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Chapter 5

The *Trokosi* System in Ghana: Discrimination Against Women and Children

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes and explains the *trokosi* system, which according to its advocates and practitioners, is an African traditional religion. It also discusses how the system violates women's human rights, in contravention of Ghana's 1992 Republican Constitution as well as other international conventions, and it offers suggestions about how the system may be handled.

The *trokosi* system is based on traditional religious beliefs. It is discriminatory against women and children (Gadzekpo, 1993), and its operations violate fundamental human rights (UN, 1995). The crux of the matter is that the victims are women and children, the most vulnerable members of society. Those affected, that is, the young girls who are called *trokosis*, as well as the general public, have condemned it. However, the perpetrators and the intellectual protagonists of the practice are pleading for modification and tolerance (Dartey-Kumodzi, 1995). Nevertheless, the system is increasingly being condemned by all well-meaning Ghanaians. Women's organizations such as the National Council on Women and Development (NCWD) and the Federation of International Women Lawyers (FIDA) have proposed legislation to outlaw the system completely. Since traditions die hard, however, the process of abolishing the system and rehabilitating the victims has been slow.

THE TROKOSI: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Trokosi, which means "slaves of the gods," is an aspect of African traditional religion, a cultural practice, and a science that evolved first

among the ancestors of the Ewe of North and South Tongu Districts, and then the Akatsi and Anlo Districts of Southeastern Ghana. *Trokosi* exists not only in Ghana, but also in Benin, Togo, and parts of Yorubaland in Nigeria. However, the main attributes of the *trokosi* system are the same and are intertwined. As a religion, it is practiced in shrines and is embodied in a deity or god called *tro* or *troxovi*. To the Ewe, the god *troxovi* is the god of transformation. The process of transformation usually connotes that which is good for the people. The people believe that the deity, *troxovi*, is one of the messengers of the Creator, God or *mawu*. In relation to this god, the people have developed an elaborate system of rituals and worship. As a traditional deity, it is employed to protect the people, give children to barren women, conjure blessings for the community, and serve as a source of instant justice. As an insider puts it: "Until the Police Force was introduced, fetish was the policeman, the judge and the god of goodness. The system is yet to change sufficiently to remove the need for the intervention of gods (Ahiabile, 1995: 20).

The *troxovi* apparently ensures the acquisition and protection of people's properties. Crimes of all kinds are not only prevented, but the gods punish those who indulge in them. The presumed sum total of its benefits can be seen in the following: teenage pregnancy is rare, reproductive health is ensured, immorality is checked, and crime is kept under control (Ahiabile, 1995). To the practitioners of this religion, the deity is a source of vitality and strength (Dartey-Kumodzi, 1995).

The following categories of persons can be identified at each shrine:

1. Those who have been spiritually called and installed, through elaborate traditional rituals, as priests or *tronua*, possess spiritual powers that they get from the *troxovi*. These powerful people actually control the system. The respect accorded them is comparable to that shown to the traditional rulers.
2. The *dorfleviwo* are individuals, both males and females, who are born into this world through the divine intervention of the *troxovi*. These privileged people may be described as the sons and daughters of the *troxovi*.
3. The *troviwo* are the biological children of the priests, the *tronua*. These offspring may be described as the "princes" and "princesses" of the shrines. They are children from properly married traditional wives. Such children are carefully looked after by their fathers, the *tronua*, and often receive some formal education.
4. The last group, known as the *trokosi*, are those vestal virgins who are sent into servitude at the shrines of the *troxovi* because of crimes allegedly committed by their senior or elder relatives such as mothers, fathers, uncles, and grandparents. These young girls enter the shrines at a tender age, between 6 and 8 years of age. The children that the *trokosis* bring forth through the relationship between them and the *tronua* are in the same underprivileged social position as their mothers, since the priests do not look after them.

There are claims that the children of the *trokosis* are special people who are destined to redeem humankind from various crimes. Nevertheless, experience has shown that so far the typical offspring of the *trokosis* have not made any significant mark even in the simple societies where the system operates. It is doubtful whether *trokosi* children born and raised under such horrible circumstances can contribute toward changing the society for the better.

