



Graduate School of Development Studies

**Conflicting Discourses on the Trokosi Practice in Ghana:**  
Exploring Tensions in the Global/Local Human Rights Translation

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*"What sets worlds in motion is the interplay of differences, their attractions and repulsions. Life is plurality, death is uniformity. By suppressing differences and peculiarities, by eliminating different civilizations and cultures, progress weakens life and favors death. The ideal of a single civilization for everyone, implicit in the cult of progress and technique, impoverishes and mutilates us. Every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life".*

**- Octavio Paz [1914 – 1998]**

## **Abstract**

Trokosi is an old West African practice that involves the sending of a young virgin girl to a shrine as atonement, for a crime committed by a family member. Since the early 1990s this practice has been subject to a tense debate reflecting a clash of perspectives. The universalist approach to human rights opposes this practice, seeking to protect the right of the child through abolition by including the practice in the framework of gender-based violence and as a violation of the human rights of the female child. The cultural relativist defends its significance based on the socio-cultural and legal norms that belong to the practicing communities that has largely been ignored by the abolitionist approach. This paper explores the power dynamics at play in the translation of universal human rights norms in the local context of Southern Eweland in Ghana. It places the Trokosi practice in its cultural context to provide new insights on how the indigenous culture frames “rights”, giving meaning to the practice and how local communities and the subjects involved (the girls sent to the shrines) perceive the practice. The paper suggests that a modification of the discourse on human rights is called for to make it “non-alien” to the practicing communities and avoid the perception of being a Western imposition. Making the human rights discourse more relevant for the local communities requires an inter-cultural dialogue on the right of the Trokosi child. Rather than simply defending a particular approach, this paper seeks to shed light on the need for cross-cultural dialogue and sensitivity towards culture and spirituality, mirrored in the process of human rights translation as it applies to Trokosi.

## **Key Words**

Trokosi, human rights, universality, cultural relativity, human rights translation, culture, spirituality, development.

**Word Count:** 17,481 [excluding table of contents, acknowledgements, abstract, list of acronyms, definitions, references and appendices]

## List of Acronyms

AM	Afrikania Mission
CHRAJ	Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
HR	Human Rights
IN	International Needs
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
SVS	Savage, Victim Savior



## Definitions

<b>Shrine</b>	Structure which houses traditional deities to be worshipped and consulted
<b>Trokosi</b>	The practice which entails a person, most often female, sent to a shrine in atonement for a crime committed by a family member
<b>trokosi</b>	Term which refers to a person serving in a shrine in atonement for a crime committed by a family member
<b>Troxovi</b>	Specific shrine which enables the practice of Trokosi. This shrine accepts children or people in atonement for crimes committed by a family member [pronounced Tro-ho-vi]

Note: in the Ewe dialect the letter “ɔ” is pronounced [oh]

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1. Statement of the Research Problem

Marks & Clapham (2004) discern two mutually opposed positions on Human Rights. On the one hand the main idea behind international human rights law is that rights are rights with universal significance; the rights a person possesses because the person is a *human being*, rather than because he/she belongs to a particular political community. Furthermore, Marks & Clapham argue “despite the existence of important region-specific arrangements, human rights norms and institutions presuppose universality, as well as having its greater practical realization as their stated goal” (2004: 386). On the other hand, this idea is rejected by those adhering to the cultural relativism approach which views the idea of human rights as a Western construct with no universal validity and in need of cultural specificity when implemented (Marks & Clapham 2004: 387). Specifically at the time when foundational human rights instruments were drafted, Africa and Asia were under colonial rule, therefore excluded from this process. From this perspective, human rights as conceived by the Western powers were viewed alien to societies that were not adequately represented in the meetings that defined the framework. To implement universal human rights would be to permeate Western ideals in a new form as “human rights, instead recycle the colonialist project of making the world in the image, or at any rate at the service of the West” (Marks & Clapham 2004: 387). In this sense “human rights is increasingly seen as the language of a moral imperialism just as ruthless and just as self-deceived as the imperialisms of yesteryear” (Ignatieff 1999: 13).

