

CHAPTER 3

THE TROKOSI SYSTEM

INTRODUCTION

WHY SHOULD THE “FATHERS EAT sour grapes and the children’s teeth be set on edge?” (Ezekiel 18:2; Jeremiah 31:29). Apparently in the southeastern part of Ghana where the Trokosi system is practiced, this is a worthwhile question to ask. It is also the case that the biblical proverb partially quoted above exemplifies exactly what happened in the Trokosi practice.

DEFINITION/MEANING

Trokosi is a combination of two Ewe words “tro” and “kosi.” The word “tro” means god or deity and “kosi” means slave. Trokosi therefore means “slave of deity.” Trokosi is a traditional system whereby, virgin girls as young as six years of age are sent into Troxovi shrines as reparation for wrongs purported to be committed by a family member. It is worth noting that although the Ewes have several deities that they worship, it is only Troxovi shrines (i.e., deities that receive children) that practice

the Trokosi system. The Trokosi system is founded on the belief in the supernatural power of the Troxovi (the gods) to search for wrongdoers and punish them. When an aggrieved person goes to the Troxovi shrine or mentions the name of a Troxovi to place a curse on a wrongdoer, it is believed that the Troxovi supernaturally searches for the wrongdoer and punishes the person by causing calamities and mysterious deaths in the wrongdoers' family. These calamities are believed to take several forms, such as strange sicknesses, incurable diseases, and unexplained occurrences, including deaths of family members. This confirms the belief in the collective responsibility of the whole clan for crimes committed by any one member (Abotchie, 1997a).

POSSIBLE ORIGINS

A story narrated by Togbui Addo IV of Klikor in the Volta Region of Ghana tells about the possible origins of the Trokosi system. He narrated a mysterious event that happened in Benin resulting in a young virgin being brought to one of the shrines in Klikor. He said one day a household in Benin woke up to realize that everyone in the house had smoke oozing from the top of their heads. The family called on an elder who was also a Catholic priest to offer prayers. However, the strange phenomenon continued regardless of the prayers of the priest. The family then consulted a diviner who told them that someone in the family committed a crime and was cursed at a Troxovi shrine in Klikor. In order to avert the mysterious event, a young virgin girl had to be sent to the Klikor shrine. Togbui Addo went on to say that after the girl was brought and rituals performed at the Klikor shrine, the strange happenings ceased. Such occurrences give credence to the belief in the potency of virgins atoning for calamities.

The origins of the Trokosi system stretch back to antiquity and cannot be completely unraveled as one is dependent on oral tradition

with its numerous handicaps. Some date the practice to the 17th century (Gadzekpo, 1993). Traditionally, it is claimed that Troxovi were brought from the original home of the Tongu people. The origins of the people of Tongu are traced to some parts of present day Nigeria. Oral tradition holds that it was the supernatural powers of these gods that guided them as they migrated to their present home (Dovlo & Adzoyi, 1995).

With regards to the geographic spread and prevalence of the practice of the Trokosi in Ghana, it is found among the Ewe and Dangme-speaking peoples of the southeastern coast of the country. On a wider scale, the practice is prevalent among the Ewe and Fon-speaking peoples along the west coast of Africa in Togo and Benin (Dovlo & Adzoyi, 1995). It is worthy of note that Dangme-speaking peoples call the practice Woryokwe, which also means slaves of deity. Thus, there is a consistency in the meaning of the word irrespective of which ethnic group practices it.

Sowah (1993), however, is of the opinion that the origins of some of the deities may not be that remote and ancient. He opines that Avakpe (the Troxovi of Avakpedome) may be associated with a hillock near the town of Avakpedome in the North Tongu District where the Avakpe shrine is located. The hillock is also known as Avakpe. Etymologically, the word Avakpe means "War" (Ava) "rock" (Kpe) (p. 82).

