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***[The NGO] is here to obliterate what we have left of our African culture.'* Escaping the traditional/modern dichotomy in program design¹**

Abstract

Within the worldview of modernity, traditional beliefs are imagined as “objects of science [and] obstacles to science”.² Within this paradigm culture is constructed as an antithesis to development.

This paper explores the ways in which the worldview of modernity informs development practices in post-colonial states and the impact on rural women and children. The paper uses the case study of Ghana’s Trokosi women and children, who are reported to be victims of a cultural practice which legitimates violence against women.

The paper investigates the program logic of a variety of development responses to the Trokosi practice. It is found that the program responses delivered by several aid organisations function within the imagined continuum of the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’ and that such dichotomies only make sense within the worldview of modernity.³

The paper builds the argument that such programs fail to build collective capacities, and rather continue to construct poor rural women as the battlegrounds on which the maintenance of culture is fought. The paper argues that Appadurai’s ‘capacity to aspire’⁴ and McIntyre-Mill’s Systemic Governance⁵ offer valuable theoretical tools to inform a future-oriented program logic that is grounded in culture.

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It has now been identified in the majority of the development literature that mainstream development theory is embedded in the history of western, industrialised

¹ The author wishes to acknowledge the input of Professor Janet McIntyre from the School of Public Policy and Management at Flinders University, and Dr Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes from the Women’s Studies Department at Flinders University.

² Stacey Leigh Pigg, “The Credible and the Credulous: The Question of “Villagers’ Beliefs” in Nepal,” *Cultural Anthropology* 11: 160–201 (1996): 161.

³ Pigg, 165.

⁴ Arjun Appadurai, “The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition”, in Rao, V and Walton, M, eds. *Culture and Public Action*, (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004).

⁵ Adapted from CW Churchman.

nations, and has been since post-war inception.⁶ Problems associated with this include reductionist bias, inability to contextualise interventions and non-recognition of the diversity of histories, geographies and cultures.

The serious contradictions of the modernisation theory have been well documented and increasingly, the same shortcomings are being noted in neoliberal development frameworks.⁷ Relativist approaches are often cited as alternatives to mainstream development frameworks as they recognise social diversity and multiple ways of knowing. However, cultural relativist post-modernist approaches “*seem[ed] to conclude that the crux of emancipation is, ‘anything goes’.... Leaving a fluid and diverse world of many equally valid truths.*”⁸ Many equally valid truths result in an inability to challenge unequal power relations and it must be acknowledged that we are “implicated in each other’s lives”.⁹ Therefore, any program intervention must rely on a program logic that ensures respect for the way others choose to live their lives and does not support the global homogenising of cultures, religions and communities. In practice, this often results in the promotion of traditional ways of knowing as a means to combat modernisation but this too is embedded in the ideology of modernity.¹⁰

Pigg argues that “the dichotomy between tradition and modernity makes sense only within the narrative of modernization. We therefore have to bracket the terms ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ in order to make them objects of analysis.”¹¹

In this paper, I will explore the way in which this plays out in the Volta Region of Ghana, using the case study of the Trokosi women and children. Furthermore, I will propose Appadurai’s (2004) ‘capacity to aspire’ as a valuable theoretical framework to inform a future-oriented program logic that is grounded in culture.

Methodology

This research was undertaken as part of my PhD and utilised an auto-ethnographic methodology. The research develops a social justice and rights based argument¹² based on a case study and participant observation of the management of international and national NGOs in Ghana. Fieldwork spanned five months and included document

⁶ John Brohman, “Universalism, Eurocentrism, and ideological bias in development studies: from modernisation to neoliberalism,” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 16 no 1 (1995): 122.

⁷ Brohman, 122.

⁸ Robert Flood and Norma Romm, *Diversity Management. Triple Loop Learning* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Publishing, 2000), 3.

