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Human Rights Activism and the Silencing of Women¹

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Abstract

This article explores and examines the competing interests of several international and national stakeholders concerning a development program offered to marginalised women reported to be exploited by a cultural practice in the Volta Region of Ghana; the discourses around the cultural practice and the way in which Ghana's rural women are represented in international, national and local discourses; and the stakeholder interest in representing the women, against the backdrop of Africa's imperialist history and the continent's current fight against neo-colonialism. It is argued that the case study of the *Trokosi Woman* provides an important and relevant example of how women's empowerment cannot take place when white race privilege and class structures within Ghana remain un-interrogated.

The Case Study of *The Trokosi Woman*

This article uses the case study of '*the Trokosi woman*' to explore the ways in which women's bodies are imagined within communities, within national struggles and through international development arrangements; and the ways in which poor rural women in post colonial settings are silenced by local and national urban males and international white men and women. The article argues that human rights discourse is mobilised by powerful groups in order to maintain their positions of power, while the *empowerment* of poor women within post colonial states, continues to be a sacrifice to the greater good.² It is my argument that the Trokosi women are positioned as individuals whose marginality provides a '*distinctive angle of vision*,'³ able to provide reasons for the women's oppression that are different to those of their oppressors. This case study highlights how poor women are not permitted to participate in discussions concerning their own futures; rather, these discussions take place between the nation's elite, who tend to be urban residing African males. Whilst national indicators point out that the life chances of women are improving

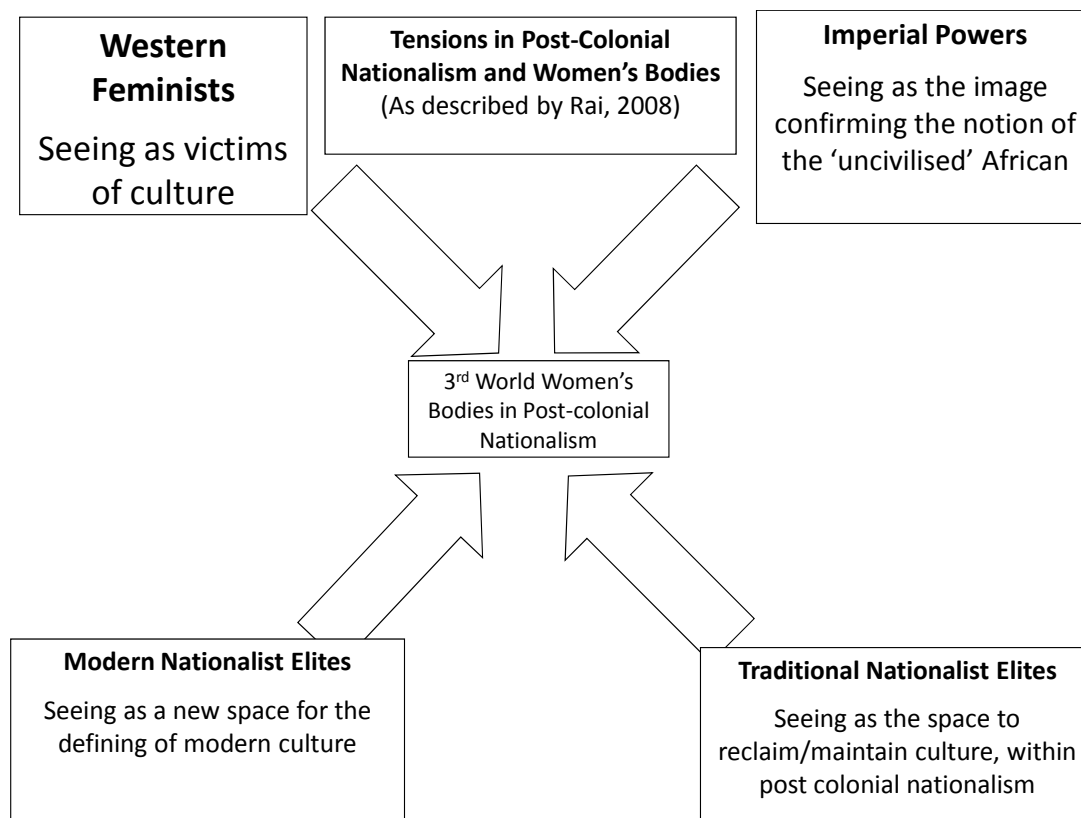
¹ The author wishes to acknowledge the input of Professor Janet McIntyre from the School of Public Policy and Management at Flinders University, and Dr Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes from the Women's Studies Department at Flinders University.