This paper analyses the tensions between the universalist vs. cultural relativist approach in the debate relating to the Trokosi practice in West Africa, with a focus on the practice among the Southern Ewes in the Volta Region, Ghana. The practice is also known to other countries in West Africa - Benin and Togo - and has purportedly existed for over 300 years (Gillard 2010: 13). In Ghana, according to the Ewe dialect, Trokosi is defined as “tro” a god and “kosi” the name of the first female born out of the magnanimity of a deity. Conversely “kosi” has also been defined as “wife or slaves of the gods”. Trokosi entails families giving their young virgin female relatives to a shrine priest, for a period of servitude, to appease the gods for the wrongdoings committed by a family member or even as a gift in appreciation for significant events.

Trokosi was brought to national and media attention in 1993 (Akyeampong 2001: 11). Since then, the Ghanaian government and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have waged an anti-Trokosi campaign, leading to an amendment to Ghana’s Criminal Code in 1998, criminalizing the Trokosi practice and calling for the releasing of girls from the shrines. Since the passing of the law however, nobody has been arrested and prosecuted. Furthermore, a report drafted by Ghana’s Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), revealed that some shrines continuously admit *trokosis*,

with concrete steps needing to be taken in order to stop the practice entirely<sup>1</sup>. The reality remains that with no arrests made, with the last liberation ceremony performed in 2003 and an assertion that many girls still remain in “bondage” in the shrines, the campaign has come to a standstill. Assumptions for the slowing of the anti-Trokosi campaign have been reasoned to the practice going under ground with Trokosi practitioners protected by some government officials, in support of maintaining tradition.

This paper situates the debate on the Trokosi system in the Volta Region, within three conflicting trends of thought that reflect different interests of concerned actors:

1. The Ghanaian government and NGOs active in the field of human rights who consider Trokosi as an infringement on the human rights of the girl child and should be eradicated.
2. The practicing communities and a movement known as the Afrikania Mission, (whose aim is to maintain traditional culture) who defend the Trokosi practice as part of an age old justice system rooted in traditional beliefs, gradually sidelined by Christianity since colonialism.
3. The young girls and women, subject to the Trokosi practice, whose voices and contributions have been marginally left out of the overall discourse.

Due to the differences in viewpoints in the knowledge of the practice and the manner in which the issue should be addressed, tensions, particularly from the practicing communities towards the government and NGO’s human rights approach, have ensued with little consensus reached. This paper will therefore depart from the observation of a stalled anti-Trokosi campaign, primarily the backlash from the practicing communities towards the criminalizing of their belief system. Specifically, I will attempt to break down the power leverage involved in the framing of the human rights discourse directed at this practice, with emphasis on the cultural relevance of the human rights framework, in an effort to better understand why these tensions exist.

## **1.2. The Research Objective**

In light of the existing tensions at the local level, my research attempts to understand the importance of inter-cultural dialogue mirrored in the process of human rights translation from the global to local.

## **1.3. The Research Question[s]**

### Main Research Question

Why has the human rights approach adopted by the Ghanaian government and NGOs to the Trokosi practice been ill-received by the practicing communities?

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<sup>1</sup> Trokosi 2009 State of Human Rights Report Extract. Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (UNPUBLISHED)

### Sub questions

- Beyond the legislative framework in place, how does the branch of government involved view the Trokosi system and the prospect of its eradication?
- How do the NGOs define their mission and situate themselves in Ghana when addressing the Trokosi system?
- How does the Afrikania Mission define Trokosi and what are its main justifications for the practice and the fact that the system can override the right of the girl child?
- How do the trokosi girls experience the practice in material sense (health, education) and in a subjective sense (the label of “slavery”, “rape victim” and “sexual slave” being placed on them)
- What is the government and NGO’s understanding of culture and spirituality and how is it mirrored in the on-going human rights campaign?

### **1.4. Methodology**

The research process combined methods of primary and secondary data collection. Particularly, for the gathering of background information on the practice, understanding the various stances of academics on the issue and the use of conceptual frameworks to guide the research line of thinking, secondary data was collected. This came in the form of articles, books, newspaper articles and documentaries. In order to deeply understand the various perspectives of the relevant actors, primary data was collected by way of semi structured interviews conducted. The fieldwork aspect of this research took place from June 27<sup>th</sup> to July 27<sup>th</sup> 2011 in the city of Accra and the South Tongu, Adidome district (district were Trokosi is largely practiced) specifically in the towns of Mafi and Battor.