Some of the shrines in Ghana, such as Koklofu and Nyigbla, trace their origins to present-day Benin as the source of these shrines. Not only is the historical connection based on oral tradition, but there are also links existing currently between the people who own these deities and their Benin homes. This view is supported by the history of the Ewes, who were said to have migrated from Notsie in Dahomey, during the tyrannical rule of King Agorkorli of Notsie, to their present abode.

From interviews conducted by the authors, there is unanimity among Trokosi priests that Trokosi deities were originally war gods who helped

the Ewe and Dangme-speaking people win wars during their migration in ancient times. Dovlo and Adzoyi (1995) confirm this view, stating:

There is strong evidence that the Troxovi originally served as war gods. They are linked with the hazardous confrontations of migration and pre-colonial skirmishes with neighbors after settlement in their present homes. These gods are credited with the success of the Tongu in war. (p. 4)

However, Trokosi deities were used as policing agents during peacetimes to punish and deter wrongdoers.

ORGANIZATION

A typical Trokosi shrine consists of a number of huts clustered together and fenced around with palm branches. One of the huts houses the deity and ritual regalia. The priest occupies one of the huts and the Trokosi women and children live in the rest of the huts. A critical examination of the Trokosi system indicates that it hinges on the social organizational structure of the Ewes through clan organization as explained earlier. Specifically, a clan or family normally owns Troxovi shrines. The clan therefore installs priests to administer Trokosi shrines. Like any hierarchical command organizational structure, the clan or family elders, who are mostly males, serve as board of directors of the shrine. The priest administers the day-to-day affairs of the shrine and performs the rituals. An appointed female, called "zeklor" (one who washes the pots), assists the priest. The duty of the zeklor includes helping new Trokosi girls undergo rituals and adjust to shrine life. There is also a male assistant to the priest called the "ngorgbea" (front man). The main duty of the ngorgbea is to lead in ritual performance and to act as

spokesperson
a linguist for the shrine. In shrines where the priest has died, the zeklor and ngorgbea act until the installation of a new priest.

FEATURES/CHARACTERISTICS

One of the key features of the Trokosi system is that wrongdoers receive their punishment indirectly through their relatives. It is believed that wrongdoers are the last to be punished after all family members have been exterminated by the Troxovi when steps are not taken to seek atonement at the Troxovi shrine. This feature of the Trokosi system reinforces the belief among the Ewe in corporate punishment. The belief is reinforced by sayings such as "deku deka gblea bubu awo" (one bad nut spoils the rest). This traditional belief in corporate punishment also resonates with Mosaic teachings of Yahweh visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children even unto the third and fourth generation (Deuteronomy, 5:9; Exodus, 20:5; Exodus 34:7; Numbers 14:18).

The offenses for which virgin girls are incarcerated in Troxovi shrines range from very trivial issues, such as using abusive language or stealing a tuber of cassava, to more grievous matters such as murder. In fact, it does not matter what type of wrong one commits. The issue rests more on the aggrieved person seeking vengeance by calling on a Troxovi name to pronounce a curse on the wrongdoer. When committed to the shrine, the Trokosi girl serves arbitrary sentences, ranging from a minimum of three years to lifelong servitude. It is also our observation that it is uncommon to find a Trokosi girl who has served a short period of time in the shrine and then been released.

In its most common and humiliating form, a virgin who is yet to experience menarche is given to a deity to atone for the sin or offense committed by a relative. She thus becomes a slave of the deity, although euphemistically she is called the deity's wife. She remains in the shrine serving the priest and other functionaries of the deity for a period ranging

from a few years to life and is often used as the sexual partner of the priest (Nukunya & Kwafo, 1999b).

As slaves, the Trokosi women and their children are reduced to beasts of burden by becoming tillers of the ground, hewers of wood, and drawers of water. Another dehumanizing aspect of the practice is that the reparation is perpetual. What that means is that, whenever a woman sent into servitude dies, she is replaced by another young virgin. This aspect of the practice ensures continuity of the Trokosi system and provides a perpetual source of young girls to populate the shrines.