² Shirin Rai, '*The Gender Politics of Development*' (Zed Books, London, 2008) 21.

³ Patricia Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (Routledge: New York and London, 2000) 12.

within post-colonial states,⁴ the way in which women's bodies are positioned within community, national and international settings have not changed since independence (See Diagram 1.1).

Diagram 1.1 Tensions in Post-Colonial nationalism and Women's Bodies



This article relies on Foucault's fundamental insights into the construction of knowledge/power through the dynamics of discourse in Western societies.⁵ It explores Escobar's findings, concerning "the discourse on the underdevelopment of the Third World constructed by the developed countries."⁶ This is done by contrasting dominant western discourses with discourses from within the nation in which fieldwork was conducted. Finally, Collins' argument that the representation of black women is not simply undertaken by white men and women, but that black men also silence black women. Therefore, dominant national and local

⁴ United Nations Development Program Report, *Measuring Gender Inequality*. 2007/08, http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/data_sheets/cty_ds_GHA.html (accessed on 7 February 2009).

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, (Editions Gallimard Press, 1969).

⁶ Arturo Escobar, "Discourse and Power in Development: Michael Foucault and the Relevance of his Work to the Third World," *Alternatives*, 10: (1984-5), 383.

voices concerning *The Trokosi woman*, will also be analysed.⁷ Furthermore, this article relies on auto-ethnographical, Participatory Action Research methodology⁸ and recognises the ‘*complicity*’ of the researcher as a white western woman.⁹ It is informed by five months of fieldwork within Ghana, including observation and interviews with staff from an international Non-Government Organisation (NGO), National Resistance Group (NRG) leaders, government officials and local community groups in Ghana’s Volta Region.

Since 1998 reports of customary servitude, sometimes termed ‘slavery’ in West Africa have flooded through international media, western academic institutions and multilateral development organisations. 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.¹⁰ The practice is named ‘Troxovi’.

⁷ Collins, 5-10.

⁸ Following Janet McIntyre-Mills, “Yeperenye Dreaming in Conceptual, Geographical, and Cyberspace: A Participatory Action Research Approach to Address Local Governance Within and Australian Indigenous Housing Association,” *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 16:5 (2003): 309-338.

⁹ Veronica McKay and Norma Romm, “Active research towards the addressal of HIV/AIDS in the informal economy in Zambia: Recognition of complicity in unfolding situations,” *Action Research Journal*, 6:2 (2008): 149-171.

¹⁰ 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); Humphrey Hawksley, “Ghana’s Trapped Slaves.” BBC News Website. (2001): 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,” *African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific, 2003 Conference Proceedings - Africa on a Global Stage*, (2003): 5; Nirit Ben-Ari “Liberating Ghanaian Girls from ‘Trokosi,’” *Africa Recovery*, (2002): 1. http://www.afrol.com/News2002/gha001_girls_trokosi.htm (accessed 22 June 2005); Modestus Ahiabile, “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; Aamemu 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>

The belief system is reported to result in sending young virgin girls to serve fetish priests within local shrines. Their servitude is believed to appease the gods for sins or crimes committed by ancestors or relatives; and therefore serves to save the community from calamity. The women are called '*Trokosi*,' literally translated '*Brides of the gods*.'¹¹

Several Christian NGO's within Ghana report that they are working to '*release*' and '*rehabilitate*' the women from their enslavement. Such NGO's are predominately funded through international governmental bodies and through the donations of individuals from Christian churches in Australia, North America and Europe.¹² NGO reports perpetuated in international media and academia, represent *The Trokosi woman* as an *incomplete, passive victim* oppressed at the hands of the *ignorant, violent and evil* fetish priest.¹³

The universally accepted image of *The Trokosi woman*, as found in international media and western academia, is not shared at the national and local levels. Within Ghana, national groups have mobilised to resist the intervention of NGO's, by giving voice to alternate discourses that represent the women as *divine, educated role models*.¹⁴

Within the case study there are several stakeholders. The first stakeholder group is the women themselves. The number of women who are reported to be *Trokosi* ranges from 5500¹⁵ to less than 100.¹⁶ Dominant discourses concerning the Trokosi women are predominantly

[/printnews.php?](#) (accessed 19 November 2004); Isabelle Gyau Orhin, "Ghanaians Asked To Condemn Trokosi By Public Agenda". *General News*, 2001, www.modernghana.com/news/12507/1/ghanaians-asked-to-condemn-trokosi.html (accessed 5 February 2009).