The Ewe who cherish the *trokosi* system have long regarded it as their traditional religion that they have practiced for several centuries. As a seemingly preliterate society, they are unable to give the date of the origin of the religion. However, when non-Ewe ethnic groups and especially some Christian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) learned of this practice between 1993 and 1994, people started to speak and write about it. Criticism of the system came to a head when two NGOs, International Needs and Green Earth Organization, organized a National Workshop on the *trokosi* in September 1994. Although the majority of the speakers spoke against it (Short, 1995; Boaten, 1995; Mama Asigbe, 1995), a few intellectuals tried to defend the system (Dartey-Kumodzi, 1995; Ahiabile, 1995; Dzirasa, 1997).

BECOMING A TROKOSI

As already noted, *trokosi* is basically a matter of belief, based on the notion that things normally do not happen without a cause. This concept presupposes that the system also deals with a search for truth and knowledge, an intellectual basis of the system. The *trokosi* system is mainly recognized as an agency for punishing wrongdoers (Glover, 1993). The vestal virgins who are initiated as *trokosis* in the various shrines become *trokosis* because, as already noted, someone in their families had confessed to committing crimes that demanded reparations. It is not easy to know all the shrines since they are scattered throughout rural communities. However, the International Needs (NGO) has identified about 160 such shrines in 7 out of the 16 districts of the Volta Region, Ghana.

The offenses punishable by payment with a *trokosi* include murder, stealing, adultery, and having sexual intercourse with a *trokosi*. Indeed, the meaning of the word *trokosi* clearly shows the slave nature of the system. Etymologically, the term *tro* means gods and *kosi* means a slave girl. A *trokosi*, therefore, is a slave girl to the gods (Ahiabile, 1995).

Whenever any of the above-mentioned crimes is committed, the aggrieved party approaches a priest, a *tronua*, to search for the offender/wrongdoer. The search is done spiritually through invocation of the gods. The aggrieved person demands of the priest that his deity punish the offender's family with mysterious deaths. The aggrieved person also

promises the deity that should it succeed in identifying the offender, the offender should be made to pay reparations by presenting a vestal virgin to the shrine as a *trokosi*.

The deity, through its spiritual powers, will then send pestilence to the offending family, resulting in mysterious deaths. As custom demands, the affected family will also conduct a search in order to find out the cause of the family tragedy. This is what is known in the Ewe tradition as "search for knowledge" (Dartey-Kumodzi, 1995). The result of this spiritual search eventually forces the offending family to consult the shrine whose deity has been involved and then acknowledge the offense. The admission of guilt empowers the priest to inform the offending family of the necessary rituals for reparations. The most significant of the items demanded is a virgin, normally a 6- to 8-year-old girl, to serve as a slave in the shrine. The period of servitude for the vestal virgin varies from shrine to shrine and can be from three years until death. What this means is that whenever a *trokosi* dies the offending family is expected to replace her with another vestal virgin. Refusal to replace a deceased *trokosi* is supposed to result in the reoccurrence of calamities in the family of the wrongdoer.

Once the wrongdoer is able to provide a virgin to serve on his or her behalf, such a person in his or her lifetime does not become affected by the "curse." The entire "curse" is put on the innocent little girl who is provided as a sacrificial lamb, a *trokosi* (Mama Asigbe, 1995). As is often the case, a vestal virgin may not even know the family member who might have committed the crime for which she is serving in the shrine.

The *trokosi* system demands that when a girl is sent to the shrine, she serves the priest by ministering to the needs of both the shrine and the priest's personal needs. She is forced to sweep the compound of the shrine, work on the farms belonging to the priest (without having a share of the products from the farm), and have sexual intercourse with the priest as long as she remains in the shrine. The priests start to have sexual intercourse with the girls when they become teenagers. The upbringing of children who are the offspring of these sexual relationships between the priests and the vestal virgins becomes the sole responsibility of the *trokosis*. There are thousands of such "futureless" children in the shrines. In short, these children become the properties of the *trokosis*.