⁹ Flood and Romm, 12

¹⁰ Susanne Schech and Jane Haggis. *Culture and Development: A Critical Reader*. (Padstow: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 77.

¹¹ Pigg, 163.

¹² Nussbaum, 1999. Page 232.

analysis, observation and interviews with international NGOs and interviews with local NGOs and government officials.

The Trokosi Women and Children

Since 1998 reports of customary servitude in the Volta Region of Ghana, have flooded through international media, often termed 'slavery'.¹³ Reports have cited narratives of the institutionalised and systematic torture, repeated rape, forced marriages, forced labour and social outcasting of women and girls in rural settings in West Africa. The practice is named 'Troxovi' and the girls are called 'Trokosi'.¹⁴

Various forms of international media reported, and continue to report that Troxovi is being practiced in Togo, Benin, Nigeria and Ghana by the Ewe group.¹⁵ Reports outline

¹³ See "Julie Dogbadzi escaped. Now she's freeing others. After a life of slavery," *Newsweek (International Edition)* New York, 5 April 1999, p. 33; "Save the Slaves". (DVD Released by International Needs Australia, Hawthorn, Victoria, Australia.) April 2003; "Mercy's Story and Trokosi: Treasure in Earthen Vessels," in "Save the Slaves" video released by International Needs, Ghana. April 2003; Anthony Owusu-Ansah, "Trokosi in Ghana: Cultural Relativism or Slavery?" 2003, <http://www2.ncsu.edu/ncsu/aern/trokony.html> (accessed 19 November 2004); H [first name?]Humphrey Hawksley, "Ghana's Trapped Slaves". BBC News Website. 2001. Pages 1-4. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/1158115.stm (accessed 21 June 2005); Ben Rinaudo, "Trokosi Slavery: Injustice in the name of religion," 2003. Page 5. *African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific. 2003 Conference Proceedings. Africa on a Global Stage*; Nirit Ben-Ari 2002. "Liberating Ghanaian Girls from 'Trokosi,'" *Africa Recovery*, p.1. http://www.afrol.com/News2002/gha001_girls_trokosi.htm (accessed 22 June 2005); M Modestus Ahiable, "The Anatomy of Trokosi system in Ghana: Report: First National Workshop on Trokosi System in Ghana" Accra, (Workshop by International Needs, Ghana, July 6-7, 1995); Rachel Eckardt, "Trokosi Field Assignment. MSW Program St. Louis University," 2004, <http://www.slu.edu/colleges/SOCSVC/TrokosiIntroductionII.pdf> (accessed 24 June 2005); Howard W French, "Ritual Slaves of Ghana: Young and Female." *The New York Times International*, 7:6 (May/June 1997): 24; Aameu Gakpleazi, "Trokosi is Not a Slave" *Ghanaian Times*, 16 November 1998, p. 6; "Practice of Trokosi Still Hurting Girls," *Ghanaian Chronicle, Accra, Ghana*. (25 August 2004). <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/printnews.php?> (accessed 19 November 2004); Isabelle Gyau Orhin, "Ghanaians Asked To Condemn Trokosi By Public Agenda". *General News*, 2001, <http://www.modernghana.com/news/12507/1/ghanaians-asked-to-condemn-trokosi.html> (5 February 2009).

¹⁴ Commission on Rights of the Child, 10 March – 18 April 1997. Fifty-third session Item 21 (b) of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, provisional agenda. Accessed on <http://www.hri.ca/fortherecord1997/documentation/commission/e-cn4-1997-95.htm> on the 5th April 2005.