¹¹ 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.

¹² Interview with employee of the NGO, 22 September 2008.

¹³ International NGO Website www.ecmafrica.org/36223.ihtml (accessed 10 March 2009).

¹⁴ Discussion (did not agree to formal interview) with National Resistance Group leader. Principal Researchers notes (29 September 2008).

¹⁵ Timothy Ayliffe "*Sex Slaves to the Gods*," www.startts.org.au/default.aspx?id=204 (accessed 9 March 2009).

¹⁶ United States State Department, *International Religious Freedom Report*. Section III, (2004). <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35360.htm> (accessed 23 August 2010)

given voice by white western Christian women.¹⁷ In recognising the complicity of the researcher, I have positioned myself as a white western woman within the framework. This stakeholder group mobilises human rights discourse to raise funds for the women and these funds are filtered through to national Christian NGO's within Ghana. Within the case study the government of Ghana claimed it does not have the funds to assist the women and children, and handed over this role to national Christian NGO's.¹⁸ In 1998, the government of Ghana amended the Criminal Code to ban harmful traditional practices after much activism and pressure relating to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.¹⁹ However, this law has not been enforced.²⁰

Within Ghana, National Resistance Groups have mobilised to resist the interventions into traditional practices by Christian NGO's. These groups claim to represent fetish priests, chiefs and communities within the Volta Region. In the field, I met with several women who were reported by the NGO to be former Trokosi women. However, the NGO impeded further contact with the women after I communicated the ethical requirement to employ an independent interpreter, rather than using an NGO staff member.²¹

The Trokosi Woman as constructed at the international level

Discourses within the academy represent the women's standing in their communities, stating that they are "regarded as sub-human,"²² and the United Nations states that "*The entire stigma associated with being a Trokosi transforms them into social outcasts.*"²³ A DVD circulated by the international NGO constructs *The Trokosi Woman* as an unknowing, unseeing passive victim who is acted upon by her family, her community and the fetish priest. It is stated, "She has not had any schooling, she has no marketable skills and her family has most likely abandoned her;"²⁴

¹⁷ International NGO Website www.ecmafrica.org/36223.ihtml (accessed 10 March 2009).

¹⁸ Interview CHRAJ representative, 15 September 2008.

¹⁹ United Nations Population Fund, *Violence Against Women*, (2007), 86.

²⁰ Interview with CHRAJ representative, 15 September 2008.

²¹ Outhred.

²² Rinaudo, 1

²³ United Nations Development Fund. *Human Development Report, Towards a More Inclusive Society - Ghana*. (United Nations Development Programme, Ghana Office, Combent Impressions Publications: 2007): 72.

²⁴ "Save the Slaves," DVD.

“She will be lead unknowingly to a life of total slavery;”²⁵ as she will be forced to “work the fields by day, [and be] always available by night.”²⁶

International websites seeking to raise funds for the development program offered to the women give voice to discourse concerning the practice; stating “for hundreds of years in the Volta region of Ghana, West Africa, the Trokosi practice... has been enslaving young virgin girls in ritualistic sexual bondage;”²⁷ “there are those who are cursing individuals and organisations who dare to come to the aid of these poor slave children;”²⁸ and that “for a long time the dirty secret of trokosi slavery thrived amongst the Ewe people....”²⁹ The practice is further constructed as sexual slavery as the international NGO is quoted in the media stating, “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.”³⁰

International discourse represents the women as fertile soil for Christian conversion, stating “98% of all released Trokosi come to practice Christianity”³¹ and “the funding of Church Planters, training of Trokosi girls and the education of their children is necessary to continue this battle against evil.”³² The practice is constructed as a dirty secret, perpetuated by evil, ignorant, ritualistic, enslavers; as it is declared, “It is not uncommon for priests and shrine owners to ‘sign’ papers with their thumbprints, because their ‘god’ forbids them to learn to read and write.”³³

At the international level, the government of Ghana, national NGO’s, Troxovi practicing communities, NRG’s and the Trokosi women themselves are silent. National Resistance Group voices are only represented by an international NGO, positioning the resistance groups as

²⁵ “*Save the Slaves*,” DVD.

