

THE RELEVANCE OF NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LAWS FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN GHANA: A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE *TROKOSI* SYSTEM IN GHANA

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Abstract : This paper demonstrates that the rights of women and children are not being protected effectively in Ghana. It argues that although Ghana has laws such as the 1992 Constitution, a number of international human rights laws that Ghana had ratified to protect the rights of women and children, and the *Criminal Code (Amendment) Act, 1998*, *trokosi* which discriminates against women and children is being practiced in the country. The paper attempts to answer why : (a) Ghanaian women and children continue to be oppressed in spite of Ghana's robust domestic and international laws that protect them? (b) the government does not enforce the *trokosi* law ?, and (c) the 1992 Constitution has not been effective in eliminating violence against women and children in Ghana? The paper anchors the *trokosi* practice in the paradigms of cultural relativism and universalism, and discusses the (i) presence of a strong patriarchal framework and the family structure which favours men over women in Ghana, the (ii) the secrecy of traditional religious practices, particularly, the *trokosi* rituals; (iii) the possible irrelevance of international conventions to Ghana's cultural and political situation; and (iv) the internal dynamics of Ghanaian politics. The paper concludes that *trokosis* persists in Ghana because of the conflict between culture and religious norms on the one hand and positive laws on the other.

Keywords: Gender inequality, religion, human rights, culture, and positive law.

1. INTRODUCTION

The socio-economic development of any democratic nation hinges on the protection of the human rights of its citizens. How effective are international human rights and national laws, such as the *trokosi* law, in protecting the rights of women and the girl-child against *trokosi* practice in Ghana?

Trokosi is a traditional religious system that oppresses women and children in Ghana. The practice, among the Ewes, requires parents to offer their virgin daughters to a fetish shrine to atone for the sins of their ancestors. Ghanaian laws prohibit discrimination against women and the girl-child. Some examples of these laws are the "equalization provision" within the 1992 Constitution, and a number of international human rights instruments that Ghana had ratified to protect the rights of women and children. Ghana also amended its criminal code – the *Criminal Code (Amendment) Act, 1998* (the *trokosi* law) to protect victims of *trokosi*, yet the practice persists. As a result, women and children in Ghana, especially those in southeastern part of the country are not enjoying their human rights which are made available to them by the Constitution of Ghana. It needs not be overemphasized that these constitutionally guaranteed fundamental human rights and freedoms are essential for the citizens as well as for the socio-economic development of any democratic country.

For these reasons, this paper inquires why : (a) Ghanaian women and children continue to be oppressed in spite of Ghana's robust domestic and international laws that protect them? (b) the government does not enforce the *trokosi* law ?, and (c) the 1992 Constitution has not been effective in eliminating violence against women and children in Ghana?

To answer these questions, the author anchors the *trokosi* practice within the paradigms of cultural relativism and universalism, and argues that *trokosi* is a site of contest for both traditionalists and universalists camps in Ghana. The paper also discusses the (1) presence of a strong patriarchal framework and the family structure which favours men over women in Ghana, the (ii) the secrecy of traditional religious practices, particularly, the *trokosi* rituals; (iii) the possible irrelevance of international conventions to Ghana's cultural and political situation; and (iv) the internal dynamics of Ghanaian politics. At this stage,

it is apposite to put the religious practice in context, and to take a look at the on-going *trokosi* liberation efforts in Ghana:

Did it seem like the day of freedom would never come? Sometimes it did seem like that to us, but we have learned to plod on in discouraging times.

Freedom for these slaves or victims of ritual servitude amongst the Ewe tribe of Ghana took much longer than we thought it would. Months turned into two long years of working, praying, and waiting.

At last, victory! ...word arrived that the date of Jan. 31[2003] had been set for the slave liberation. ...

On that momentous day, 264 “trokosis” were freed and 950 child slaves born to them through rape in captivity. Almost all the ECM [Every Child Ministry] Ghana staff was on hand to celebrate the day with community and government leaders, and with the slaves themselves.

At present, many of the girls are receiving vocational training and intensive Gospel witness through the fine work of ECM’s Ghana partners in this project, International Needs Ghana. As you rejoice with us at what God has done, please continue in prayer for these girls and women (Every Child Ministry 2003).

The epigraph above introduces the subject matter of this paper: the total eradication of a horrendous religious practice; a tradition that enslaves a virgin girl to atone for the sins of a relative, based on the belief that gods often punish a person’s sin by causing the death of members of his family until the sin is pardoned. As such, the opening quotes serves as a programmatic guide for what is to follow: an argument for effective enforcement of Ghanaian laws to eradicate the *trokosi* practice and to eliminate discrimination against women and children and, to promote socio-economic development in the country.