Children of Trokosi slaves suffer the same fate as their Trokosi mothers. Shrine priests neglect their children born with Trokosi slaves and the children are denied their basic rights and freedoms. Paramount among the rights is the denial of the right to education. Although basic education is free and compulsory in Ghana, Trokosi children are denied access to education because by a twist of fate, they happen to be born to Trokosi mothers and live in Trokosi shrines. Trokosi children are denied paternal care and grow up lacking a sense of identity and security.

The following two narratives typify the lives of ritual slaves. The first is the story of Dora Galley, a 22 year-old woman, who resided at Ative Minawoekope with her parents and six siblings. She was incarcerated for seven years at a shrine.

REASON FOR INCARCERATION

The reason for being a Trokosi is that my uncle had a sexual affair with a Trokosi. This resulted in deaths in my family. I was sent to the shrine to atone for the offense of my uncle. As a Trokosi, I was forced to have sex with the priest as one of the rituals in the shrine. My luck was that I did not get pregnant before we were liberated three and a half years ago.

I was also compelled to work on the farm of the priest from morning till evening without any payment or food from the priest. I had to cut down trees and uproot tree stumps to burn into charcoal to sell and make some money to take care of myself. As a Trokosi I did not have any right to take any crops from the farm unless the priest allowed me to. As a result of the meanness of the priest, I faced a lot of deprivation and hunger for most of the time. Occasionally my parents sent me some food stuffs but that was kept in the priest's room and I had to request it anytime I needed some.

I missed my parents and siblings, also my friends, very much when I was in the shrine. I could not leave the shrine to visit them because of the fear that a relative would die if I left the shrine. My relatives stopped visiting me in the shrine because they were worried about my constant crying anytime they visited me in the shrine. They were afraid that I would follow them home.

My parents were of great help to me initially, but they abandoned me. Some other Trokosi women helped me. I believed in the gods of the shrine since that was what I was introduced to. However, with the passage of time and the hardships I went through in the shrine, I started praying to the almighty God, for deliverance. As I prayed I became hopeful that something would happen one day for me to be free, and it did happen. I had the hope that something would happen.

For me International Needs Ghana is an organization concerned with fighting for the freedom of Trokosi girls and seeking to relieve them and other people from their pains. If it were not for the work of International Needs, I would have still been in bondage. I want to thank them very much for liberating us and giving us a vocation. Because of International Needs, I can now look forward to a fulfilling future.

I look forward to be equipped with tools to work with. I also wish that the fight to liberate the rest of those who are still in servitude in the

Trokosi shrines would go on. My wish is that, I will succeed in my chosen vocation and live an independent life. I was at the International Needs Vocational Training Center for three years and studied hairdressing after my liberation and rehabilitation where I learnt hairdressing.

After her liberation and rehabilitation, Dora had this to say:

I personally dislike the Trokosi practice. I think that it is an affront to the dignity of women and is a practice that takes advantage of the meekness of women. How can someone else commit a crime and a young innocent girl goes to suffer in the shrine?

In other words why have the fathers eaten sour grapes and set the children's teeth on edge? It was an uncle of hers who had sex with a Trokosi. Why should Dora be made to pay for it when she had no part in the entire episode?

The second narrative is for Patience Akpoe, a 31-year-old female who hails from Mafi Kpogadzi. Patience spent 12 years at the shrine. Now after her liberation, she lives with her father Asidigbe Adzamade, and her mother, Asiehi Adzamade, at Yeji, a fishing town along the Volta River.

REASON FOR INCARCERATION

The reason for Patience's incarceration was that her uncle had sex with a Trokosi. Trokosis are supposed to be wives of the gods, and any man who has sex with them commits an offense against the gods and is punished. Her uncle drowned mysteriously and the family consulted soothsayers who told them to atone at the shrine for the offense. Here are the words of Patience telling about her ordeal, liberation, rehabilitation, future aspirations, and denouncement of the Trokosi system:

My experience in the shrine was a pathetic one in that I was reduced to a farm laborer and did other menial work. My family promised to send me food while I was in the shrine but abandoned me. To take care of myself I had to cut down trees to burn charcoal to sell before I could buy food to eat. My difficulties in the shrine included getting food to eat regularly, clothing, working on the farm for long hours, far beyond reasonable time, and being used as beast of burden to carry farm produce and to fetch water from the river for the priest.