The adherents of this system argue that the *trokosi* is the wife of the *tro*, and therefore her spiritual role is to intercede on behalf of her family in order to prevent further calamities from befalling its members (Dartey-Kumodzi, 1995). If this assertion were true, then the *trokosi* would be powerful spiritual entities/personalities. While it is an abomination for any individual to have sexual intercourse with a *trokosi*, the priests have unlimited license to indulge in intercourse without any inhibition (Pro-

gressive Utilization, 1994: 2-6). One priest alone was said to have fathered over 400 children in his 37 years of priesthood (Okrah, 1997).

One of the most pernicious aspects of this system is the general dehumanization of the *trokosi*. Once a woman becomes a *trokosi*, she is believed to have a mystified body. As a result of this belief, such an individual becomes a curse in the society. Even her own relatives who took her into the shrine begin to shun her and her children. Her only acceptable society is her kind in the shrines. Since this happens only to the females in these traditional societies, it clearly appears that the *trokosi* system amounts to woman abuse of the highest order (Ababio, 1995).

The defenders of the *trokosi* system claim that it punishes wrongdoers and therefore deters crime. They contend that the system is so effective that if an individual offended the gods, the spirits would take vengeance on the offender. Based on these arguments, it is clear that the system is founded on retribution and fear. It is such an entrenched belief that its true adherents do not see anything wrong with it (Adda-Dontoh, 1994).

Investigations conducted with some of the girls who braved the odds and ran away from their shrines and have since been rehabilitated reveal the untold mental and emotional agony and struggle the girls experienced during their stay in the shrines. A liberated *trokosi* confided in the writer as follows:

We were living like slaves. We were made to suffer hunger. We had no soap for our bath. We did farm work under severe pressure. In the nights the priests just ordered any one of us to sleep and have sexual intercourse with him. If you felt sick, it was the responsibility of your people to give you medication. In fact, it was terrible for a human being to live in such a condition. (Personal Communication, 1996)

Another *trokosi*, a mother of two, revealed that she spent nearly 20 years at a shrine and had two children with the priest. He refused to look after the children because he did not consider the children as his own.

The experiences narrated by the *trokosi* deserters reveal that the system has a disruptive effect on family life, which is held in high esteem in African traditional religion and custom (Opoku, 1978). Once in the shrine, a *trokosi* is cared for by her family, including food and clothing, while the priest uses her as a beast of burden during the day and as a bedmate during the night but without any social obligations. The laws of Ghana regarding neglect of spouses and children do not seem to apply to those who live in those shrines. Their families that sent them there often neglect the *trokosis* who serve long sentences in the shrines. Such treatment violates the values and norms of social and family life. Those

who serve life sentences as *trokosis* often offer a pitiable picture of abject poverty and neglect, especially when they become too old to work.

TROKOSI AS AN INSTRUMENT OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION

All the shrines have male priests and male shrine owners; no shrine in Ghana has female ownership. This gender imbalance in ownership explains why this system exists in its primordial form. The *trokosi* system is male dominated, and hence the tendency is to use vestal virgins instead of boys as reparation. Moreover, girls or women are more amenable to fear on which the system is based, for the priests are aware that the *trokosis* (female) cannot rebel. If the slaves were to be boys or men, the system would probably have collapsed or been highly modified. Therefore, the priests and shrine owners are safe with girls and women as their victims. Again, the vestal virgins are sent to the shrines while they are still very young and grow to accept their fate as natural. As young females, most of them are unable to offer any resistance, for example, by refusing to go to the shrines. The system does not take into consideration the fact that these vestal virgins will one day grow into adults and must therefore be trained properly in order to contribute to the good of the society. The Beijing Conference (UN, 1995: 17) stressed the importance of bringing girls up properly:

The girl child of today is the woman of tomorrow. The skills, ideas and energy of the girl child are vital for full attainment of the goals of equality, development and peace. For the girl child to develop her full potential she needs to be nurtured in an enabling environment, where her spiritual, intellectual and material needs for survival, protection and development are met and her equal rights safeguarded.

