perhaps even more worrying is that according to a source at SMAC, who are leading a large social mobilisation campaign, rumours seem to have disappeared and Sierra Leoneans are acting as if Ebola never existed. Consequently, health measures are not being adhered to.

In May to June 2015 I returned to Sierra Leone to research the rumours that are circulating about the cause of Ebola and the response to it – Ebola rumours. I discovered that these rumours were a product of the initially over stretched and poorly implemented Ebola response, but were more often linked to long-term issues of structural violence that also contributed to the unprecedented spread of Ebola in Sierra Leone. Thus, Ebola rumours are an extremely fruitful way to elucidate both Sierra Leonean perceptions of Ebola and the response to it, and the multiple, global, political, economic and social inequalities that contributed to the outbreak. Although social mobilisation and sensitisation is important in the short-term, it is these issues that the Ebola response and those that dominate the current system of global health governance³ must grapple with to properly eradicate Ebola now and in the future.

¹People who have been in contact with a confirmed Ebola case and therefore need to be monitored for symptoms either in a holding centre or a quarantined house.

² The rumours that emerged during the Ebola outbreak to explain the cause of the epidemic and the response to it.

³ Global health occurs when the causes and consequences of ill health 'are oblivious to the territorial boundaries of states and, thus, beyond the capacity of states to address effectively through state institutions alone (Buse et al, 2002;5),' which results in a global, rather than national response.

1. Some rumours are reactions to the originally, poorly funded and over stretched international response to Ebola. On March 31st 2014, MSF declared the outbreak 'unprecedented' but the WHO denied this. The international communities' lack of support ensured that MSF was unable to provide a 'full range of containment activities in all areas.' The lack of facilities meant nurses and patients died rapidly (MSF Report, 2015: 6-7). As a result, Sierra Leoneans often did not trust the Ebola Treatment Centres (ETCs) and the general response, as few were surviving and returning to their communities from which they had, at times, been forcibly removed. Rumours suggested that nurses were stealing blood and organs to sell or were performing cannibal rituals within the ETCs (Reuters, 2014).

In Wellington, Freetown, a rumour suggested that sachets found in rice rations provided by the Ebola response, which were perhaps a desiccant used to keep the rice fresh, were in fact sachets of poison intended to contaminate the food. This caused people to resist quarantine measures. However, after speaking to a couple of families that had been previously quarantined, I discovered that their rations had included turned fish, which could have initiated the poison rumour.

These rumours generally dissipated when the response became more successful. Survivors returning to their communities had a huge impact on people's perceptions of ETCs and their willingness to use them. This suggests that the popular notion that Sierra Leoneans fear health staff and facilities are exaggerated (Oosterhoof, 2015). When people's practical and emotional needs were met, rumours and resistance diminished. Taking rumours seriously can explain people's anxieties concerning health facilities, which can contribute to the correct practical health measures being provided.

2. It is not just Sierra Leonean rumours that have had an impact on the Ebola outbreak. Throughout the outbreak Western media and environmental science has widely accepted the idea that Ebola was caused by deforestation, eating bush meat and bats (Drakeley, 2015; Ginsburg, 2014; Glasgow and Pirages, 2001; McCoy, 2014). Despite these tenuous linkages, these ideas are not labelled as rumours, but as not-yet-proven scientific 'facts.' The Ebola response must be aware that here we are dealing with a 'hierarchy of knowledge,' whereby information from the Western world is more respected than knowledge produced in Sierra Leone.

This has shaped the Ebola outbreak in two ways. Firstly, local knowledge was overlooked at the start of the outbreak, which induced tensions between Sierra Leoneans and the Ebola response. This undoubtedly continues in some contexts as the WHO is still endorsing 'behaviour change capacities (Ebola response phase 3, 2015: 3-4).' Secondly, what we can call Western rumours, have created Sierra Leonean rumours. For example, during a focus group discussion in Kissy, Freetown, many suggested that Americans had tested bioweapons on monkeys in Kenema. The monkeys escaped, which brought a sickness now called 'Ebola' and explains why the government has ordered people to stop eating bush meat because it claims that it is a vector for Ebola.