#### Methods of secondary data collection

Secondary data collection was conducted through exploration of various journal articles, documentary films, websites of human rights organizations involved in the campaign, and scholarly work on the subject of Trokosi. In addition more literature review on the debate surrounding the practice was made and this allowed me to discern key tensions between the universalist and the cultural relativist position in the discourse on Trokosi.

#### Methods of primary data collection<sup>2</sup>

Interviews were conducted with representatives from CHRAJ, an elder from the Afrikania Mission, a shrine priest, a schoolteacher, a representative from International Needs (IN) and 3 released trokosi women. For those who only spoke the local Ewe dialect, I made use of a translator. I approached the relevant actors in their own context to enable freer expression. The interviews were semi-structured in order to give the various actors a platform to express themselves and not be confined in their answers. The interview questions were formulated in an objective manner, so that the answers were not influenced by the ways in which my questions were posed. Furthermore, due to the sensitivity of the topic, primarily to the trokosi women who had to recount their ordeals, efforts were made to secure private and comfortable locations of their choosing. A very important approach undertaken in the field

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<sup>2</sup> [See Appendix 1]

when conducting the interviews was to limit any preconceived notions gathered during the readings and also from personal upbringing. Being a Christian from Ghana, and having been socialized in the Christian charismatic environment that demonizes traditional religion, I had to make sure I went into the field with a very open and non-judgmental mindset in order to fully engage with the community's understanding and approach to the practice. I have a minimal grasp of the language, so this allowed me to follow most of what was said in the local dialect. This also gave me an upper hand in ensuring that translations were not taken out of context.

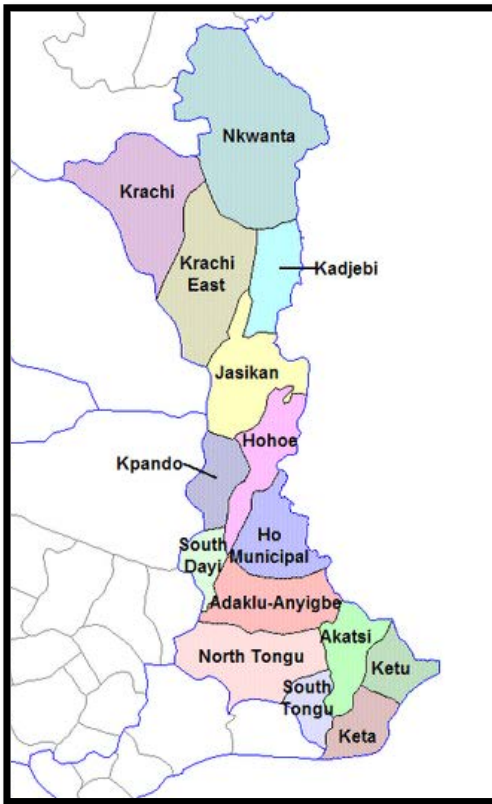
#### Limitations of the paper

The paper is limited in the number of samples from which primary data was collected. Due to time limitations, the field research focused on one district. Also the amount of subjects interviewed in the practicing communities was little with only one shrine visited and 3 /rokosi women interviewed. The claims made in this paper are therefore limited to the qualitative findings used to inform them.

## Chapter 2

### Trokosi as a Practice in Southern Eweland - Ghana

This chapter contextualizes the Trokosi practice, providing a brief overview of its practitioners - the Southern Ewe society. The main aim is to discern the main aspects of the practice as a socio-legal instrument of crime control and its transformation overtime.



Map of Volta Region

#### 2.1. Geographic Spread of the Trokosi Practice

Among the many divisions of Ewes who migrated to Ghana were the “Dogboawo” settling along the southeastern coast and along the lower Volta Region (Ameh 2001: 134). They are referred to as the “Southern Ewes” and dominant groups emerging from these were the people of Anlo and Tongu. The Anlos are spread over the local government administrative districts of Keta, Ketu, Akatsi, South Tongu (Adidome) and North Tongu (Sogakope). The geographical center of the Trokosi practice is located in the Southern Eweland specifically in the districts of Akatsi, Keta, Sogakope and Adidome (IN report, 1998: 91). With 44% of shrine “bondage activity”, the Adidome district accounted for the largest number of Trokosi shrines in the Volta Region with the major concentration in the towns of Mafi, Volor, Dofor and Battor (IN report 1998: 91).