I felt very bitter towards the priest - Torgbe Korleshie - when he impregnated me at the age of 16. The priest did not allow me to visit the clinic for prenatal care or go to the hospital. Throughout the pregnancy, I had to fend for myself.

I missed my family since I was only 10 years of age when I was sent there, even though they abandoned me to my fate. I very much longed for parental affection, which the shrine never provided. My best friend was called Shimekor. She was of great help to me. We shared together the little food we could lay hands on.

I believed in the worship of the Korloe god (the name of the god of the Korloe shrine). Among ourselves, we encouraged each other in the hope that one day we would be free. I did not know that I would indeed be liberated the way it happened. But it did happen through the work of International Needs.

I would like my child to be sponsored to the highest level of education. I wish for myself a joyous occasion and to go home with my tools to start my work together, with the funds that will be added. I spent 18 months at the International Needs Vocational Training Center and learnt hairdressing.

The most important thing in my life is my health, my job that I will be starting soon, and the education of my child. Above all, I am eager to vehemently protect the independence I am now enjoying. My future plans are to set up a hair salon to help take care of myself and my child, educate my child, and to be married to a responsible man.

International Needs means a lot to me. They gave me my freedom and my training. When they liberated others and me, they provided us with seed money to start life as independent people. I can now boast of having my own vocation to fend for my child and myself. I would encourage all to support the work of International Needs.

The practice of Trokosi is a crime and it should be stopped completely. Human beings are not animals to be sacrificed for flimsy issues such as sexual misconduct and theft. The government should move quickly to arrest and jail those who are still perpetuating this evil and dehumanizing practice by keeping and abusing young innocent girls in the shrines.

TROKOSI CHILDREN

Interviews conducted with some priests, clearly show that those who were married and had children before becoming Trokosi priests have closer affinity with these children than the children born to them by Trokosi women. Most Trokosi priests consider intercourse with the Trokosi women as fulfilling a spiritual obligation to the gods because they see themselves as the physical representatives of the gods when they are ordained into the priesthood. The Trokosi women on the other hand are considered the wives of the gods. Trokosi children therefore are regarded as the children of the gods and not the children of the priest's although the priest's biologically fathered them. In accordance with this notion Trokosi children are given shrine names and do not bear the name of their biological father the priests. As part of the identity definition of their new role and status, Trokosi priests also stop using

their given names and start using shrine names when they are ordained. As part of the package of punishment, any child born by a Trokosi is the responsibility of that Trokosi and her family, not the responsibility of the priest. It is therefore not uncommon to find priests who had children before becoming priests providing for those children and educating them to the highest level and neglecting children born to them by Trokosi women.

WHY THE SYSTEM THRIVES

Although a law was passed in 1998 by the government of Ghana criminalizing ritual servitude, the Trokosi practice still persists due to lack of enforcement of the law by responsible government institutions. Second, Trokosi-practicing communities still strongly believe and fear that the gods will cause mysterious deaths and calamities in their families if they stop sending their virgin daughters to the shrines as reparation for the sins of their forefathers. Third, there exist a group of traditionalists called the Afrikania Mission, who strongly believe that Trokosi is part of the cultural heritage of the people and therefore vehemently oppose every attempt to stop it.

Soothsayers play a vital role in sustaining the Trokosi system. The role of soothsayers came to the fore in an interview with Mr. Tsatsu Badagbor, a North Tongu District Assembly member from Mepe in the Volta Region of Ghana. He indicated that the role of soothsayers must be tackled because leaving them out of the equation would create a gap. Mr. Badagbor asserted that soothsayers are the ones who first divine and tell inquiring family members what is wrong with them and actually prescribe the object of reparation, invariably a virgin girl. He explained that there are numerous soothsayers and he thinks that they operate in a league. Furthermore, he said that once the first soothsayer divines

and comes out with a prescription, other soothsayers will give the same outcome no matter how many more soothsayers are consulted.