Trokosi is practiced among the Ewes in Benin, Togo, Ghana and southeastern Nigeria (Yakin Erturk 2008).¹ However, for the purpose of this paper, I will limit my analysis to the practice in the Volta Region of Ghana. The term *trokosi* [plural: *trokosiwo*] refers to a traditional practice of ritual bondage of virgin girls where the victims are committed to fetish shrine² of *troxovi* [plural: *troxoviwo*],³ as reparation

¹ See, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Mission to Ghana,” *Human Rights Council, Promotion and Protection of All Human Rights, Civil, Political, Economic, Social and Cultural, including the rights to Development, its causes and consequences* A/HRC/7/6/Add.3 (21 February 2008). [Yakin E., Report, February, 2008]

See also, *Anti-Slavery Reporter* (July 1988),

² There are quite a few shrines in Ghana. Some of them are: Greater Accra Region: Ablao Shrine, Kemana Shrine (both in Osuweg, Dangbe West) and the Dasuma Shrine (Big Ada, Dangbe West). Volta Region: Gava Shrine, Axava Shrine (Tor-

for the sins of their relatives.⁴ Thus, committal is based on the commission of crimes within the family. Examples of such infractions include: theft, adultery, murder, lying rape and, sexual intercourse with a *trokosi*. Others are rudeness to cult members, defiance of the cult and refusal to pay debt (United Nations’ Development Program 2007). The ritual has been practiced among the Ewes for hundreds of years (Elom Dovlo & A. K. Adzoyi 1995). It is still being practiced, and it is extremely oppressive to women and children (Gadzekpo 1998).

To put this in perspective; let us consider the case of Abla Kotor. “Abla Kotor, whose family sent her, at the age of six, to the Awlo-Korti shrine in Tefle in southeastern Ghana to atone for a crime her father committed” (Sara Aird n.d) when “he raped his own niece and the product of that rape was Abla.”(Ibid.).

To pay for her father’s crime, Abla must now live and work for the local Ewe priest, Kotinor Akorli, until he decides she has appeased the gods. Abla’s parents gave her up into this life of slavery, where she faces mental, physical and sexual abuse, in hopes that by so doing, the gods will not bring vengeance

gorme/Fodzoku, North Tongu), Venor Shrine (Old Bakpa, North Tongu), Avakpei Shrine (Mafi Avakpedome, North Tongu), Korlie Shrine (Mafidugame, North Tongu), Korlie Shrine (Dovekpogadzi, North Tongu), Me Shrine (Bator, North Tongu), Adzemu Shrine, Dzaadza Shrine, Adevor Shrine (all three in Agave, South Tongu), Dalive Shrine dedicated to the Kyaoli Deity (Dalive, South Tongu), Sui Shrine, Nyigbla Shrine, Tormi Shrine (all three in Anloga, Keta), Adzima Vena Shrines I and II (Klikor, Ketu), Nyigbla Glaku Shrine (Afife, Ketu), Adzima Shrine (Kunyorwu, Ketu), Adzima Shrine (Aklasukorpe, Ketu), Adzime Shrine (Gbevekope, Ketu), Adzima Shrine (Ave-Adzigo, Ketu), Bame Shrine (Ave-Zomayi, Ketu), Dzoli Shrine (Avenorfeme, Akatsi) and Hodzo-Korpe Shrine dedicated to the Amata Deity (Alavanyo, Ho Municipal District). In addition, the Gava Shrine and the Axava Shrine (both Torgorme/Fodzoku, North Tongu) are currently awaiting the appointment of new fetish priests, after which they might continue the practice. See Yakin E, Report, February, 2008, at 15-16.

³ *Troxovi* is the fetish or god which accepts *trokosi* or *trokosiwo* which is the plural form of *trokosi*.

Troxoviwo are represented by fetish priests who serve as intermediaries between the god and the community they serve.

⁴ Take, for example, the case of Eunice. She “was so young when she was taken into slavery that she doesn’t remember her exact age. When you ask her, she glances at preschool children playing outside. “About as big as that one”, she says. Very young. The trouble began for Eunice when a priest during a session of divination claimed that her grandfather had an affair with another *trokosi*, another slave owned by the shrine. The priest demanded that little Eunice come to the shrine to take the place of the older girl who had been defiled. Give up her daughter into slavery? Oh no! At first, Eunice’s mother refused. But soon her father’s relatives began to die. Finally the mother gave in. In the shrine, the priest beat Eunice almost every day, sometimes, for no apparent reason at all. She was raped about twice a week, a terrible ordeal that causes her to feel ashamed and angry. Often she was deprived of food. Eunice says she never felt a moment’s happiness while in slavery at the shrine.”

See, Ever Child Ministry, “Slave Liberation Project, and Stories Kevin Read on the Air.” Online:

<http://www.kidsyes.org/wyllpage2.htm>.

upon the Kotor family as retribution for her father's crime. Having lived in the shrine for over three years now, Abla spends her days collecting water, cooking, cleaning, farming, and caring for livestock. Denied access to education, prohibited from leaving, banished from her family home, and soon to face the sexual advances of her master, the Ewe priest, Abla is just one of the thousands of girls and women enslaved in this manner (Ibid).