Economically, Southern Eweland is poorly endowed with natural resources with an increasingly deteriorating environment due to sea erosion, seasonal flooding, droughts, declining fisheries and poor road infrastructure (Ameh 2001: 137). Their greatest resource is the people who are highly educated (Ameh 2001: 137).

#### 2.2. Trokosi in the Social Structure of the Southern Ewes

Spirituality is embedded in the Southern Ewe culture, with the “strong value of leading a pure and moral life” as the core of its society (Ameh 2001: 163). Pre-eminence is given to *Mawu*, the creator of the universe. He lives in the heavens and operates through supernatural forces on Earth acting as intermediaries between Him and men (Abotchie 1997: 65). Because of His omnipotence he cannot be confined and worshiped in a shrine (Ameh 2001: 65). Below *Mawu* are earthly gods, *trowo*, owned by individuals, families or the state and whom perform protective, welfare and truth searching functions for worshippers (Ameh 2001: 151). Socially, the traditional Ewe society operates on a system of collective responsibility, with the actions of an individual potentially having consequences for other clan members

(Ameh 2001: 143). In this regard, other clansmen can be held accountable if the offender evades punishment. This principle of collective responsibility is also paralleled to the manner in which the gods execute justice as “the awe-inspiring belief is held that the supernatural forces, sometimes for reasons best known to them, choose to spare the wrongdoer and instead strike an innocent member of his lineage” (Abotchie in Ameh 2001: 143).

As to crime control, a criminal act is not only regarded as a moral sense of injury to the overall society but also to the gods whom embody virtue and are supervisory over a code of morals similar to those of the Jewish Ten Commandments (Abotchie 1997: 10-11). According to Abotchie, the Ewes have formal and informal, public and private means of dealing with crime (Ameh 2001: 147). Such acts designated as “things hateful to the gods” consist of homicide, robbery, adultery, incest, rape, abuse, assault, treason, witchcraft and evil magic, the violation of certain taboos and the unjustified invocation of a curse upon a person (Ameh 2001: 145). These constitute serious crimes and are thus handled through the public criminal justice system (Ameh 2001: 145). The menial crimes however are handled privately at the family level and they consist of “marital dispute, domestic thievery, bearing false witness, disrespect, disobedience, insults of a less serious nature, indebtedness, and the violation of household taboos” (Ameh 2001: 147).

The Ewes attribute crime to either diabolical possession or free moral agency (Abotchie 2001: 11). Both are punishable, as it is believed that unless “crime is expiated by punishing the guilty, the whole clan or state will suffer” (Ameh 2001: 146). Therefore, the main objective of punishment is to restore the solidarity of the community and to pacify the gods (Ameh 2001: 146). If individuals are dissatisfied with decisions made in the court, there is also an alternative of using different magico-religious means, specifically appealing to the gods, *tromo*. Because of the strong religious belief infused in the Ewe society, the decisions of the gods are accepted and hence the mechanism of crime control relies on the gods to solve difficult cases (Ameh 2001: 149).

Due to the notion of collective responsibility it is important to find the truth about crimes committed, so that the family does not suffer as well (Ameh 2001: 151). As to the methods used to search for the truth, magical processes of divination in the form of oracle consultation and hexing are employed (Ameh 2001: 152). The oracle is the medium through which humans and supernatural forces communicate, giving answers to the queries by the clients, and this is either conducted through manipulated magical objects, visible or invisible “vocal” oracles (Abotchie 1997: 70). After this, hexing is employed to deal with the offender.

“Hexing is employed in three instances in traditional Ewe society: (a) invoking the supernatural forces to pass judgment on unknown offenders, (b) invoking their wrath against known wrongdoers, and, (c) placing an evil “spell” or “curse” upon an object of value to protect it against trespassers” (Abotchie 1997: 79).