Besides, the vestal virgins are deceived by their parents/relatives when they are being taken to the shrines. The sorts of preparations initially mounted for them make them feel that they are some sort of brides. They are made to believe that they are "wives" or "brides" of the gods. They are given several pieces of cloth, white stools, new cooking utensils and such things as traditionally newly married women would receive. This deceit makes the innocent girls enter into this state of servitude willingly. It is when their parents in the shrines abandon them and as the days develop into weeks, weeks turn into months, months into years that they realize rather belatedly that they are in servitude.

The *trokosi* system is a source of discrimination against women because in the patrilineal society that puts much premium on the male, the female tends to be regarded as an "object" whose significance lies in the fact that "it" is able to produce other human forms. Since the family line is

maintained through the male and a woman in marriage is, more or less, seen as the property of the man in the African context, she ceases to be a member of her first paternal kinship group, so that it is always easy to sacrifice her.

Furthermore, patriarchy regards the male as central for the defense of the traditional society, so that in terms of decision making the female plays a peripheral role in the traditional setup. The low traditional position of women in Ewe society is demonstrated by the fact that only recently have they acquired traditional female leadership. In contrast, the Twi-speaking people regard females as the ancestors of the various clans and also consider the position of the female traditional leadership as enshrined in the traditional laws and usage. Therefore, since the Ewe women have no say in the traditional society, it is easy to discriminate against them because they tend to be regarded as the weaker vessel.

Young female children are the most abused in this system because they have the least power to control their own affairs. These children, both male and female, who are the products of the *trokosi* system, are denied formal education and so cannot easily appreciate what goes on in their micro-environment and in the outside world. As a result, they live in total ignorance and take whatever experiences they encounter in the shrines as normal (Short, 1995).

SOCIAL AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE TROKOSI SYSTEM

What happens in the shrines leading to the presentation of vestal virgins who become *trokosis* amounts to setting up a criminal justice system that is juxtaposed to the orthodox one (Short, 1995). When someone becomes a victim of a crime, that person consults at a shrine and promises that when the perpetrator is discovered he or she should be made to pacify the gods with a virgin.

The results of the invocations—tragic deaths and serious calamities—are subversive of the rule of law and a serious violation of human rights. This system obviously runs counter to the traditional system of law and therefore amounts to setting up a separate system of criminal justice that breeds unjustifiable suffering and often death. According to a newspaper report in *The Mirror* No. 2209 (March 27, 1997, Accra) with the title: *Trokosi She'll Be But Mum Says 'No,'* a man who had allegedly stolen a cassette tape recorder many years before was now experiencing mysterious deaths in his family. A spiritual search that he conducted revealed that he needed to pay reparation with his daughter who was in primary three. When the mother, an unbeliever in the *trokosi* powers, refused to hand her child over, she was forcibly separated from her husband. The woman's refusal was unprecedented. The following discussion shows

that the *trokosi* system as it operates today violates the human rights and freedom of both women and children that are guaranteed under the 1992 constitution of Ghana as well as other international human rights instruments.

Article 12 (2) of the 1992 constitution of Ghana guarantees the fundamental human rights and freedoms of all citizens. This provision requires that a person should not exercise his rights and freedoms in such a way as to violate or infringe on the rights of others. The *trokosi* system violates the rights of the vestal virgins. Yet, under the constitution the rights of this group are as important as those of their parents or guardians who send them to the shrines. According to Articles 16 (1) and 16 (2) of the constitution, a person shall not be held as a slave or be placed in a situation of servitude. Similarly, no person has the right to force another person to work for him or her.

In the shrines, however, the vestal virgins perform duties such as going to the farms to till the land, fetching fuel-wood, burning charcoal, sweeping the compound of the shrines, and undertaking all such duties as the priests may demand. The vestal virgins perform all these duties against their will. Thus, they are subjected to conditions tantamount to slavery, servitude, and forced labor. Article 19 (1) and (2) of the constitution seeks to prohibit all these activities which appear rather normal in the shrines. The Article states that any persons who commit a crime must be given a fair hearing in a law court (p. 17). Furthermore, such persons must be given the chance to defend themselves. Similarly, the *trokosi* system violates Article 15 of the Fourth Republican Constitution of 1992. This article seeks to ensure the dignity of all persons and prohibits any cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, such as the treatment often given to the *Trokosi* which detracts from their dignity and worth as human beings.