Unfortunately, this is only one of the many thousands of stories of subjugation or repression characteristic of the *trokosi* system which operates in democratic Ghana. From the above narrative, it is not difficult to surmise that the Ewe traditional criminal justice system is not only gender biased, it is also incredibly oppressive to women. Abla, the issue of the crime (rape), had to be sacrificed to ward-off the anger and punishment of the "justice" seeking and "crime controlling" god. This criminal justice system does not punish the offender but rather, an innocent virgin girl who has absolutely no knowledge of the crime. Abla's case is particularly instructive: her father who committed the crime was not the one who had to be punished; rather, it was Abla who was condemned to suffer in 'bondage' and to serve as 'a wife of a god' for many years as a *trokosi*. Taking Abla as an example, scholars such as Elom Dovlo agree that *trokosi*, as a religious practice, oppresses women and the girl-child. Why then does the practice still exist in Ghana notwithstanding the country's robust laws that prohibit it?

Literary translating as "slave" of the god, "slavery", or "the servant of a god or deity" "in the Ewe language, the practice is premised on the belief that gods often punish a person's crime by causing the death of members of his/her family until the sin is atoned for. According to Dartey-Kumordzi, "Trokosi was traditionally instituted by our African ancestors, to serve as a check on criminal activities such as stealing. In the past, if someone has his/her property stolen and the thief failed to surrender himself/herself for appropriate punishment, the gods of the Trokosi shrine would vent their spleen on all members of the criminal's family" (Dartey-Kumordzi 1995). "This resulted in the thief's relations 'kicking the bucket' [dying] one after the other until such time that the offender was found out. [Otherwise], the death toll would continue until a virgin was sent to the priest of the Trokosi shrine to atone for the sin of the runaway criminal" (Ibid).

Usually, the subject of atonement is a virgin girl who is expected to serve the fetish priest for three to five years, depending on the seriousness of the crime committed by the girl's ancestor, and also the policy of the *troxovi* shrine. While in confinement, the girl-child's family has to feed and clothe her while she

works on the priest's farm, serves as a domestic helper and caters to the priest's sexual desires. The girl-child is generally overworked and usually in poor health because of absence of medical attention at the shrine.

As Yakin Erturk puts it, "[t]he exclusionary effect of this practice is total: Children of *trokosi* are denied parental and emotional support, adequate nutrition and a healthy environment. Servitude restricts their access to social services such as formal education, medical care (ante-natal, post-natal attention and immunization of their children)" (Yakin Erturk 2008). The 'atonee' (the girl) is also at great risk of contracting sexually transmitted disease (STD) such as HIV/AIDS because, often, the priest has numerous sexual partners. After five years, the girl's family is free to redeem her, but the conditions and rituals of redemption are such that the family, more often than not, is not able to fulfill that obligation. Consequently, the girl may be confined to the shrine for life. The ancient traditional practice, which is tantamount to slavery and forced labour, has been practiced among the Ewes, for hundreds of years (Elom Dovlo 2005). Professor Dovlo has pointed out that "trokosi was traditionally understood as a means of controlling crime within traditional communities" (Ibid). This assertion was echoed by Audrey Gadzekpo. According to her, the *trokosi* "system is a very ingenious order and a multipurpose mechanism put in place by our forebears to check heinous crimes, provide cures, maintain the tradition and culture of the people, regulates the society and serves as the last place to find the truth" [Sic] (Ibid).

The ingenuity of the traditional criminal justice system as noted by Gadzekpo, is not in question. However, the troubling gender biased orientation of the practice is what serves as the impetus for this inquiry. Built on the concept of moral and social order, the practice is severely discriminatory against women. First, the person who is being punished for the prohibited act/behaviour has not committed any offense and, therefore, has no knowledge of the crime and has no idea why she is being punished. Next, the sacrificial victim is usually a female, a virgin, and of a very tender age. Moreover, since a male child is hardly ever used to atone for the sins of his ancestor, as opposed to the vestal girl, it follows that this cruel and discriminatory customary practice is directed towards the female population of the practicing (Ewe) people.

More agonizing is that the *trokosi* practice takes place under the full view of Ghanaian laws that proscribe it in the country. Chapter 5 (Fundamental Human Rights section) of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, for instance, protects all Ghanaians against human

right abuses. Article 12 (2) of the 1992 Constitution decrees that,

Every person in Ghana, whatever his race, place of origin, political opinion, colour, religion, creed or gender shall be entitled to the fundamental human rights and freedoms of the individual contained in this Chapter but subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and for the public interest....

At the same time, article 12(1) emphasizes and mandates strict observance of human rights of Ghanaians by all persons, both natural and legal, and prescribes mechanism for the enforcement of those rights. In fact, articles 14 and 16 of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana unambiguously proscribe the practices of servitude and forced child labour. According to article 14, "Every person has a right to personal liberty", and article 16 commands that "No person shall be held in slavery or servitude or be required to perform forced labour." These constitutional guarantees were set out to protect vulnerable people including women and children, and in this case the girl-child, in Ghana.