With regards to *Trokosi*, the first instance of hexing is employed. Here the wronged party goes to the shrine of a deity, *tro*, and either prays for specific sanctions to be employed against the offender or leave this to the discretion of the gods. Sanctions may include sudden and unexplained deaths, blindness, offering of a virgin girl, etc., depending on the gravity of the crime (Abotchie 1997: 79). The gods, through supernatural powers, look for the offender and once detected, send various misfortunes on the offender's family members rather than

the offender. Presumably, the offender must live to confess the crime (Ameh 2001: 153-154).

Because the Southern Ewes attribute mishaps to derive from a source, this drives them to question and investigate. In this regard, the affected family may consult a shrine to find out the offense, the offender and what must be done to appease the gods. And due to the Southern Ewes desire to pursue a good life, the family is quick to make amends (Ameh 2001: 154). For a Trokosi deity, the atonement may include a virgin female child depending on the sanctions agreed by the wronged party that initiated the whole process (Ameh 2001: 154). In all, crime must be atoned in order to appease the gods, so that the state of harmony is restored. This ensures peace, the ultimate stage of the good life (Ameh 2001: 163).

“The importance of maintaining a good and prosperous life, the emphasis placed on living a pure moral life and living in harmony with the gods, the desire to seek the truth in all matters, the values of truth, honesty and peace all contributed in the creation of the Trokosi system. It can be inferred that the institution of Troxovi, and the practice of Trokosi emerged out of a coherent system with its own values, beliefs, cultural, and ritual conduct. Consequently, the Southern Ewe are not a group of weird, wicked, and barbarous people to have created such a system of bondage as the Trokosi system [...] The practice of Trokosi or its variant Fiashidi evolved out of a coherent system, with its own values, beliefs, cultural and ritual conduct” (Ameh 2001: 164-165).

Abotchie attributes the religious system of crime control to which Trokosi belongs, as an effective mechanism of social and crime control. His studies showed that Southern Ewes and some Western-educated Ghanaians trust its efficacy of “instant justice” much more than the modern imported Western system of crime control, also noting that it is more fair and uncorrupted (1997: 115-123).

Similar to the Trokosi practice is *Fiashidi*<sup>3</sup>. Sandra Greene accounts for the rare cases of families in the Anlo clan by Nyigbla (one of the most powerful gods of Anlo) dedicating one of their own (most often a young woman) to the service of the god in payment for services rendered after difficult disputes were settled by the priest (1996: 87). This changed in the 1880s when the Nyigbla priest initiated a new order, which entailed the induction of two or more young women (chosen by the god) from each Anlo clan once a year, every year. The women were known as *zizidzelandwo* and they were expected to dedicate at least one of their future children to the worship of Nyigbla. Some women also joined either voluntarily or through the urging of their mothers as this proved to be socially beneficial (Greene 1996: 91):

“ ... Association with one of the most powerful gods in Anlo, Nyigbla, (i) granted the women prestige, (ii) gave their families the opportunity to establish close ties with the most powerful political and religious families or clans; and (iii) provided them with an expanded set of contacts that could be of potential social and economic benefit” (Ameh 2001: 155).

Married women benefitted the most from this induction as they were considered special and could not be mistreated by their husbands or others (Ameh 2001: 156). Any abuse towards the *zizidzelandwo* came as an offense to the god, needing appeasing through a

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<sup>3</sup> This is an Anlo term



series of costly gifts (Greene 1996: 92). In this case, they gained considerable leverage within their marriages.

The practice appears to have taken a turn for the worse and according to Quashigah, the Trokosi practice has now become “corrupted over the years and reduced into a rather heinous form of the original practice” (2001: 603). Whereas the practice was once meant to produce a class of traditionally elite women, it has in its debased form reduced young girls to slaves, subject to sexual and economic exploitation (Quashigah 2001: 603). In accounting for the negative transformation of the Trokosi practice, Quashigah equates this to the process of Western modernization, in which the overall structure has little need for cultural practices:

“So long as these [cultural] practices have relevance in the economic, social, and cultural lives of a people, the social system itself will regulate or control these practices. When, however, a dislocation occurs in the system, a lot of distortions in the society appear; the values, which had held the old system together snap, and the regulatory mechanisms, which kept it relatively pure, cease to exist. This is especially true when economic systems get transformed due to outside influence, and other aspects of the old system are not able to keep pace. The fate that has befallen the Trokosi or Fiashidi system is reminiscent of those other, otherwise hallowed traditions, which, having come under strain in changing social, economic, and cultural systems, are taken over and operated by people who do not understand the original virtues which informed them. These people then control such institutions to satisfy modern economic and social needs that are completely devoid of the original purposes. The abuses of the Trokosi system represent, in a microcosm, the conflict between communal social system of the traditional African societies and the individualistic Western mode of social organization, which is rapidly edging out the former. It is a struggle of a traditional system against a modernizing influence. These traditional practices had built-in checks that prevented the abuses with which they are now ridden. The attack by modernization on the traditional system has affected the effectiveness of the internal self-regulatory functions of the traditional systems” (2001: 604-605).