In addition to the above constitutional provisions, Article 4 of the African Charter of Human and People's Rights provides that every human being's life and integrity should be respected (OAU, 1996). Furthermore, the Beijing Declaration at Annex 1.9 states: "Government should ensure the full implementation of the human rights of women and of the girl child as an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedoms" (p. 4).

Among the many major adverse consequences of the *trokosi* system, the vestal virgins do not have the chance to go to school; rather, some of them are taken out of school and sent into servitude as *trokosis* (Mama Anigbe, 1995). This educational deprivation is passed on to the children they have with the priests. Whereas the priests' children from their properly married wives (*troviwo*) are sent to formal schools by their fathers (priests), the offspring of *trokosis* are not. The priests' refusal to send their *trokosi* children to school is illegal and equally violates Article 25 (1) of

the country's constitution, which provides that all citizens of Ghana should have equal access to educational opportunities and facilities. However, because of their social status, *trokosis* and their children are denied these rights.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provides for the right of the child to education. Ghana, as a member of the United Nations, is obliged to uphold this provision of the Convention. This point was further buttressed by the Beijing Conference (1995: 39), which stated: "the girl child should be properly nurtured and equipped with the necessary skills in an enabling environment to ensure the growth of her full potential as a normal human being." Unfortunately, the environment in the shrines is not conducive to the proper upbringing and training of the girl child.

In addition to equal access to educational opportunities, all children, no matter who their parents are, should have equal opportunity to medical care. Article 28 (1) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as Article 28 (4) of the Ghanaian constitution (1992), support this view. The latter stipulates that "No child shall be deprived by any other person of medical treatment, education or any other social or economic benefit by religion or other beliefs" (p. 29). Since the *trokosi* system endangers the health of the *trokosis* and denies them medical treatment, it violates the Articles just quoted.

Child sexual abuse is one of the most objectionable aspects of this system. The priests in the various shrines have unlimited sexual access to the *trokosi*. Thus, while traditionally these vestal virgins are supposed to be the wives of the *tro* and are therefore untouchable, the priests exploit them sexually and produce children who normally have no future in modern society. Some of these *trokosis* are forced to bear children at the tender age of 14 years. By the time some of the *trokosis* finish their "sentences" and are released from the shrines, they are already saddled with children whom they have no means to look after.

Traditional African society abhors the sexual abuse of children. Moreover, there are laws and usages that deal with this social misconduct (Rattray, 1929). Both Article 27 (1) of the African Charter on the Child and Article 34 (1) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child denounce sexual abuse. The UN Convention imposes a serious obligation on all states "to undertake to protect the child from all form of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse" (Ghana, 1993: 15).

Furthermore, the Beijing Declaration (1995: 96) is very explicit about women's rights in this respect. It stipulates that women should have the right to decide on matters relating to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence. It further states that there should be an equal relationship between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction. Para-

graph 17 of the same document also states that to empower women, they should have full control over all aspects of their health as well as their fertility. However, the customary or religious practices associated with the priests in the shrines are detrimental to the health and welfare of the women. It is indeed deplorable that a single priest could "own" as many as 30 "wives" in the form of the *trokosi* without having any obligation for their welfare or the well-being of the children so produced.

The *trokosi* system not only violates basic human rights, but it also dehumanizes its victims. Article 26 (2) of the Ghana constitution prohibits all customary practices that dehumanize or are injurious to the physical and/or mental well-being of Ghanaian citizens. The seriousness of the dehumanizing aspect is demonstrated when a sick *trokosi* and/or her children are thrown out of a shrine and have to fend for themselves. This is obviously contrary to the spirit of Article 41 (d) of the 1992 constitution which stipulates: "It shall be the duty of every citizen to respect the rights, freedoms and legitimate interests of others and generally to refrain from doing acts detrimental to the welfare of other persons" (p. 41).