²⁶ “*Save the Slaves*,” DVD.

²⁷ The NGO’s American Website, http://www.innetworkusa.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=39&Itemid=45 (accessed 3 November 2009).

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

²⁹ International Media Website, http://truthforafricalovers.com/truth_about_Trokosi_shrine_slavery (accessed 3 November 2009).

³⁰ Rinaudo, 1.

³¹ The NGO’s UK Website [confidential] (10 September 2008).

³² International NGO Website.

³³ International NGO Website.

the ‘opposition’ within the framework of their own argument. The NGO declares;

The other claim the opposition makes is that the *trokosi* slave system should be preserved simply because it is the tradition of their people. It is interesting to note, however, that the very same people who make this claim at the same time condemn slavery in the West and even demand reparations! They didn’t like slavery when it was done to them, so why do they defend doing it to others?³⁴

At the international level, the women are represented as unknowing, unseeing passive victims and fetish priests and NRG’s are represented as savage, hypocritical misogynists.

The Trokosi Woman as constructed at the national level

At the national level several stakeholders give voice to discourse concerning the *Trokosi woman*. She is represented as an incomplete person, requiring rescue by the NGO. An employee of the NGO in Ghana states,

...to bring a smile onto the face of a young women who has been rescued from slavery and from bondage and has been given the opportunity to live life afresh. I think that these are the things that excite me and that keep me connected with [the NGO].³⁵

Similarly, the Executive Director gives voice to discourse stating,

I see them as being in a situation where they are unable to be full people. The law [customary] doesn’t allow them to become Christians.³⁶

Alternate discourses are voiced by NRG leaders, representing the women as role models, who are integral to the morality of the society.

We have women, educated women studying at the University of Ghana, going to the Shangri La to engage in prostitution with western business men. The Troxovi system ensures the morality of society, so these things do not take over our society, like they have yours.³⁷

He also states, “the concept here is to have a role model for the family from which the criminal comes... That person is like bringing peace to the

³⁴ International NGO Website.

³⁵ Interview with employee of the NGO, 22 September 2008.

³⁶ Interview with the Executive Director of the NGO, November 2008.

³⁷ Discussion (did not agree to formal interview) with NRG leader, 29 September 2008.

family.”³⁸ When the leader of a NRG was asked to comment on the discourse provided by the international arm of the NGO, he stated, “You are researching something that doesn’t exist.”³⁹

Government bodies within Ghana seek to act as referee between NRG’s and the NGO. A representative from the Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice states in an interview that,

Traditionally they [Trokosi] were not allowed to marry any other man so yes, that is an abuse of their individual rights, but they are not required to sleep with the priest... That is an abuse of the system by individual priests. It is not happening to all Trokosi.⁴⁰

The United States State Department within Ghana reports,

There is no evidence that sexual or physical abuse is an ingrained or systematic part of the practice... The practice explicitly forbids a Trokosi... to engage in sexual activity or contact during the atonement period.⁴¹

At the national level, Trokosi practicing communities and the women themselves are silent. The women are represented as targets for rescue by national Christian NGO’s and are represented as a space to reclaim pre-colonial African identity by NRG’s. The third stakeholder, the United States State Department in Ghana and the Government of Ghana position themselves as referee between NRG’s and Christian NGO’s, responding to the claims made about the women and the practice, by each group. At the national level, the women are spoken for and about by urban residing African men. The discourse given voice by NRG’s seeking to destabilise the claims of Christian interventionists gives valuable insight concerning the extent to which the women are ‘forbidden’ or ‘allowed’ to marry, engage in sexual activity or receive an education. This represents the practice as a powerful patriarchal construct which controls the interactions of the women.

The National Resistance Group also gives voice to discourse concerning the national NGO, stating: “[The Executive Director of the NGO] is a buffoon. Every person at [the NGO] is a buffoon.”⁴² The researcher is positioned as a white western woman, whose race is unaccountable for the human rights abuses it commits, and whose society is overrun with

³⁸ Discussion with NRG leader.