The practice of Trokosi/Fiashidi/Woryokwe is closely linked to the Ewes and their close neighbors, the Dangmes and Krobos (Dovlo & Kufogbe, 1997), who have a common migration history. The people of Anlo refer to the system of Trokosi as Fiashidi, and the Dangmes and Krobos call it Woryokwe. The origins of the deities that receive women in bondage are traced to the Volta Region and beyond to the Republics of Togo and Benin (Dovlo & Kufogbe, 1997). Prior to the abolition of the practice at the Dadapiem of Big Ada, the Chief of Dangbebiawe had to travel all the way to Benin to inquire about the acceptability of change to the gods and the means of bringing about ritual abolition of the practice.

It is believed that since the gods who receive women as Trokosis are major gods of ethnic communities and clans, they cannot be fully operational outside their traditional geographical location. There are several reasons supporting this viewpoint.

First, most of these gods were acquired originally as war gods to serve these communities. It would be difficult to establish the shrines of such war gods in territories considered enemy territory in the past. Second, cultural practices relating to land ownership and tenancy militates against the spread of these shrines. Normally, shrines of the major gods of other ethnic groups are not allowed in other ethnic areas. The fear is that since these are ancestral gods, the physical presence of shrines to them can be used by people of associated ethnic groups to lay claims to land and other landed property in the future. In the Afram Plains District (North Kwahu District) of the Eastern Region, for instance, where a lot of Ewe-speaking people can be found, tenancy agreements do not permit tenants to establish such shrines. It was discovered that in the Afram Plains the chiefs did not only disallow such shrines but any

one seeking the services of such shrines in the Volta Region had to first inform the chief (Dovlo & Kufogbe, 1997).

Third, one major role played by these shrines, which would have enabled their adoption in other areas of southern Ghana, is the role of supernatural adjudicator of cases (Dovlo & Kufogbe, 1997). Somehow this role was fulfilled in the other areas of southern Ghana, which are mainly Akan speaking, through their river deities - a famous one being the "Antoa Nyame." Earlier in the century improvement in communications opened the door to the more versatile medicine-drinking shrines of the Northern Region such as Tigare and Nana Tongo, etc. The spread of these, which was also known as anti-witchcraft shrines, may have preempted the spread of the Troxovi shrines (Dovlo & Kufogbe, 1997).

The Troxovi shrines may also have no attraction to the Akan because the practice is centered on women and the Akan is a matrilineal society. As Boateng (1995) argues, in a patrilineal society not much premium is put on the female segment of the society, consequently the lack of concern regarding the plight of the Trokosis (p. 32). Thus, the matrilineal system of the Akan may have forestalled the development or transplanting of such cults among them.

A fourth reason for the geographic limitation of the practice is offered by a priest, Torgbui Ahogbato of the Kaja shrine of Pokuase. According to Dovlo and Kufogbe (1997) the priest noted that the Troxovi deity does not travel far. It is believed that the farther it goes, the weaker its potency becomes. Thus the Trokosi practice, according to the authors, behaves according to a distance decay postulate in which the power of the gods to strike victims decreases with distance away from the home localities of the parent shrines (Dovlo & Kufogbe, 1998). Those shrines whose practices come close to the phenomenon are related to parent shrines in their home localities of origin but do not have the mandate of the parent shrines to carry out full Trokosi operations. Therefore, at

best, they are operated as recruitment or satellite centers for subjects outside the active range or sphere of influence of the principal shrine and parent god. Such views about the diminishing power of the gods suggest that the female ritual bondage phenomenon might operate according to a distance decay postulate of geographical interaction where the core or center of energy radiation is the parent shrine, so the satellite or recruitment center/shrines constitute the periphery of decreasing the spatial interaction (Dovlo & Kufogbe, 1998). This according to them explains why Trokosi cannot be found in other parts of Ghana apart from the Volta, Greater Accra and the Eastern Regions. The shrines are not, however, without influence in areas outside the regions of dominance. Clients could come from anywhere in the world for atonement from far and wide, across the country, and the eastern borders from Togo and Benin, depending on their fame.