Moreover, Ghana's *Criminal Offences Act, 1960*, (Act 29) as amended, *Criminal Code (Amendment) Act, 1998*, outlaws *trokosi* practices. It protects women and children from "customary servitude" including "any form of forced labour related to a customary ritual" (Criminal Code Amendment Act, 1998, s. 17). Moreover, the practice violates provisions of Ghana's *Children's Act of 1988*. Specifically, the practice offends against the "best interest of the child principle" (Children's Act, 1998, s. 2) "the right to grow up with one's parents," (Children's Act, s.5). "the right to dignity, respect, leisure, liberty, health and education"(s. 6 (2)(a) and the duty of parents to protect children from neglect, discrimination, violence, abuse, exposure to physical and moral hazards and oppression (s. 6 (3)). Furthermore, Ghana's *Children's Act* prohibits torture and degrading treatment, including any cultural practice which dehumanizes or is injurious to the physical and mental well-being of a child (s. 13 (1). In fulfillment of its international obligation, Ghana ratified the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and made it part of its domestic law for the purpose of protecting women and children against such offensive gender-related practices as *trokosi*. More significant and astonishing, however, is the *Law Prohibiting Ritual Servitude*, and also, the above-mentioned *Criminal Code (Amendment) Act, of 1998 (Act 544)*, (also known as the *trokosi* law), which was passed purposely to abrogate the pervasive and harsh *trokosi* practice. Yet *trokosi* practices still exist in Ghana (Elom Dovlo and S. K. Kufogbe 1998). As I write, there are at least 23 *trokovi* shrines in the Volta region which still accept *tro-*

kosi (Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland 2009).

One of the reasons for this is that as a religious practice, *trokosi* practice has eluded public scrutiny in Ghana for many years. This is because until the beginning of the 1990s when the practice captured the attention of human rights advocates (such as International Needs Ghana and other Christian organizations) the ritual was conducted in absolute secrecy. The recent publicity concerning the practice was only made possible by globalization and its attendant communication technology. In fact, *trokosi* pre-existed the arrival of Europeans to the Gold Coast (now Ghana). It was practiced in the Gold Coast during British colonial rule, notwithstanding the (colonial) government's commitment to democratic values, both in Britain and its non-metropolitan territories, and which were subsequently transplanted into the Gold Coast. More than fifty years after the British, post-independent Ghana, in spite of its many laws that prohibit the practice, is still battling with ways and means to eradicate *trokosi*.

Today, however, the good news is that the oppressiveness of the *trokosi* system has gained unprecedented attention, publicity, as well as international audience. Discussions of the practice abound on the Internet and the "[a]nti-trokosi campaign ...has come to be tied up with global publics, global media, transnational networks, and global actors with global voices" (Hoofdsuk n.d). This is not all, however. The "1999 US Department of State Report on International Religious Freedom defined *trokosi* as 'religious slavery' and an especially severe human rights abuse and a flagrant violation of women's and children's rights"(Ibid). The report continues:

International audience watched BBC and CNN documentaries on 'trokosi slavery'. Western journalists visited Ghana to investigate the issue and wrote articles on 'Ghana's slaves to the gods', 'Ghana's trapped slaves', and 'juju fetish slaves' in newspapers and magazines. And a Google search for *trokosi* on the Internet yield 22,300 hits that link one to similar texts about 'systematic abuse', 'child slavery', 'vestal virgins', 'sex slaves to the gods', or 'African sex slavery' sad looking poorly dressed girls (Ibid).

However, apologists of the practice, such as the Afrika Mission (Ibid), claim that practitioners are just exercising their constitutionally guaranteed religious rights, their freedom of religion. However, when balanced against other rights which are fundamental to the life and dignity of *trokosi* victims, the practice must not be allowed to prevail. This is because the practice cannot be demonstrably justified in democratic Ghana. Mercy, an ex-*trokosi* agrees: At a National Dissemination Workshop on the study of *Trokosi Practice in Ghana* on Wednesday Mercy, a libe-

rated Trokosi narrated the story of how at tender age of eight, her parents condemned her to a Trokosi camp to atone for the sins of her aunt. On several occasions when she tried to escape, she was unsuccessful; in part because when she returned home her parents escorted her back to the shrine. With no one to turn for help, even in the era of democracy, when there ought to have been avenues for redress, Mercy began her condemned life as *trokosi*, where she woke [up] at dawn and cleaned the shrine and worked on the farm. Worse, the priest sexually abused her, leaving her with four children to fend for. "The Trokosi system is not good" she told the gathering. My generation and the generation before mine missed out in education" (Ibid)."

II. THE ABOLITINIST AND ANTI-ABOLITINIST DEBATE

Research reveals that *trokosi*, indeed, exists in Ghana and under horrendous and inhumane conditions, despite a body of vigorous laws both national and international that prohibit the practice. Both the abolitionists and anti-abolitionists camps acknowledge the existence of the practice; however, opinions are divided on the degree of oppressiveness of the practice to women and children. To non-governmental organizations, spearheaded by International Needs Ghana, the practice is cruel and repressive to women and children and needs to be totally eradicated from Ghana.

