



Trokosi Slavery: Injustice in the name of religion

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Slavery in the modern world, how can it be possible that it still exists? The problem is that it does still exist. In 2001, National Geographic writers and photographers working with the charity, Free the Slaves, travelled the world to report on slavery in various continents. From this research came the statement: “There are more slaves today than were seized from Africa in four centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The modern commerce in humans rivals illegal drug trafficking in its global reach—and in the destruction of lives”.¹ Of modern slavery, South Africa’s Archbishop Desmond Tutu, is quoted as saying: “Generally people would not believe that it is possible under modern conditions. They would say ‘No, I think you are making it all up’, because it’s just too incredible...”² The story of Ghana’s contemporary slaves is just too incredible to believe, but none the less in the 21st Century it is still a reality. Practiced amongst the Ewe (ay-vay) tribe in Ghana West Africa and through other countries including Togo and Benin, Trokosi, is a form of religious child slavery where family members forfeit the liberty of their children for crimes committed by others. Children sometimes as young as five years old, almost always females, are given by their families to a life of servitude, physical and sexual abuse and deprivation - simply to pay for the crime of a family member.³ It is amazing that this practice still occurs in West Africa, from where most of the slave trade, which saw people transported to Europe and the Americas, originated. The 19th Century anti slavery movement saw this form of slavery abolished. However Trokosi slavery has continued largely unabated, because of its roots in the religious culture of Traditional African Religion. Today it is a source of dismay and embarrassment to many Ghanaians, but through voodoo practices its power is perpetuated through secrecy, fear and superstition.⁴

Trokosi – meaning “bride of the spirits” - are considered to be among Africa’s ‘most at risk’, vulnerable marginalized and oppressed. They have done nothing wrong and are subjected to a life long sentence for offences, which they are clearly not in any way responsible for. Once labeled Trokosi, the girls are considered to belong to the gods. They are then identified with the shrine and so lose their kinship identity and are cut off from their family thus rendering them in classificatory limbo. Their status is lowered to the categorization of being regarded as sub-human. Ghana’s Trokosi girls are literally groaning, crying, begging for your mercy. Freedom cannot come too soon.⁵ But until this happens girls are still continuing to be given into ritual servitude today.

¹ <http://www.freetheslaves.org>

² Ibid.,

³ Pat Sheil, ‘The Bonds That Break, Freedom Fighter: Australia hosts the man on a mission to liberate African sex slaves’ in *The Bulletin*, September 23, 1997 pp. 24-25

⁴ ‘Trokosi: Treasure in Earthen Vessels’ : “Save the slaves” International Needs Australia Audiovisual Material recorded in 1999

⁵ Marie Claire, ‘Where Priests Keep Children As Sex Slaves’ in ‘CAMPAIGN’ August 1996 Ed. Anti-Slavery International pp.92-95



So what is Trokosi slavery?

Trokosi, (practitioners don't like referring to them as "slaves"), are usually little girls as young as five years old who are given by family members to the Fetish shrine, and specifically the Fetish priest, to atone (pay for) "sins" of a family member. The girls go through a ritual where they are stripped of the clothing that represents their way of life and are given basic clothing items that signify their status as Trokosi - "brides of ancestral gods."⁶ It is practiced in rural communities in the Volta region. These are very isolated places, difficult to access without adequate transport infrastructure and in some cases can only be reached by canoe.⁷ In every sense, wherever it is practiced, the Fetish "priest" owns the child and he must forcefully consummate the "marriage with the gods" as soon as the child goes through puberty. The innocent child is condemned while the offender remains guiltless and free, and too, the Fetish Priest and Shrine Elders perpetrate wrongs against the child believing this to be right by the gods.⁸

Trokosi girls are stigmatised for life. They will be used as forced labour and for ritual worship, including sexual rituals. Any children borne to Trokosi girls, usually fathered through rape of the Fetish priest, will remain her responsibility and not the responsibility of the Fetish priest. Some Fetish priests have been known to have up to 60 Trokosi "wives". Their children are rarely valued by the Fetish priest (the father).⁹

The voices of Trokosi children are silenced for fear of punishment and retribution, as it is believed that the priest and the spirits hear and see every action. Another factor detrimentally affecting them as well is lack of education and awareness of their rights.¹⁰

Footage of a television special on this problem, produced by a British TV network, shows the interviewer seeking answers from a Trokosi girl "Do you like living in the shrine?" "Is there anything you don't like about the shrine?" The girl stares and stares at the camera without responding – the body language speaks volumes, but finally she says, "I cannot say. I cannot say."¹¹

The good news today is that the cycle of abuse is slowly changing. An African Non Government Organisation, International Needs Ghana, has been working on the Trokosi problem over the last decade. Under the leadership of Rev Walter Pimpong, this Christian agency has to date successfully negotiated voluntary release of 3,000 Trokosi women and girls from over 200 shrines. International Needs refuses to pay