¹⁵ See Rachel Outhred, "Reflecting on Recent PAR: Ensuring the World's Poorest Women have Access to social justice relies on bypassing the gatekeepers who silence women," *Action Learning and Action Research Journal*, (April Edition. 2009): 84 – 106.

the belief system practised in regional areas which results in young virgin girls being used to provide unpaid labour to the fetish priest, the rationale being that their labour will appease the gods for sins or crimes committed either by living relatives within their community, or by their ancestors. The debt of the past can be invoked by the powerful fetish priests, so that the labour of the powerless can be called upon. It is stated that the women are called Trokosi, literally translated '*brides of the gods*'. The community believes that by appeasing the gods they will be saved from calamity.¹⁶

Media reports state that the total number of Trokosi women could be as high as 30 000 in West Africa¹⁷ and that in 1998, 5000 Trokosi women existed in Ghana.¹⁸ In 1995 Dvolo and Adzoyi reported the estimated number of Trokosi in Ghana to be 5000, in 1999 Nukunya estimated the number to be 9000 and in 1998 Ameh cited the number as upwards of 20 000.¹⁹ It is also estimated that 9 percent of those held in ritual slavery are under the age of ten and sources have documented more than 6 000 children whose mothers are known as Trokosi.²⁰

Interventions

International media focusing on the Trokosi practice report that thus far the women's only hope of a different life lies in the work of NGOs, based in Ghana.²¹

Within Africa Non-Governmental Organisations often play a complementary or supplementary role to public social service. According to both published reports and interviews with the Ghanaian government's Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice, government departments did not have the resources to intervene into the Trokosi practice²² and therefore approached several NGOs requesting intervention.

The first 'release' took place in July 1996,²³ long before the Criminal Code was amended, to outlaw the practice.²⁴ One organisation was initiated by a Ghanaian evangelical Christian who claimed his aim was to "*wipe out all denominations of African traditional*

¹⁶ International Needs, Australia, "Save the Slaves," April 2003.

¹⁷ International Needs, Australia, 2003.

¹⁸ Gyau Orhin, 2001.

¹⁹ United Nations Population Fund. Programming to Address Violence Against Women. Washington DC, (United Nations Population Fund, 2007), 87.

²⁰ United Nations Population Fund, 87.

²¹ *International Needs, Australia, 2003.*

²² Ababio, Anita W, H."Trokosi, Woryokwe, Cultural and Individual Rights. A Case Study of Women's Empowerment and Community Rights in Ghana", (August 2000), 22. Commission of Human Rights and Administrative Justice Representative, interview by Rachel Outhred, 15 September 2008.

²³ Ababio, 113.

²⁴ Ababio, 23.

religion and covert and baptise."²⁵ This organisation 'liberated' the women in a shrine at Fievie, enabling the women and children to leave the shrine, however the women became economically destitute and isolated from their communities, and quickly returned to the shrines.²⁶

Pigg states that '*Modernity... is quite literally a worldview: a way of imagining both space and people through temporal idioms of progress and backwardness.*'²⁷ Whilst couched in religious discourse, this NGO intervention places the reported human rights abuses within the brackets of the 'traditional' and responds with a program logic that seeks to 'modernise' the women and children.

An international Christian NGO states:

*"It is not uncommon to see a priest walking long distances barefoot in the scorching sand, because his 'go' forbade him to wear even sandals."*²⁸

The NGO had described the families of the girls as '*primitive people*'²⁹ in the national media.

Within these examples the international NGO criticises the religious leaders on the bases of both religion and 'backwardness'. Interestingly, oral tradition traces the practice of not wearing shoes back to the Old Testament,³⁰ where Moses is confronted with the burning bush and God says to him, "*Do not come any closer, take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.*"³¹ Therefore, the Christian NGO and the beliefs of the fetish priest share some historical commonality, yet the fetish priest remains criticised due to his being 'primitive'.

National groups have now formed to resist the NGO activity and have stated:

"The way the campaign against [the Trokosi] Institution is proceeding gives the impression an attempt is being made to replace African

²⁵ Patience Vormawor, "Emancipation of women from ritual bondage: A case study of Trokosi women of South-Eastern Ghana." Unpublished Thesis. University of Ghana, Legon, Accra, (1998), 106.