Clearly the practice which was once based on producing a class of socially respected women has transformed into one in which they are exploited. This prompts one to question the reasons behind this transformation. Possibly this can be reasoned to the poor economically endowed region of Southern Eweland combined with the process of modernization, which might have led to its people reverting to livelihood sustaining activities, in this case, at the expense of women.

In all, the Southern Ewes understand their reality to be spiritual, guided by supernatural forces. The values which permeate their society are based on the achievement and maintenance of goodness and virtue, which embody the character of *Mannu* and his intermediaries. These values must also be embodied by the people in order to create a peaceful environment and be at unity with the gods. The Trokosi practice therefore plays a role in the attainment of such peace, through its purification of crime and appeasing the gods, in the situation where the formal judicial system cannot solve such crimes. In this process, the violation of the trokosi women was not a part of its original set up.

That said, Trokosi is embedded in the socio-cultural and ecological environment of the Southern Ewes. Its transformation owes itself to the deteriorating environment, thus attempts to counter the practice in the interest of the girl child, requires understanding the reasons for its current way of operation and the value system from wherein it originated.

## Chapter 3

### **Translating Human Rights Conventions: From a Universalist to Local Framework**

This chapter explores the key issues of contention in the process of translating universal human rights norms to local contexts. Specifically the way in which non-Western communities negatively view the universal human rights corpus will be expanded upon using the “savages-victims-saviors” construct coined by Mutua. From then, Merry’s theory on transnational human rights translation will be used to show how the process of HR translation can be effected in a manner yielding positive reception from non-Western communities. The concepts of culture and spirituality as they apply to HR translation will also be explored.

#### **3.1. The Construct of “Savages-Victims-Saviors” in Human Rights Translation**

Makau Mutua argues of the theoretical flaws which exist within the current human rights framework. Specifically, he uses a three-dimensional metaphor “savages, victims and saviors” with each dimension a metaphor in itself to highlight the human rights movement (Mutua 2001: 201).

Mutua explains the first dimension of the metaphor, the savage, as a human right perception of the state or more specifically the state as the operational instrument of savagery. Accordingly, “the good state controls its demonic proclivities by cleansing itself with, and internalizing, human rights. The evil state expresses itself through an illiberal, anti-democratic, or other authoritarian culture and the redemption or salvation of the state is solely dependent on its submission to human rights norm” (2001: 203). The second dimension is that of the victim, and this evokes the image of those whose “dignity and worth” have been violated by the savage. The victim is “powerless, helpless and innocent” (2001: 203). Finally the third dimension, the savior, is the one who redeems, protects, civilizes and safeguards. The savior brings with him the promise of freedom, “the freedom to create a better society based on particular values” (2001: 204). Within the human rights discourse, the image of the savior has been a depiction of the United Nations, Western governments, International NGOs and Western charities as the redeemers (2001: 204). “The savior is ultimately a set of culturally based norms and practices that inhere in liberal thought and philosophy” (2001: 204). There is also the notion of saviors as being white and the people of color as the victims. Through a “pathology of self redemption”, white people having the privilege of travelling and visiting savage states, redeem themselves by defending and civilizing lower, unfortunate and inferior people (2001: 208)

Mutua argues that the human rights corpus is inherently Eurocentric and suffers from many flaws, which are also captured in the SVS metaphor. For one he postulates of the origins of the human rights movement whose context stems from European culture and history, basically undermining its claim of universality. Secondly there is a rejection of a multicultural mosaic in the narrative. He argues that the human rights discourse informs a transformation by Western cultures of non-Western cultures into a Eurocentric prototype. Here the process of “othering” is taking place, coinciding with the “imagination of the

creation of inferior clones, in effect, dumb copies of the original” (2001: 205). In this regard, there is a hierarchy in defining the prototypical human being and his/her understanding of human dignity as defined by the West. In all, there exists unequal power relations in the human rights framework which is in need for “cultural, national, gender, religious and ethnic inclusivity” (2001: 207). Mutua insists that such a movement cannot treat Eurocentrism as the starting point and other cultures as peripheral. Instead, the point of departure for the movement must be “basic assumptions about the moral equivalency of all cultures” (2001: 207).