CONCLUSION

By and large, the *trokosi* have eluded researchers. The paucity of literature on this subject is indeed notable. Perhaps the first intellectual attempt to expose this abhorrent practice was a B.A. dissertation presented to the Department of Study of Religions at the University of Ghana, Legon (Glover, 1993). The present work is an attempt to shed more light on the *trokosi* phenomenon.

The chapter has examined the characteristics, origins, dynamics, and consequences of the *trokosi* system which can be supported neither morally nor legally. It has exposed a system that violates relevant international conventions as well as the 1992 constitution of Ghana with regard to women and children's rights (Short, 1995). The system is discriminatory and dangerous to women and children. The supporters of the *trokosi* system claim that without it the Ewe communities would have been destroyed by vice. The lameness of this argument is that not all Ewes practice this type of religion. Furthermore, the practice has not spread beyond its traditional borders, thus making it culture-specific. One curious aspect of the *trokosi* phenomenon is that, despite its apparent antiquity, only recently has it come to the attention of the Ghanaian society at large. Over the years both the practitioners and the victims of the system have remained silent on its operations.

It is incongruous that a country such as Ghana that boasts the first female high court judge in the Commonwealth would tolerate a practice like the *trokosi*. Chiefs, opinion leaders, and scholars from those areas remained silent over the practice until its exposure in 1994 by NGOs.

Since then, the public outcry against it has become loud and clear. Church groups, the Federation of International Women Lawyers (FIDA), the Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHIRAJ), Queenmothers Associations, the 31st December Women's Movement, and the National Council on Women and Development (NCWD) have all intensified their campaign for its abolition. Some of the organizations have set up vocational institutions to enable the liberated *trokosis* to acquire some vocational skills so as to earn a decent living.

Three schools of thought have emerged regarding the *trokosi* system. The first, supported by hard-liners, notably the fetish priests, the shrine owners, and regrettably some intellectuals, contends that the system is for the good of the society and should be maintained without modification. According to some believers, the shrines also perform other functions such as giving spiritual protection to people, bestowing prosperity on others, and ensuring the fruitfulness of barren couples. These functions by the *trokosi* are considered essential in the lives of the believers, who do not think that such spiritual prowess contravenes any laws of the land. Accordingly, they do not want the system to be abolished. The second school is made up of opinion leaders, shrine owners, and some fetish priests as well as some adherents who advocate modification of the system, for example, substituting sheep, goats, or cows for vestal virgins. This group of people argues that completely abolishing the system will create a vacuum in terms of dealing with offenders. The third group is made up of the majority of Ghanaians, who consider the system abominable and reprehensible, and therefore feel that it should be abolished without reservation. The abolitionists urge that the enslaved girls be liberated, the shrines destroyed, and the recalcitrant owners and priests prosecuted in the law courts.

Recently, a bill has been tabled before the Ghanaian parliament seeking to abolish the *trokosi* system (Short, 1995). A parliamentarian from one of the districts in which the system is practiced has expressed opposition to the abolition of the system, saying that "Any resort to punishment through legislation as a means of eliminating the practice may itself create certain undesirable social upheavals" (Dzirasa, 1997: 8). He did not specify the so-called social upheavals. As a possible solution to the problem created by the *trokosi*, he suggested that the practitioners or the owners of the shrines be compensated with money, cows, sheep, or other "incentive packages."

In light of this discussion, the system should be outlawed through legislation. Both the owners and the victims should be educated to appreciate the deleterious and obsolete nature of the system. The liberated *trokosis* should be rehabilitated through vocational training, as is currently being undertaken by the International Needs (NGO). Through legislation, the *trokosi* perpetrators should be given a time frame within

which to dismantle the system. After the deadline, "social upheavals" or not, the laws of the country should be allowed to take their course. An evil system such as *trokosi* should not be allowed to operate in the twenty-first century.

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