²⁶ Rachel Outhred. "The Life Chances of Women and Children: Does Development Make a Difference?" *Flinders University Library*, (October 2010), 132.

²⁷ Pigg, 163.

²⁸ International NGO Website www.ecmafrica.org/36223.ihtml (accessed 10 March 2009).

²⁹ International NGO Website www.ecmafrica.org/36223.ihtml

³⁰ Personal communication with the son of the Chief of Oshiyie, Greater Accra Region. 3 March 2010.

³¹ "The Holy Bible. New Living Translation", (Tyndale House Foundation, 2007), Exodus 3 verse 5.

Traditional Religion with Christianity. This is unfortunate and discriminatory. Christianity failed to prevent crime in Europe.”³²

The Head of one resistance group states:

‘[The NGO] is here to obliterate what we have left of our African culture.’³³

Once again, the argument is couched in religion, yet Wilmington states that religious conversion of indigenous peoples has been part of all British colonial efforts since the settlement of Virginia began in 1607.³⁴ Historically, Christianity presented colonisation as a means to further engage Africa in commerce, in order to ‘modernise’ and ‘civilise the natives’.³⁵

Another Christian NGO, through their ‘Trokosi Modernisation Project’ renames the women after removing them from the shrines.³⁶ The act of renaming indigenous people with Christian names follows colonial practices. Renaming has been adopted in many colonies, including Australia and Canada, and usually takes place through the mission schools.³⁷ This practice is also embedded in the worldview of modernity as Buti reports “The desire to ‘tame’ the ‘wildness’ in indigenous children was apparent in practices adopted.... Typical, and perhaps most fundamental in the move to re-socialise indigenous children, was the practice of renaming children on their arrival at residential schools and Australian Aboriginal missions...”³⁸ Similarly, the act of renaming the Trokosi women points to a desire to civilise, re-socialise and modernise the women.

Ababio also cites an unnamed NGO who, in order to avoid being accused of imperialism, set up vocational schools for Trokosi women and girls near the shrines at Afife. The organisation purposefully decided against releasing the girls and rather, educated them within the context of their shrine lives.³⁹

³²Elom Dovlo. “Religion in the Public Sphere: Challenges and Opportunities in Ghanaian Lawmaking”, (Brigham Young University Law Review, 2005), 629.

³³ Discussion (did not agree to formal interview) with National Resistance Leader. Principal Researchers notes. 29th September 2008.

³⁴ Jean Wilmington. ‘Writing on the Sand: The First Missions to Aborigines in Eastern Australia’, in

Swain and Bird Rose, eds., *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions: Ethnographic and Historical Studies*, (Australian Association for the Study of Religions, Adelaide, 1988), 77.

³⁵ Birgit Meyer. *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, for the International African institute, London. 1999), 757.

³⁶ Outhred, 2010, 221.

³⁷ Tony Buti, “The Systematic Removal of Indigenous Children from their Families in Australia and Canada: The History – Similarities and Differences”. *Land and Freedom* (July 1999), 29.

³⁸ Buti, 29.

³⁹ Ababio, 25.

According to Ababio there was little coordination or consultation between NGOs or community members as NGOs moved to intervene in Troxovi practicing communities.⁴⁰ The lack of coordination and consultation between NGOs in the field centred on fundamental disagreements regarding how interventions should take place. Several NGOs “could not contemplate allowing the women to remain subjected to such traditions”⁴¹ and others feared impinging on the traditional beliefs of communities.