⁶ Emma Brooker, 'Slaves Of The Fetish' INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY 16 JUNE 1996 pp. 12-14

⁷ Innocents Lost : The Misused Part Two A True Vision Production For Channel Four Television Corporation MCM XCVII in association with HBO a division of Time Warner LP 1st TX 9pm 9/12/97 68 Thomas Road Chiswick London W43 RE Tel: 01817427852 Fax: 01817427853

⁸ Dr. Elom Dovlo with Mr. A. K. Adzoyi Report on Trokosi Institution Department For The Study Of Religions, University Of Ghana Legon (October 1995) Pp. 1-26

⁹ Ibid.,

¹⁰ Howard W. French 'The Ritual Slaves of Ghana: Young, Female, Paying for Another's Crime' in The New York Times INTERNATIONAL Monday January 20, 1997 A1, A5 continued.

¹¹ Innocents Lost : The Misused Part Two A True Vision Production For Channel Four Television Corporation MCM XCVII in association with HBO a division of Time Warner LP 1st TX 9pm 9/12/97 68 Thomas Road Chiswick London W43 RE Tel: 01817427852 Fax: 01817427853



for the release of a Trokosi girl as they argue that this would simply create a new economy for the religious practitioners. Rather, through patient discussions with shrine leaders, eventually progress has been made over the question of human rights abuse. Whilst the practitioners hold firmly to their beliefs, International Needs workers speak of the injustice of an innocent child suffering for the guilt of another.¹²

The work of progress is hard and difficult. Fetish shrine temple operations are very secretive, and IN workers struggle to get accurate information due to this lack of transparency. Therefore the dilemma of documenting ritual servitude and human rights abuse based on research is difficult. Trokosi is a complex issue and governments and NGO's involved in human rights and advocacy working in countries where this practice exists confront many difficulties.

How should religious practitioners who hold different values and different beliefs to that of those attempting to have this practice abolished or reformed be dealt with?

Advocacy planning has been problematic and controversial in this particular cross-cultural setting. By cross-cultural, we refer to African people from modern Ghana, addressing the Trokosi practicing communities who are African people following an ancient culture.¹³

Further, a problematic issue has arisen in addressing human rights abuse where groups like the Afrikania Mission (representing African Traditionalists) say that opposing these practices is infringing on national sovereignty and individual's religious freedom and right to self-determination and cultural expression. Countering this, International Needs addresses the problem of the complete denial of the victim's rights in favour of individual religious freedom.¹⁴

Inevitably, this has sparked debate in regards to the notion of cultural relativism and the notion of universal human rights. Therefore complex cross-cultural issues need to be taken into consideration prior to proceeding with advocacy interventions. This is necessary for positive outcomes to take place to redress archaic/obsolete cultural or gender related practices that are barriers to the advancement of human rights.

The spiritual aspect must be taken into consideration (not overlooked) as this animistic practice is deeply rooted in the beliefs, tradition and mentality of the people. Sickness and death are attributed to the wrongdoing of people.¹⁵ This it is believed incurs the wrath of forces of evil in the spiritual realm. Thus an imbalance has been created and the guilty offender must confess less the situations worsen. The offender must be identified so that a solution to rectify the problem can be made in order to bribe the gods and thus still the spirits wrath. If the guilty offender does not confess

¹² David Ayliffe, Executive Director for International Needs Australia (Personal Communication) 2003

¹³ Ibid.,

¹⁴ Vincent Azumah (Ed.) Info Ghana Newsletter 2002 No. 1 The Advocacy & Public Affairs Department of The International Needs Network Ghana Accra Office pp. 1-11 See Also: <http://www.intneeds.org>

¹⁵ Robert Kwame Ameh (Simon Fraser University) 'Lessons From The Ghanaian Anti-Trokosi Campaign' in Report of The 1st West African Sub-Regional Workshop On Female Ritual Servitude 7-8 February 2001



the Fetish must be consulted, and an answer, right or wrong, will be provided and believed.¹⁶

Originally, it is thought that animals not girls were required. Inherent in the system is injustice, gender discrimination and violation of human rights. Regardless of whether one confesses or not, the scapegoat is almost always an innocent virgin girl – 99.99%. Boys are seen as problematic, less subservient to girls, and of course unable to produce offspring.¹⁷

Some instances have been recorded of girls dedicated to the shrine as foetuses before they are born!¹⁸ Many lament the fact that they were born into bondage with no choice in the matter for crimes they did not commit, deprived of the opportunity to go to school and denied the freedom to choose their own spouse. Once in the shrine they are neglected both by their families – who fear contact with the shrine – and by the shrine authorities. This is the case even for tender aged children, who are either fostered by other suffering Trokosi women or fend for themselves.¹⁹ It is believed that by offering these girls as “living sacrifices” that the anger of the ancestral gods will be appeased thus limiting the calamity that is believed would increasingly fall upon the community. Once a Trokosi she is branded for life.