According to Nukunya and Kwafo (1999b), there were at least 39 Trokosi shrines in the southern Volta Region and the two Dangme districts of the Greater Accra region. In the North Tongu District, there were 18 shrines while in the South Tongu Districts there were 8 and 5 in the Ketu District. While there were 3 in the Keta District, in the Akatsi District, the Dzoli shrine at Avenorpeme (Suife) was the only Troxovi shrine, and in the Dangme East District, there were 2 whilst the Dangme West District had 3 shrines.

Clients come from far and near, although quite a large concentration of clients come from the Tongu area itself. According to the Tongu priests, the principal order of numerical importance is Tongu, Avenor, Anlo, some, northern Eweland (Ho, Hohoe, and Kpandu Districts), and Ada, Dzodze, Togo, Krobo and Kwahu areas. The network of clients is quite wide, extending far beyond the borders of Tongu, Eweland, and even Ghana (Nukunya & Kwafo, 1999b).

the premises of the shrines present a problem in conducting a census of victims.

THE ROLE OF FEAR IN PERPETUATING THE TROKOSI SYSTEM

Mazrui, Ajayi, Boahen, and Tshibangu (1993) observed that:

Religion impregnates the entire texture of individual and commercial life in Africa. The African is profoundly, incurably a believer, a religious person; religion is not just a set of beliefs but a way of life, the basis of culture, identity and moral values. Religion is an essential part of the tradition that helps to promote both social stability and creative innovation. (p. 501)

To a large extent the reason for the silence of many politicians over the Trokosi practice could be found in the words of Mazrui et al. (1993) Trokosi is not just a set of beliefs but a way of life, the basis of culture, identity and moral values of the Ewe people of the southeastern section of the Volta Region of Ghana. The Trokosi system as a traditional religious practice instills fear both in the ordinary citizen and the politician. The belief in the ability of the Troxovi deity and shrine to inflict pain and death on even people of other religious persuasions is very strong, hence the silence of politicians and law enforcement agencies or their inability to deal with it.

For example, the Mayor of Adidome, Mr. Sylvester Clarke the first government official to take on the task of ending the suffering of innocent girls, women and their children enslaved in the Trokosi practice did so because he was not an indigene of the area that practiced Trokosi. He therefore did not have the entrenched fear that local politicians had. Mr. Clarke had to approach civil society organizations for help because the District administration of which he was the head did not

have the finances and human capital to deal with the enormity of the Trokosi issue. District Assemblies and administrations in Ghana are funded directly by the central government. Funds disbursed by central government to Districts are mostly designated for specific development projects such as building of schools, health care centers, and roads, provision of portable water and dealing with issues of sanitation. Hardly will central government make budgetary allocation for solving issues like Trokosi because it is localized and does not have a national character enough to merit the limited resources at the disposal of the central government. The paradigm in developing countries is that social issues such as Trokosi falls within the purview of civil society organizations and these organizations are better equipped and resourced to handle them.

CONCLUSION

In no uncertain terms the Trokosis serve the priests as slaves, who serve the gods of the shrines. They are used as beasts of burden to provide for the upkeep of the priests, exploited sexually, yet receive no normal human affection and denied of the simplest needs of life. These words contained in a report on the website of Every Child Ministries will serve as a fitting conclusion of this chapter.

They are said to be "wives" of the gods, although one must observe that these gods certainly do not treat their "wives" with any affection, respect or even human decency. This is a dehumanizing form of ritual abuse. These child slaves (Trokokis) are forced to chant praises to the idol gods, offer sacrifices and do heavy manual labor in the priest's fields all day without any compensation, while strictly forbidden to eat even a morsel of the grain they raise. Most Trokosi slaves live with constant hunger, and some of them are refused food. In such cases they have no alternative but begging or scrounging in garbage discarded by others (Every Child Ministries, n.d.).