The SVS metaphor will be used to channel the overall sentiments of the local communities, primarily that of the Afrikania Mission and shrine priests in view of the human rights approach undertaken by the Ghanaian government and NGOs to address Trokosi.

### **3.2. Theory on Human Rights Translation**

The manner in which the language of human rights is framed is essential to the way in which the targeted communities embrace its rhetoric. In view of the uncontested Eurocentric core of the human rights corpus and the need for cross-cultural dialogue and overall cultural relevance in the way it is framed and implemented in non-Western communities, Merry effectively outlines the process through which human rights can be translated in order to reduce tensions, therefore reaching compromise.

In her article on translating human rights from the global to the local, Sally Merry discerns the importance of translators, who play a critical role in spreading human rights through their translation from the global arena down and from the local arenas up. Translators are powerful as they serve as “knowledge brokers between culturally distinct social worlds” yet they are vulnerable to “manipulation and subversion by states and communities” (Merry 2006: 38).

According to Merry, as ideas from the transnational sources trickle down to local communities they are “vernacularized”. This is the process of extracting universal human rights language and adapting to local institutions and meanings (2006: 39). Within this process, the symbolic dimension of vernacularization is then called “indigenization” and this refers to a “shift in meaning particularly the new way in which an idea is framed and presented in terms of existing cultural norms, values and practices” (2006: 39). Here, local meanings, terminology and symbols are used to frame human right discourses. Specifically, the frame is defined as a way of packaging and presenting ideas that generate shared beliefs motivate collective action, and define appropriate strategies of action. It is an interpretive package surrounding a core idea (2006: 41). In this regard, indigenization is the applicatory process of an innovation being framed by local symbols and terminology (2006: 41). That said the, higher the frame is resonant with local ideas, the greater the likelihood it will be successful (2006: 41).

Crucial to vernacularization is the role of translators whom by working in the middle, “refashion global rights agendas for local contexts and reframe local grievances in terms of global human rights principles and activities” (2006: 39). Translators work in a field of “conflict and contradiction” as they are both powerful yet vulnerable (2006: 40). Translators are “able to manipulate others who have less knowledge than they do but still subject to

exploitation by those who installed them” (2006: 40). In addition, translators work within the field of unequal power, as their work is either influenced by those who fund them or by the targeted community (2006: 40). In both circumstances, their loyalties to the source or the target are always questioned by either party.

According to Merry, there are two ranging methods within which indigenization occurs and this is either through replication or hybridity (2006: 44). In the process of replication, “the transnational mode sets the overall organization while the local context provides its distinctive content. Transnational idea remains the same, but local understanding shape the way the work is carried out. The source is relatively dominant”. On the other hand, hybridity “takes a more interactive form, with symbols, ideologies and organizational forms generated in one locality merging with those of other localities to produce new hybrid institutions. The target is more powerful” (2006: 44). Overall, translators whose interests and commitment are vested in the target group, produce more hybrid transplants whereas those vested in the source create replicas (2006: 48).

In all Merry posits a contradiction in the current human rights framework. For human rights to be accepted within local communities, they have to be tailored to the local context and resonant with the local cultural framework. However, to be part of the human rights system, they must emphasize individualism, autonomy, choice, bodily integrity, and equality – ideas embedded in the legal documents that constitute human rights law (2006: 49). In this sense, allowance must be given for the HR corpus to be defined by each society.

Merry’s theory on human rights translation will be applied to the human rights approach towards Trokosi, to observe the cultural relevance of its framework.

### **3.3. Culture, Spirituality and Human Rights**

Seeing that in Southern Eweland, the cultural *is* the spiritual, it is important to understand how this has been made relevant to the HR framework, particularly in the process of vernacularization.