³⁹ Discussion with NRG leader.

⁴⁰ Interview with CHRAJ representative, 15 September 2008.

⁴¹ United States State Department, 3.

⁴² Discussion with NRG leader.

immorality. Just as international stakeholders refer to NRG's as hypocrites, the researcher is also represented as such by NRG's;

You look at how you have abused your own indigenous people. Then you come here and research our people. No-one will pay to research the human rights abuses of the white man.⁴³

Within the national discourse, an employee of the NGO voices his concerns around western intervention, claiming; "The history of intervention and colonization has also resulted in 300 years of slavery which has destabilised many communities."⁴⁴ Yet the two groups are unable to recognise mutual interests as the NGO is reliant on development funding from international patronage networks. Therefore, certain national discourses that confront neo-colonialism are silenced at the international level due to the power relationship that exists between national development worker and international funder.

The Trokosi Woman as constructed at the local level

Ghana's national newspaper gives voice to local farmers, fetish priests and herbalists, concerning the women and the practice. A local farmer further discusses what the women are 'allowed' to do:

... in the past, the girls were deprived of education and not allowed to go on errands outside the shrines. Today, the girls are allowed to attend school until they are liberated.⁴⁵

Similarly, a Fetish Priest discusses what the women within his shrine are 'able' to do: "I am flexible in performing rites and those to acquire my shrine are being trained in various vocational skills after which they will be liberated."⁴⁶ The practice is represented as an integral feature of the society, vital to the maintenance of justice and morality. Local men state that "Trokosi was introduced by our ancestors to serve as a rallying force, justice, morality, security and socialization, but for the introduction of the system, the moral fibre and security of the society will be compromised"⁴⁷ and that "If we should enforce the strict adherence of the Trokosi system, we will realize that the crimes being committed by the youth will minimize."⁴⁸

⁴³ Discussion with NRG leader.

⁴⁴ Interview with NGO employee. [confidential] September 2008.

⁴⁵ "Trokosi Practice: Is it relevant?" *The Spectator*, 13 September 2008, p.11.

⁴⁶ "Trokosi Practice: Is it relevant?" *The Spectator*, 13 September 2008, p.11.

⁴⁷ Trokosi Practice: Is it relevant?" *The Spectator*, 13 September 2008, p.11.

⁴⁸ Trokosi Practice: Is it relevant?" *The Spectator*, 13 September 2008, p.11.

The extent to which the women are excluded from discussions concerning the decisions that affect their own futures can be seen in a quote from a local herbalist:

After serving the shrine you have to marry from its catchment area when certain rights are performed for your protection. This must not be seen as an infringement on the rights of the liberated.⁴⁹

A local farmer suggests that the NGO should brainstorm with local shrine owners to discuss the future of the Trokosi women.⁵⁰ Within this framework, whether liberated by the NGO, or serving within a shrine, *the Trokosi woman's* future is discussed by powerful males. As can be seen in Diagram 1.2, the women remain spoken about and spoken for by every stakeholder within the case study, and each group makes claims concerning the other. Each stakeholder group fails to empower the women and give them voice, because their own political agendas prioritise destabilising the other group's claims. Similarly, the NGO's representation of the women places them as targets, rather than agents and therefore, simply replaces fetish priests as gatekeepers to the women.

Women as Pawns

Within the discourse the history of imperialism in Africa is a key theme. At the international level, white men and women are not required to acknowledge their role as oppressors, NRG leaders use cultural relativist arguments to justify the control of the women, national development workers are seen as 'collaborator's' in neo-colonialism and national urban males are not required to acknowledge their role as oppressors within the nation itself. Throughout discussions on imperialism in Africa, the women remain silent, spoken for and represented by international white women or national urban males. Epistemological claims made by both groups dominate the dialogue, yet stakeholders fail to foster inter-subjective discussion in order to verify claims of truth.⁵¹

Within the case study, the Trokosi women are silenced as their voices are sacrificed to the political pursuits of each stakeholder group. This resonates with the ways in which women's bodies were constructed in post-colonial nationalist struggles and results in the women being

⁴⁹ Trokosi Practice: Is it relevant?" *The Spectator*, 13 September 2008, p.11.