Both programmatic responses to the Trokosi practice are conceived of within this imagined binary of the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’. Such binary approaches reinforce the postcolonial woman’s body as the battleground on which the maintenance of culture is fought.⁴²

For example, Vormawor reports the case of a released Trokosi woman who revolts against traditional religion by attending Christian churches.⁴³ Interestingly, this discourse not only acknowledges the existence of the battle between traditional religion and Christianity but, the woman identifies her own body as the battleground. The highlights the way in which postcolonial women play out as pawns in the political agendas others, within the traditional/modern continuum,

Pigg’s modernity:

Though globalisation has “been constructed as a distinct object of study”,⁴⁴ the national and the global can not be understood as separate domains. Rather, it is the juxtaposition between the local and the global that provides the angle of entry for analysis.⁴⁵

As Schech and Haggis argue, development approaches advocated by Escobar, Sachs and Rahnama rely on the revaluing of indigenous, local knowledges as a force to counter globalisation.⁴⁶ This approach remains embedded in the imagined traditional/modern continuum, which can only make sense within the worldview of modernity.⁴⁷ Pigg argues against the tradition/modern continuum by highlighting the complexity of villagers’ beliefs in traditional healing in Nepal. She describes how the villagers are not

⁴⁰ Ababio, 23.

⁴¹ Discussion with the Project Manager for an international NGO intervention into Troxovi practicing communities. (30 September 2008).

⁴² Rachel Outhred, 2010, 175.

⁴³ Vormawor, 147.

⁴⁴ Saskia Sassen. “Spatialities and Temporalities of the Global: Elements for a Theorization,” *Public Culture*. 12: 1, (2000): 215-232.

⁴⁵ Sassen, 2008

⁴⁶ Schech and Haggis, 77.

⁴⁷ Pigg, 193.

gullible or “credulous” as they neither dismiss the powers of the Sharman, nor leave his practices unquestioned. In this way, power does not exist in the unstoppable force of globalisation taking modernity to the village, but rather “the power of a network whose extensive reach depends on a web of linkages rather than its ability to be everywhere at once. The idea of the modern exists in a network of translatable social manoeuvres that are not reducible to a single thing”.⁴⁸ Similarly, Blackmore et al argue that the ‘trends’ of globalisation exist across the global yet play out in distinctive ways across national contexts.⁴⁹

The ways in which the idea of the modern exists in networks and social manoeuvres in Ghana’s Volta Region have not yet been explored. NGO programmatic responses to the Trokosi practice are conceived of within this imagined binary of the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’, whereby tradition drives out modernity and modernisation replaces tradition.⁵⁰ This forces stakeholders to position themselves at either end of an imagined continuum.

No matter where stakeholders position themselves, Connell’s arguments regarding the global dynamics of knowledge are applicable, whereby one “construct[s] a model of the world from the perspective of the metropole, while imagining one is taking a global perspective.”⁵¹

The Capacity to Aspire and Diverse Ways of Knowing

Appadurai’s Capacity to Aspire moves away from the imagined continuum of the traditional and the modern and diverges from notions of culture that can become treacherously close to “romanticism and reductionism”.⁵² Appadurai argues that the conceiving of culture as ‘the past’ and development as ‘the future’ creates an aspiration conflict. Appadurai’s Capacity to Aspire focuses on future orientated cultural capacities, that is, “social and cultural capacity to plan, hope, desire and achieve socially valuable goals”.⁵³ Through the process of self recognition, strengthening the capacity to aspire could help the poor “to contest and alter the condition of poverty”.⁵⁴

In the case of the Trokosi women and children, interventions that rely on a theory of change that sees ‘the traditional’ as the force to drive out modernity, or modernisation as able to replace tradition, will create an aspiration conflict. Appadurai argues that future orientated cultural capacities can be developed by identifying the cultural rituals

⁴⁸ Pigg, 193.

⁴⁹ Jill Blackmore et al., *Repositioning University Governance and Academic Work. Educational Futures: Rethinking theory and practice.* (Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2010).

⁵⁰ Following Schech and Haggis, 77.

⁵¹ Raewyn Connell. *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science.* (Allen and Unwin, October 2000), 59.

⁵² Schech and Haggis, 78.

⁵³ Appadurai, 176.