On the other hand, traditionalists, led by the Afrikania Mission disagreed with the anti-*trokosi* perspective. They maintain that *trokosi* is not harsh or oppressive to women as the anti-*trokosi* camp contends. They argue that the *trokosi* system is a crime control mechanism, a moral training school for girls, and that they have the right to maintain their forefather's culture. They protest strongly that the "campaign against *trokosi* is an attack on their freedom of religion, as guaranteed by Ghana's 1992 Constitution" (Link & Visitor 2009).⁵

This is not surprising. Afrikania Mission also known as the Afrikan Renaissance Movement is a group of African traditionalists who have banded together to promote traditional religion. Afrikania is the main, if not the only group arguing for the retention of the *trokosi* system and opposing the liberation of *trokosiwo* or *trokosis*. They do not want to see the sys-

tem abolished because they see it as part of their tradition and culture (Dictionary of Trokosi).⁶

The group was started by a former Catholic priest, Rev. Dr. Father Kwabena Damuah, who left the Christian faith for the African Traditional Religion (ATR). The Afrikania Mission seeks to strengthen ATR by unifying diverse traditional groups. It even introduced practices akin to Christianity, such as worshipping on Sundays, although, each deity in the ATR context, has a special day on which it is worshipped. It also has a set of "holy books"; all this, on the surface seem more like those of Christians. Similar to the Christian's concept of monotheism, the Afrikania Mission has adopted the ancient Egyptian god Amen-Ra as a single unifying deity. The group is the force behind the "Trokosi Council", which strongly supports and defends *trokosi* practice. All said, the Afrikania Mission is the brain behind most movements advancing African traditional religions (Ibid).

Unlike its opponents, the ING and other missionary groups, the traditionalists group denies that cruelties exist in the practice of *trokosi*. It defends the religious practice as a valuable traditional cultural practice on the basis of freedom of religion. Afrikania argues that anti-*trokosi* claims are false. There are no human rights violations taking place in *trokosi* shrines and most of all, the *trokosi* system, as defined by the anti-*trokosi* movement, "does not exist; it is a fabrication of ING and other Christian groups, which are interested in cheap publicity and fraud." (Interview at Afrikania Mission, August 20, 2009).

According to Afrikania, the *trokosi* system (a) controls crime by training and teaching young women how to be good role models in their families and communities; (b) it is an honour bestowed on the girls, and should be considered as such. In the words of Osofo Ameve, the Head Priest of the Afrikania Mission, *trokosi* shrines serve many purposes for the community. They serve as (a) hospitals, (b) healing centers, (c) pharmacies, (d) courts of last resort and justice, (e) places of worship and devotion, (f) sanctuaries for refugees, (g) schools, (h) conservatories of culture morality, and (i) lodges of esoteric knowledge (Ibid).

Evidently, the two camps involved in the *trokosi* debate approach the issue from totally different perspectives. For the International Need Ghana, the practice

⁵ Wife of the Gods, "Grace escapes from Slavery in Ghana. Now Canada Says She Must Go Back. Her Baptist Friends in Erie Disagree" Link & Visitor (September, 2009) pg. 2. Online: <http://www.baptistwomen.com/link&visitorsample.html>

⁶See *Dictionary of Trokosi*, Online: http://www.geocities.com/yaakikesa/Dictionary_of_Trokosi_Terms_1

is inhumane and an affront to fundamental human rights and should be abolished while the Afrikania Mission insists that the practice is a moral training school for women and girls and should be maintained.

On the other hand, the anti-*trokosi* movement, a number of non-governmental organizations, including the International Needs Ghana (ING), fiercely campaign for the obliteration of the practice in Ghana. The ING is the leading campaigner against the *trokosi* system and through its indefatigable lobbying effort Ghana amended its Criminal Code in 1998 to criminalize all 'customary or ritual servitude'. This however, did not put an end to the *trokosi* controversy or practice

The ING was established in 1984 as a Ghanaian branch of a global Christian human rights organization to defend and promote human rights in Ghana. It is being headed by Rev. Walter Pimpong. The organization is funded by donors from abroad and local sympathizers. For example, in June, 2001, ING received \$50, 000 US from the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). The ING is run by an Executive Board made up of nine members; it is active in all the regions in Ghana, but especially in the Volta, the Greater Accra, the Central and the Northern regions.

The ING's major activities consist of liberating *trokosis* from shrines, running economic recovery projects for their reintegration into society, and carrying out or commissioning research. In order words, the ING provides human rights advocacy, education, liberation and rehabilitation for victims of *trokosi*. The premise of the organization's campaign is that "trokosi practice is slavery, it is obnoxious, it is inhumane, it contravenes human rights laws, and must be stopped" (Ibid).

The International Needs Ghana lists some of the human right abuses in the *trokosi* system as follows: (a) servitude ranging from three to lifelong, (b) physical abuse, sexual abuse, and (c) emotional abuse by fetish priests. Others on the list were (d) long working hours in unsuitable conditions, (e) denial of appropriate food, (f) denial of education, and (g) denial of medical care.