⁵⁰ "NGOs, focusing on liberation of the Trokosi's can dialogue or brainstorm with the heads of the shrines," see "Trokosi Practice: Is it relevant?" *The Spectator*, 13 September 2008, p.11.

⁵¹ Karyn. L. Freedman, "Diversity and the Fate of Objectivity", *Social Epistemology*. 23:1 (January – March 2009): 47-48.

Diagram 1.2 – Constructing the Trokosi Woman

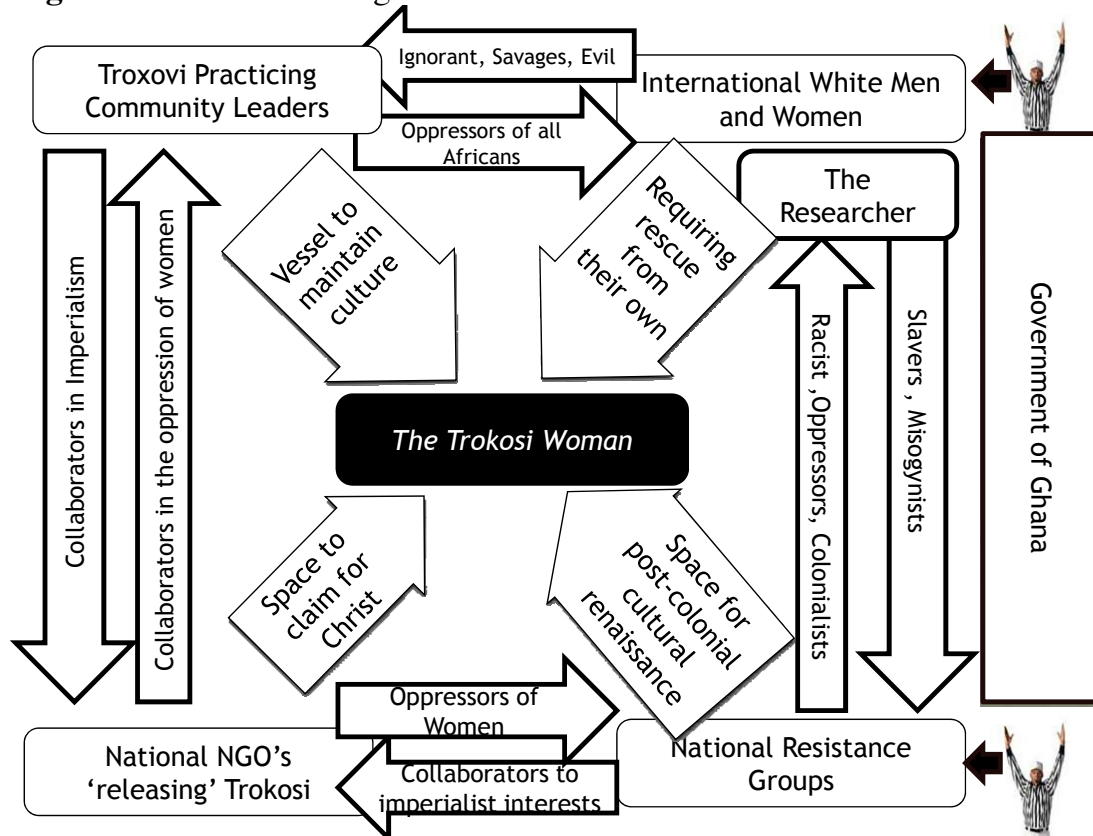
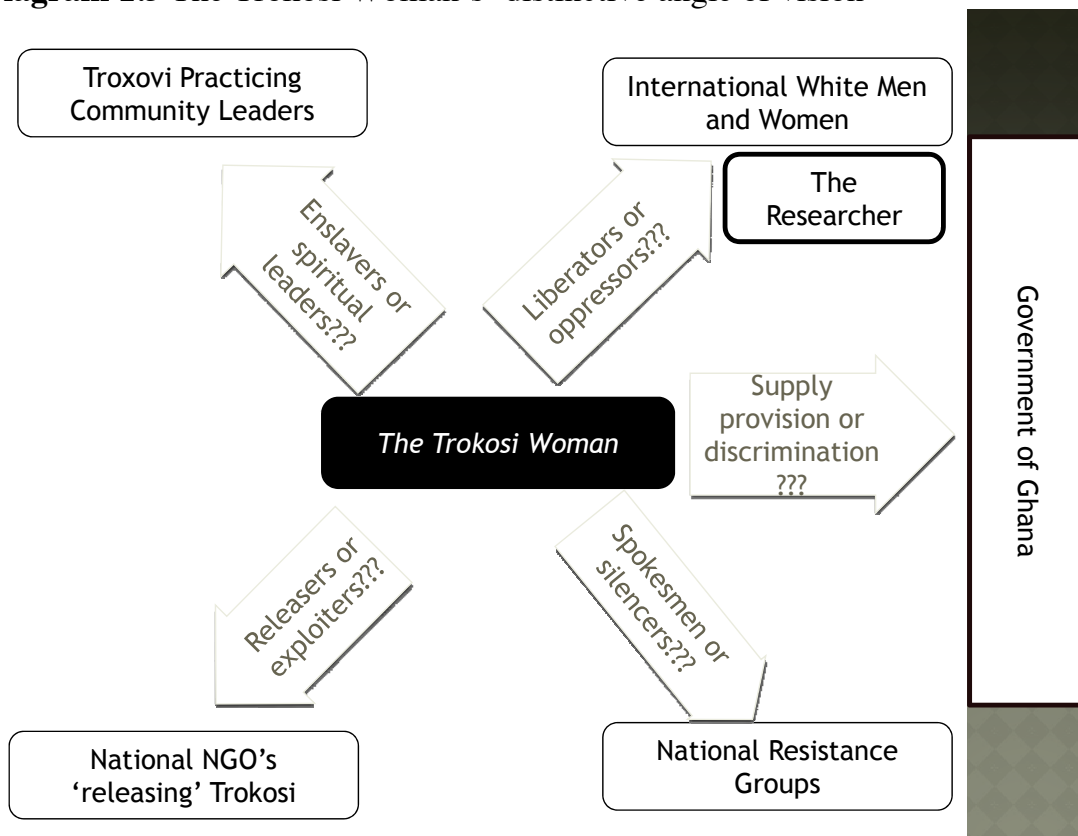