⁵⁴ Appadurai, 2004.

that perpetuate cultural agreement. This is not to say that cultural practices that limit the life chances of women and children should be ignored in favour of those practices that perpetuate agreement. Rather, following McIntyre's description of Systemic Governance,⁵⁵ it is argued that the closest we can get to truth is through compassionate dialogue that explores agreement, paradoxes and considers the rights and responsibilities of caretakers.⁵⁶

Discussions regarding cultural rituals that perpetuate cultural agreement might be undertaken within one of McIntyre's five domains of knowing; idealism. The term 'idealism' is derived from the Greek 'idein', meaning 'to see'. The term refers to the formulation and influence of ideas, the importance of principles, values and goals and a consideration of present realities. However, the ideal often represents things as they should be, rather than how they are. An exploration of the ideals of a society is important as social norms are often grounded in ideals but also, silent and subtle prejudicial norms can often contradict the ideals of a group.

Gender and Development approaches clearly articulate the need to acknowledge the interdependent roles of men and women. Through the identification of cultural rituals, compassionate dialogue and an exploration of diverse ways of knowing, communities might be enabled to consider a future where they are empowered, without necessarily emulating the 'blueprint' provided by western societies. This approach doesn't argue for a multitude of choices in the individualised, western human rights concept of choice. Rather, it argues for a multitude of possibilities, possibilities that are not constrained within the constructed traditional/modern continuum. Such possibilities are not yet articulated and therefore can not yet be given voice.⁵⁷

Following Appadurai, interventions into communities where Troxovi is reportedly being practiced should focus on encouraging internal efforts in the cultivation of voice among the poor. This should be undertaken with respect for diversity and respect for the way others choose to live their lives; whilst acknowledging that we are "implicated in each other's lives".⁵⁸ In this way, tools can be developed to identify collective aspirations and articulate pathways that link aspiration with achievement.⁵⁹ Such pathways are not confined by the worldview of modernity, whereby the imagining of space and people is restricted through the language of progress and backwardness. The supply of material

⁵⁵ Adapting from C W Churchman, Janet McIntyre-Mills. "Rescuing the enlightenment from itself: implications for re-working democracy and international relations". In *Rescuing the Enlightenment from Itself: Critical and Systemic Implications for Democracy*. (New York, USA: Springer 2006).

⁵⁶ Following McIntyre-Mills, 2006.

⁵⁷ Zipin, Lew. *Student Equity in Higher Education 2nd Annual Conference*. Verbal response to a keynote speaker in Voice Panel Session, 2010.

⁵⁸ Flood and Romm, 12.

⁵⁹ Appadurai, 2004.

and non-material resources may also be required to align collective aspiration with collective achievement.

Conclusion

Given that this article insists that it is essential for communities to be a part of the discussions and solutions surrounding their own futures,⁶⁰ the article avoids outlining prescriptive programmatic recommendations for the implementation of human rights interventions in post-colonial states. Rather, this article explores the worldview of modernity and the extent to which it impacts on human rights interventions, through the case study of Ghana's Trokosi women and children.

The article has explored programs offered to the Trokosi women and how development theory is informed by the worldview of modernity, and NGO programmatic responses to the Trokosi practice are conceived of within the imagined binary of the 'traditional' and the 'modern'. Within this constructed way of knowing, it is imagined that the traditional drives out modernity and modernisation replaces tradition.⁶¹ This paper argues that Appadurai's Capacity to Aspire and McIntyre's Systemic Governance⁶² offer a useful theoretical tools whereby cultural capacities can be developed, without relying on a program logic embedded in the worldview of modernity. Such programs would rely on a Theory of Change that through the facilitation of compassionate dialogue, the exploration of cultural rituals, the cultivation of voice and the mapping of pathways; communities may be able to align aspirations with achievement and conceive of a future unrestricted by past-orientated traditions and futures based on 'the modern'.

⁶⁰ Following McIntyre-Mills, 309-338.

⁶¹ Schech and Haggis, 77.

⁶² Adapted from C W Churchman.

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