Trokosi practice varies between regions. Some girls are sent for life. While in other places she is sent for period of three years. However the priest still has sexual access to her, even if for some reason she has been allowed to leave the shrine. Further, the Priest can always call Trokosi’s back for work on the farms at any time as they are considered to belong to the gods. These slaves are subjected to all kinds of exploitation including forced menial labour and sexual abuse. They are denied access to health and education.²⁰

For those girls in or out of the shrine, the priest can claim her when she has reached puberty. Once the girl has experienced her first or third menstrual cycle the priest is entitled to sleep with her. If she refuses to have sex with him she is severely beaten and forced into submission.

The girls are forced to engage in esoteric and mystical practices and ritual prostitution and rebellious girls are sedated with medicinal herbs. The priest has no commitment

¹⁶ Dr. Elom Dovlo with Mr. A. K. Adzoyi Report on Trokosi Institution Department For The Study Of Religions, University Of Ghana Legon (October 1995) Pp. 1-26

¹⁷ Emile Francis Short, ‘Talk Delivered by Emile Francis Short, Commissioner For Human Rights & Administrative Justice at Sogakope & Akatsi on 29th February and 1st March, 1996 Respectively to the chiefs and Queen Mothers of the north and south Tongu and Akatsi districts’ in Workshop For Paramount Chiefs And Queen Mothers In North, South Tongu And Akatsi Districts Venue: Hotel Cisneros, Sogakope; Theme: Modernisation For Development Prepared by International Needs Ghana Sponsored by Royal Danish Embassy (DANIDA) pp. 1-15

¹⁸ Glenda DeJager, Associate Director of International Needs (Personal Communication) 2003 See Also: The Forgotten Slaves, <http://www.antislavery.org>

¹⁹ International Needs Ghana Emotional & Vocational Rehabilitation Report (Phase 1) On Dorfor Emancipated Trokosi’s (Consultant: Dr. B.B. Puplampu, Chartered Psychologist) 1996

²⁰ Equality Now, ‘Slavery in Ghana: The Trokosi Tradition’ Women’s Action 14.1: March 1998, pp1-2, http://www.equalitynow.org/action_eng_14_1.html accessed 30 July 2002.



to her. Therefore relatives are responsible to provide her with food, and it is up to the Trokosi to raise any children borne to the priests.²¹

A girl may be paying for a petty crime that her great, great grandfather supposedly committed. In some instance the irony is appalling, in that a girl pays for the rape that led to her birth by being punished for the crime of her “rapist father”. Part of her payment for that crime will be that she in turn is abused and raped by other men for religious reasons²² Consider the case of Mercy Senahe²³. It was alleged that her grandmother stole a pair of earrings. For this crime Mercy’s older sister was sent as reparation to the shrine, but the sister contracted a disease probably through neglect and malnutrition, and died. Through this, Mercy was then required to go as the younger child. This was at the age of 8. At 11, after the onset of puberty, the Fetish priest raped Mercy and she fell pregnant later that year, giving birth to a child at the age of 13.²⁴

Through International Needs advocating on her behalf Mercy was one of many slaves released from this particular shrine. She was 22, with four children when she was released. Mercy came to Australia to share her story earlier this year. It is to be noted that when Mercy was released from the shrine she received documentation of her release, which clearly stated that she was no longer a Trokosi, and would never be called again to serve in the Shrine. Prior to the work of International Needs, total liberation for Trokosi slaves had not occurred.²⁵

Of the 3,000 liberated today, ages have varied from little children to very old women. One of the earliest released Trokosi women was aged between 70 and 85 years old (it is hard to estimate age when the society doesn’t measure it). This woman had lost contact with her family and her village, having been a slave for all but the first five years of her life. She did not even know why she had had to suffer such deprivation but valued freedom because at last she could do what she wanted without being told what to do, where to go and how to act.²⁶

An estimated 6,000 to 7,000 girls were held in bondage to Fetish priests in the Volta region of Ghana alone. With 3,000 free, International Needs is almost half way there in changing the practice completely in the country. It is sadly estimated however that

²¹ Madam Suzanne Aho (Director of Social Welfare, Women’s Affairs and Child Protection) ‘The Trokosi / Fiashidi Ritual Servitude: Togo Experience’ in Report Of The 1st West African Sub-Regional Workshop On Female Ritual Servitude Theme: Harnessing Our Collective Resources For The Transformation Of Ritual Servitude 7-8 February, 2001 Miklin Hotel Accra International Needs Ghana January, 2001pp. 39-43

²² Equality Now, ‘Slavery in Ghana: The Trokosi Tradition’ Women’s Action 14.1: March 1998, pp1-2, http://www.equalitynow.org/action_eng_14_1.html accessed 30 July 2002.