Diagram 1.3 The Trokosi Woman's 'distinctive angle of vision'



represented and spoken for at every level. The universal acceptance of *The Trokosi woman* as represented by international groups, supports Escobar's theory that the third world is constructed by western nations through the production and reproduction of discourse. Within the case study human rights discourse is mobilised by powerful groups to represent the women as targets, requiring rescue through international development programs. However, the funded programs have now been in existence for over a decade and the voices of the Trokosi women remain silent. This case study provides a strong example of the importance of empowerment approaches that identify the multiple oppressions of race, gender and class, as such approaches do not silence black women about their histories, requiring them to identify with their gender over their race.⁵²

Collins argues that within the US, worldviews originating in the cosmologies of West African ethnic groups were used to order and evaluate the lived experiences of slave communities and that this offered enslaved Africans explanations for their slavery which were alternative to those of the white slave owners. These knowledges were hidden from and suppressed by the dominant group. Therefore, whilst anti-poverty approaches, focusing on human rights discourse, might meet the immediate needs of women in post colonial states, it is through empowerment approaches that women themselves might *construct and reconstruct oppositional knowledges*. Such oppositional knowledges might provide explanations for the oppression of the women, which are alternative to those of the international community, the national elite and local males. Collins argues that the economic exploitation of US Black women created the conditions for distinctively Black and female forms of resistance and using this example, the Trokosi women can be seen as "individuals whose marginality provide[s] a distinctive angle of vision on... intellectual and political entities."⁵³ (See Diagram 1.3).

The omission of the Trokosi women's voices at the national and local levels, resonate with Collin's claims that there is not only a racist bias in international feminist activism, but also a masculinist bias in Black social and political thought.⁵⁴ The case study supports the argument that women are silenced by dominant groups through the constructed imagery

⁵² Larissa Behrendt, "Aboriginal Women and the White Lies of the Feminist Movement: Implications for Aboriginal Women in Rights Discourse," *The Australian Feminist Law Journal*, 1 (1993): 35.

⁵³ Collins, 12.

⁵⁴ Collins, 3.

of the woman's body. This is not only achieved through activities that rely on cultural relativist arguments, but also through human rights activism. This article provides an example of how the silencing of women places them as pawns within global political and religious tugs-of-war.

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