The Ebola response cannot overlook the dangers of misinformation, as they cause people to resist health measures. Even more importantly, the inequalities ingrained in global transactions of knowledge that can characterise one set of ideas as 'traditional' and another as 'fact' must be acknowledged. Failing to do so overlooks useful and existing capabilities in Sierra Leone that can be built upon to create an effective Ebola response and erodes respect of Sierra Leoneans and their perceptions of Ebola. *All* interpretations of Ebola, from

witchcraft to hemorrhagic fever, are socially conditioned and a product of some sort of 'tradition.'

3. Ebola rumours are a product of the experience of structural violence in Sierra Leone. Here is a useful article which explains how colonial, post-colonial, economic relations and 'development' has prevented many Sierra Leoneans from escaping poverty, racism and political violence, as space here does not permit me to explain:

<http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2014/12/04/afraf.adu080.full.pdf>

There are countless rumours that embody the experience of structural violence: Americans testing harmful bioweapons, the government released Ebola in the southern, Sierra Leone People's Party stronghold to eliminate the opposition, the government is injecting people with Ebola to increase the number of cases to get more money from the international community, and foreign health workers are stealing and selling organs and blood in ETCs.

Accordingly, the Ebola response has a responsibility to contextualise rumours and other reactions to Ebola from a social, political and historical perspective. This ensures that people's reactions and the reasons for the outbreak are understood, which avoids simplifying health measures and explanations of the causes of the outbreak itself. If not, rumours, resistance and Ebola will remain, as will the complex factors that caused the outbreak.

For instance, in Port Loko, the witch plane crash rumour⁴ is often treated facetiously and sensitisation is encouraged to overcome such rumours. However, in certain contexts, this rumour is inherently political and therefore increased sensitisation is irrelevant. I found that this rumour confronted deep-rooted issues concerning chiefs in Mamasa, Port Loko. In this case, the witch plane crash rumour stemmed from a conflict between two chiefs after an election. One chief, annoyed at having lost the election, sent a witch plane to his opponents, which caused a sickness named 'Ebola.' Many Sierra Leoneans find chiefs problematic. A social mobiliser in Mamasa felt that democracy did not work in Sierra Leone: "when one chief is elected, one group will always be unhappy and will react." Moreover, chiefs are frequently implicated in corruption. Some *okada* drivers in Mamasa complained that when their chief needs money he detects faults on their bikes to confiscate their licence, which they have to buy back.

Tensions between Sierra Leoneans and their chiefs can be traced back to the colonial era during which the British listlessly installed democracy. Instead, the British ruled through loyal chiefs and patronage. Consequently, the chiefs largely answered to the British instead of the people. Forced labour, unfair land reform and taxes became rife and reoccurred more recently under President Siaka Stevens in the 70's and 80's when patronage and corruption was commonplace (Keen, 2005: 9-10).

Ebola rumours are a way for Sierra Leoneans to grapple with the outbreak in relation to previous problematic political, economical and social experiences, which most Sierra

⁴ Witch planes are tiny aeroplanes that are used to transport witches from one place to another. Some suggest a groundnut shell or animals can be used as witch planes. Occasionally, in the 'astra' world, the magic world, there are accidents: a witch plane could crash and bring a sickness or the people involved will fall sick. In this instance, a witch plane crashed in Port Loko and brought Ebola.

Leoneans have a very good awareness and knowledge of. Equally, the Ebola response and the international community must aim for enduring solutions to Ebola that confront these problems. This is difficult considering the ephemeral nature of development programmes. Already, many NGOs are leaving. Moreover, despite being most likely endemic in Sierra Leone, rumours and the drive to overcome Ebola has waned amongst Sierra Leoneans. Thus, Sierra Leone's deep-rooted and prevailing political, economic and social issues need to be reiterated to the those involved in the Ebola response to ensure that a sustainable approach to development, that cooperates with Sierra Leoneans and their government, is implemented. Listening to people's perceptions of Ebola, through the rumours which have arisen throughout the outbreak, is one way of initiating this approach.

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