According to the ING, the organization has been able to liberate about 3500 *trokosis*, out of an estimated total number of 5000 from shrines in the Tongu, Akatsi and Ketu districts in the Volta region.(Ghana 2008). Like all the others in the liberation movement (such as Every Child Ministry), the ING strongly believes that education is the key to the total eradication of *trokosi* and other outmoded practices in Ghana. Consequently, the ING is in collaboration with a host other organizations that are vigorously cam-

paingning, raising funds, commissioning research and educating liberated *trokosis* (Interview August 20, 2009).

The ING and its partners do not ascribe to relying solely on legal means to stop the *trokosi* practice, however. The abolitionists believe that there is a high likelihood that if legal means are resorted to without proper education on the harmful effect of the practice on its victims, the practice might move underground. This is because, "[e]nding a custom that is embedded in superstition is not simple. Legislation cannot drive away fear. But it can push illegal practices underground" (Ibid). The above sentiment was underscored by Mr. Wisdom Mensah, the ING project coordinator in an interview to the *African Recovery* in October, 2000. He noted that "ending a behavior that is embedded in tradition is not simple. Culture practices 'die hard'" (Ibid). Mensah lamented that "the ING held a seminar for police officers in the Volta region; [a] majority of participants were not familiar with *trokosi* and were not aware of the law against it"(Ibid). The ING's focus therefore, he declared, "is to sensitize people about *trokosi*, aiming at its gradual elimination. Legislation alone cannot do that" (Ibid). Only "criminalizing the practice without understanding why the practice continues to exist" he argued, may lead to the practice being perpetuated "in another form or underground" (Ibid).

Apparently, traditional authorities feel the same way; the Chief of Mepe Traditional Area, Fiaga Togbe Kwao II, agreed with ING's position. In his address at a graduating ceremony for 128 liberated and ING vocationally-trained *trokosis* on November 10, 2001 at Adidome, the Chief bemoaned that "changing centuries old custom and practice is not easy, [and] urged the crowd to make efforts to raise the status of women throughout Ghanaian society (N. Ben-Ari 2001).

To this end, and as part of its education program, the ING educates priests and the *trokosi* community as a whole on the harmful effects of the practice on its victims. Pursuant to educating *trokosi* stakeholders, ING and its partners advocate alternative remedies, such as acceptance of material things like alcohol and money in lieu of vestal girls for restitution. Following this, a community-wide agreement is signed to free *trokosiwo* from a shrine. Next, the shrine is compensated for its future economic loses (Ibid), for giving up its workers (*trokosis*). Impressively, the alternative crime prevention modality has been very effective. Recall that the ING alone has been able to liberate and vocationally trained more than 3500 *trokosis* to date.

Systematically, ING carries out its liberation efforts on a shrine-to-shrine basis. This is deliberate, given that each shrine has its customs and policies on confinement. Typically, the ING would educate the *tro-*

kosi community, fetish priests, and shrine owners on the harmful emotional, psychological, and physical effects of the practice on its victims and then organize a counseling section for them.

In addition to education, dialogue, and negotiation, the ING supports each shrine with a rehabilitation package. This enables the priest and shrine owners to organize a durbar to perform the liberation exercise in the presence of a witnessing community of chiefs, elders and NGOs to publicly renounce the practice. Moreover, since *trokosiwo* are shunned in the larger community, the renunciation exercise symbolically suggests public acceptance of liberated *trokosiwo* into the larger community. At the durbar, the priests and shrine owners sign documents to absolutely discharge *trokosiwo* and their families from any further obligation or encumbrance to the shrine.

III. TROKOSI PRACTICE AS A HINDERANCE TO SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In his paper, "*Trokosi* Modernization: Rehabilitation and Integration of *Trokosi* Women and Children," (B. Puplampu 1998)⁷ based on post-liberation psychological care and counseling of about 400 ex-*trokosis*, Dr. Bill Puplampu argued that depending on the experience of the *trokosis* in the shrines at the time of their release, the ex-*trokosis*, go through levels of traumatic experiences. He classified them psychologically characterized as follows: (a) a rationalization of the experience, leading to resignation to fate; (b) extreme concern for economic sustenance; (c) inappropriate understanding of mother and child relations; (d) dereference to male authority; (e) lack of internal sense security; (f) fear – both economic and spiritual; (g) a yearning in some cases for alternative spiritual experiences; and (h) repressed anger directed at the system for taking away their youth. Others are, (i) pains at the lack of understanding or explanations as to why they had to serve in the shrine; (j) lack of a sense of own identity manifested by many of them wanting to change their names; (k) dependency syndrome; (l) the older ones tend toward excessive use of hard liquor' and (m) emotional dependency, typified by crying for no apparent reason (Ibid.). These factors, of course, work against the development of *trokosi* women and their children; they deny them the enjoyment of their rights and freedoms as human beings. They live in constant fear, both psychologically and physically. The result of this is that their potential contributions to the socio-economic devel-

opment of Ghana suffer tremendously, if not nonexistent.