²³ **Source:** Equality Now, Women’s Action 14.1 March 1998 ‘Slavery In Ghana: The Trokosi Tradition’ http://www.fijiwomen.com/newsletters/regional/archives/regional_4... accessed 25/09/2003

²⁴ David S. Ayliffe ‘Sea of Mercy, An Ocean Of Grace A former slave finds freedom’ in World View Interactive Issue One ; Belgrave, Alternative Concepts, 2003 p.22-23

²⁵ Ibid.,

²⁶ Ibid.,



approximately 30,000 girls along the West African Coast are currently in ritual servitude in neighbouring countries Benin and Togo.²⁷

Walter Pimpong, Executive Director of International Needs Ghana, was approached by government officials in 1990 and was asked if he could do something about this problem. Walter whose mother is from the Ewe tribe who practice this was not even aware of the extent or nature of the problem. However after seeing it firsthand committed himself to work for freedom of Trokosi girls. He believed that it would not be until the year 2000 that he would see any slaves released, However in 1996 to his surprise he witnessed the first release ceremony ever where 30 women and their children were set free. By 1999 over 700 girls had been rescued. Today IN has secured the release of over 3,000 girls so far.²⁸

While some cry cultural relativism others cite that Trokosi practice violates the constitution of Ghana, contravenes the African Charter on Human and People's rights, The African Charter on the Health and Welfare of Children's Rights, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.²⁹ Following lobbying by International Needs, the United Nations and other agencies, the Ghanaian Government has passed a law banning this Trokosi practice but has yet to enforce the law due to pressure from a powerful lobby group. Through advocacy IN hopes to help ensure that the rights and the dignity of beneficiaries and the wider community are respected. Publishing articles on the harsh treatment of children can raise awareness of the unacceptable practices. Conditions and situations contravening the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child need be exposed and rectified. Affirmative action needs to be taken. Although lobbying of governments, awareness raising and public campaigning is beneficial for advocacy and promoting change these tools of leverage have their limitations. They do not necessarily secure the release of children in bondage.

Therefore in their advocacy planning IN is undertaking a holistic approach to try and ensure that all people in need and their communities have meaningful participation, inclusion, equality, security and dignity that will ultimately improve their life choices and advance human rights.

IN is encouraging the government and the entire civil society to be involved in the process of working for the promotion and protection of human rights. IN's advocacy-planning approach addresses issues of discrimination, exploitation, injustice and poverty.

²⁷ Ibid.,

²⁸ Rev. Walter Pimpong 'International Needs –Ghana Advocacy And Rehabilitation Program in Report Of The 1st West African Sub-Regional Workshop On Female Ritual Servitude Theme: Harnessing Our Collective Resources For The Transformation Of Ritual Servitude 7-8 February, 2001 Michelin Hotel Accra International Needs Ghana January, 2001pp. 51-55

²⁹ Emile F. Short (Commissioner for Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ),Ghana) Harmonising The Laws, Policies And Programmes To Transform Ritual Servitude In The West African Sub-Region in Report Of The 1st West African Sub-Regional Workshop On Female Ritual Servitude Theme: Harnessing Our Collective Resources For The Transformation Of Ritual Servitude 7-8 February, 2001 Miklin Hotel Accra International Needs Ghana January, 2001pp. 63-72



The job is far from complete. Changing the mindset of a culture of abuse takes generations but every Trokosi woman and family who is set free, and on average these women have up to four children each, provides the encouragement for IN workers and supporters to keep on working.

Australians are involved in the work of IN Ghana through International Needs Australia. IN Ghana's strategy is to rehabilitate 100 slaves annually. The Australian Government has provided funds for micro-finance and building a vocational training centre. AusAid initially supported International Needs in 1998 during the first phase. Currently IN is undergoing a second three year phase for which it has received an AusAid grant amounting to Aus\$ 300,000 for the purpose of assisting IN with providing vocational training for 900 released slaves.³⁰ This will empower released Trokosi and their communities by enabling them to support themselves and their families into the future. IN Ghana works to relocate and assimilate released slaves into local accepting communities, provide education for the children and for the communities.³¹

Human Rights should not be viewed as the sole privilege of those living in cultures which recognise them, nor as an option which one day should be obtained, but should be seen as necessities of life which Governments, Organisations and Individuals seek to realize for all humanity.

³⁰ David Ayliffe, 'No Mercy For Mercy : Child Bride, 11 Beaten For Sex' IN-Network Australia 2003

³¹ International Needs Ghana Project Proposal for Social And Economic Integration Of Women African Development Fund Grant Application for Period 3 Years (1st April, 1998 – 31st March 2001)



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