The case of Juliana succinctly illustrates the fear factor, for example, beyond the boundaries of *trokosi* shrines. Juliana Dogbadzi was a victim of the *trokosi* (fetish slavery) in Ghana for almost 17 years. When she was 7 years old, her parents took her a shrine to pay penance to the gods because her grandfather had allegedly stolen two dollars. Juliana cleaned the shrine and worked in the priest's field, and received no food or medical treatment. The priest repeatedly raped her. She lived with 11 other women and child slaves in one small room and was never allowed to go to school. Juliana attempted to escape from the horrible conditions several times. On one occasion, *her parents returned her to the shrine fearing revenge by the gods* (Emphasis mine). On another occasion when the priest found her, his workers nearly beat her to death. When she was 23, Juliana finally escaped and made it to the office of ING which helped her learn skills and rebuild her life.⁸

Julie's escape and she being taken back to the shrine is not unexpected since the *trokosi* practice thrives on fears and intimidation. Some ex-*trokosis* are afraid to even talk about the deity because of fear of being struck down by "*xebieso*" the twin god of thunder and lightning. "You either have to be knocked down by the thunder god..." (J. Martey 2009). These were the words of Osofo Ahadzi of the Afrikania Mission, concerning punishment for disobedience to *troxovi* gods. The *trokosi* initiation demands that the initiates and the family take an oath of secrecy,⁹ involving the wrath of the twin-god of thunder and lightning. Some people involved in the practice are always too afraid for their lives to act contrary to the wills of the gods and the priests.

⁷ See Bill Puplampu, "*Trokosi* Modernization: Rehabilitation and Integration of *Trokosi* Women and Children" in International Needs Ghana, *Reports of the Second National Workshop on the Trokosi System in Ghana* (Accra: International Needs Ghana, 1998) pp. 81- 86.

Dr. Bill Puplampu is a psychologist who provided counselling and rehabilitation services for liberated *trokosis*.

⁸ Frontline Profile – "Juliana Dogbadzi." Biography. "Rather than building a life without looking back, Juliana has chosen to continue to work to liberate other women and children from the *trokosi* practice. In May 2000, Juliana Dogbadzi founded Survivors For Change (SfC), a grassroots organization comprised of women and girls who have survived human rights violations under *Trokosi* and who have come together to fight the practices enslavement, bondage, and discrimination that oppresses them. During the first two years, SfC worked as an independent affiliate of International Needs Ghana mostly on public awareness raising and education in communities, with traditional leaders, young girls and their families about the harmful consequences of *Trokosi*. Acknowledging that a lack of information about the practice was no longer their biggest obstacle, the group shifted its focus to re-establish the lives of former *Trokosi* slaves and empower them through social-economic self help projects. Survival for Change now operates a small grassroots project in a village in Ghana's Volta region." Online:

<http://www.forefrontleaders.org/paetners/profile.php?RecordID=1>.

⁹ Dovlo, Elom and A.K Adzoyi, "Report on *Trokosi* Institution" *Report Commissioned by International Needs for Department for Studies of Religions, University of Ghana, Legon*, (Accra: University of Ghana Press, 1995

The next impeding factor to a *trokosi's* enjoyment of freedom and to her self dignity and fulfillment is the stigma attached to being a *trokosi*. Generally, people avoid *trokosiwo*. They refuse to associate with them, even after they are discharged from the shrines. "After serving several years at the shrine, a *trokosi* may be released from servitude if her family pays for a special ceremony, but she will retain a relationship with the shrine and continue to perform certain rituals there. Released *trokosi* are allowed to marry but are often unable to find a husband" (Yakin Erturk 2008). And "If a man sleeps with a *trokosi*, his family is believed to have incurred the wrath of the gods, therefore, must also offer as virgin daughter to the shrine" (Ibid). All these factors work against the self esteem, dignity and development of the *trokosi* and by extension the socio-economic health of the nation.

IV. REHABILITATING TROKOSIS FOR SELF AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

To fix the psychological "black hole" associated with the *trokosi* system and to make the liberated women economically productive, the International Needs Ghana embarks on "*trokosi* rehabilitation program." The objectives of the program are four fold:

- (a) to begin a process of repairing any psychological damage caused to the liberated *trokosis*;
- (b) to begin a process of reorienting the victims of the *trokosi* practice's personal construct about themselves, society and various aspects of life such as marriage and work;
- (c) to identify and appropriately place liberated women and children from *trokosi* shrine into formal education, vocational training and/or to help them to begin viable economic activities; and,
- (d) to assist *ex-trokosis* to successfully integrate into society.

A program director of the rehabilitation program explained to me that the process involves a variety of activities. He mentioned as examples, (a) different forms of advocacy and education; (b) negotiation for release; and (c) post-release rehabilitation, which are carried out in different stages.

The first stage is the Need Assessment phase. Here, soon-to-be-released women and children are interviewed and counselled so as to ascertain their social and emotional state. Second is the Post-Release Counseling phase. At this stage, an individual rehabilitation plan is drawn for a liberated *trokosi*. The third phase is the Follow-Up stage. The first in line at the Follow-Up stage is education. A *trokosi's* education program is fashioned according to the information gathered by ING at the counseling stage. Consequently, a liberated *trokosi* gets to take up formal

education or a vocational training such as hairdressing or dressmaking. *Ex-trokosis* may choose to get basic education in their communities, or in the nearest ones. For vocational training, the liberated women and children, may choose to be placed in the International Needs Ghana's Vocational Centre (INVTC)¹⁰ located in Adidome in the Volta region. The next and final phases are Resettlement and Evaluation. For resettlement, ING assists *ex-trokosis* with home or job arrangements (Interview, August 20, 2008),¹¹ and for evaluation, the organization collects feedback on its work and then issue reports to that effect.¹²

¹⁰ This Center started in the late 1980s and has a capacity of 150 students. The Centre offers two types of training. One is training that targets younger women with basic education, and the other targets older women without basic education. The ING Centre offers a regular program which is two years in duration, and a modular program which takes three months to complete. The regular program trains students in dressmaking, hairdressing and lessons in Ewe (local language) and English, once a week. In the modular programme, students are trained in bread making, beads making, and local soap making. They also learn how to make "batik", a local clothing material and also take lessons in Ewe and English, once a week. The INVTC has facilities in place to cater for the children of *ex-trokosis* who are enrolled in its program. After graduation, ING offers post-training rehabilitation support to graduates to enable them establish workshops for their vocations, by way of "start-up-kits" for their businesses.

¹¹ Interview with the Head of Programme and Research International Needs Ghana, August 20, 2009. See also, Crownwell Awadey, "Physical and psychological adjustment of liberated *Trokosi/Woryokwe* in Ghana," 2001.

¹² In 2001, ING interviewed community members, *ex-trokosis*, shrine priests, and shrine owners and issued a report. The report dealt with the emotional and psychological counselling, rehabilitation of liberated *trokosis* and their children and how they have enhanced their status and well being. According to the report, all *ex-trokosis* were engaged in economic activities and were well integrated into their communities. And that community members, shrine priests and owners were generally ready to accept the resulting changes in their political, social and economic lives. The report acknowledged the liberation exercise as generally positive but quickly pointed out that life after liberation for the *trokosi* women and children was not without problems. It specifically stated that post-traumatic stress symptoms were still prevalent among *ex-trokosis*. See, Awadey, supra, note 56. Also, ING held four workshops in four different areas in Ghana in 2008, to inform and educate key government officials, agencies, traditional authorities, opinion leaders, priests and owners of *trokosi* shrines. At the workshops, participants made suggestions, recommendations and commented on how to come to terms with the practice. Participants felt strongly that education on the practice should be intensified. Others suggested that those involved in the *trokosi* practice should be made to convert to Christianity. Other comments were that because of the psychological and emotional effects on the victims of *trokosi*, they (victim) should be handled cautiously. *Foot Note Continue from previous page:*

V. CONCLUSION

The *trokosi* debate is a site for convergence of religious, traditional and cultural norms as well as individual rights. It is a contested terrain of universal and traditional values; an intersection of religious, cultural and human rights normative values or concepts - a nexus of universal rights and cultural relativism.

This paper about the interaction of traditions/ customs, modernity and post-modernity is timely and only made possible by the iniquitousness of the media in Ghana since the beginning of the 1990s. Because of this, researchers are able to critically examine and analyze how the various factors at play arrange and align themselves, as it is the case, to impede socio-economic development in Ghana. In a way, the interrogation of the *trokosi* ritual enables us to appreciate or get a clearer perspective on why the robust extant laws such as the International Human Rights Conventions which Ghana adopted to protect women and children/girl-child, the constitutional guarantees of fundamental human right and freedoms, neither did the *Children's Rights Act*, the *Family Law Act*, nor the *Educational and Economic Rights* protect *trokosis*. This was mainly due to the fact that, with the exception of *trokosi* practitioners, there was a general lack of knowledge of the existence of the practice, at both individual and governmental levels. In the light of this, the economics of Ghana could not benefit from the harnessing and development of its human resources base which she needs for socio-economic advancement. Today, however, discovery of the existence of the practice and its publicity has brought about amendment to the Ghanaian criminal code, which prohibits the practice of *trokosi*. Although, to date, no one has been prosecuted for practicing *trokosi*, the fact remains that the time has come and there is a specific law in place to curtail the oppressiveness of the practice, to restore democratic as well as fundamental human rights to women and children in Ghana. Indeed, more than ever, now is the time for the relentless implementation and enforcement of the laws that protect the rights of Ghanaian women and children from the claws of cruel and undignified religious practices, which also work against effective human resources as development, well as socio-economic improvement in Ghana.

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pants believed that the practice would gradually disappear without enforcing the "trokosi law" of 1998, if similar workshops were organized to educate opinion leaders. Participants also noted that efforts had to be intensified to minimize the fear of trokosi among the people in order to facilitate their liberation and integration into their communities. See Dissemination workshop on Trokosi practice in Ghana, (October 15, 2008).

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