Akrong articulates that the African conceives of reality at its core as spiritual, attributing causality to spiritual agency and material causes functioning, if at all, only secondarily (1999: 4-5). In this regard:

“The significance of this metaphysical analysis of the construction of reality and meaning is not to describe primitive mentality, nor compare primitive mentality to modern mentality nor even to equate supernatural agents to atoms and molecules. But to make the point that the process of development involves Africans in a new domain of discourse whose lexicon and logic they struggle to master because their world-view predisposes them to different domain of discourse which contradict that of development at the very core of meaning [...] On the level of meaning this tendency in African theory of meaning makes the appropriation, assimilation and integration of the benefits of modern scientific thought very difficult and thus accentuate the problem of meaning and interpretation in the transfer of and acquisition of knowledge, which is the key to the whole process of development” (1999: 5).

According to Akrong “the cultural and spiritual alienation at the heart of development discourse in Africa has instead disturbed the African society rather than helped it to respond to the modern changes that are affecting her life” (1999: 7).

The term development is addressed here primarily because human rights has found its place in our current era as being integral to the modernization process of third world countries. In its progression, development has moved beyond an economic boundary into a multi dimensional approach, where meeting the basic needs of individuals (also understood as basic rights inherit and entitled to all individuals by virtue of being human) is the essential focus. In this sense, development has taken a rights based approach with the underlying principles of HR driving it.

In the case of culture, the attainment of HR in line with the process of development has been viewed as disruptive to societies whose value systems do not register with the Western proponents within which the human rights corpus and modernization are embedded in. Realizing this, Akrong expresses the need for maturing in a “cultural milieu” in order to address the challenge of making culture and religion an “integral part of development not an appendage, but a core component” (1999: 12). Likewise, Beek argues that “the role of spirituality, whether as a hindrance or as a support has been ignored in rural development” (2000: 37).

Beek states that “little is known about the role of spirituality in the development process, and little or no guidance is given to development practitioners as to how to address spiritual issues, resulting in less effective and even damaging development efforts” (2000: 38). He equates one of the reasons for this limited knowledge to the fear development practitioners have of imposing or appearing to impose an outsider’s perspective, whether religious or scientific/materialistic (2000: 39). On the other hand, individuals with scientific perspectives tend to view spirituality and religions as belief systems based on myths whose overall negative effect on society would be replaced eventually by sound scientific thinking (Beek 2000: 39).

Furthermore, he argues that the avoidance of spirituality in the development discourse presents a degree of condescension implicit in withholding what one believes to be a superior understanding of reality so as not to offend or impose. He states that even though people’s spirituality and culture is viewed as weak and to be protected, there is a “silent conviction that science and development ultimately will allow people to leave behind their spiritual and unscientific beliefs” (Beek 2000: 39).

Finally he states, “without increased attention to spirituality, development efforts will fail in their attempts to sidestep an issue which permeates life in the South” (2000: 40). Beek emphasizes that “the purpose of integrating indigenous spirituality into development is neither to impose outside knowledge nor to manipulate it as a means to the outsider’s ends, but rather for mutual reflection and learning” (Beek 2000: 41).

Although many debates exist about the role or place of spirituality in the HR discourse, it is beyond the scope of this paper to address this. Instead the paper will limit itself to the concept of spirituality and culture as it applies to the Trokosi practice and its HR framework.

## Chapter 4

### The Meanings of Human Rights in the Discourse on Trokosi in Ghana

#### 4.1. Contextualizing the Debate

Anti-Trokosi advocates object to the rituals involved in the making of a *trokosi* girl, framing this as practices of human rights abuse and “slavery”. For example, Gillard (2010) notes that once at the shrine, the girls are “stripped off” their name and clothes. A cloth is put between their thighs and a rope around their neck. The shrine does not take responsibility for their basic rights such as food, health services, education, affection or monetary rewards for their hard labor. The families of these children supply them with food, but often times, when this is not possible, they suffer malnourishment. Those who succumb to illness or the lack of food have to be replaced with another girl child or else the family would have to face the wrath of the gods. After having their menstrual cycle, these girls are raped and impregnated by the “fetish priests” with their children also becoming the property of these priests until otherwise not needed anymore (Gillard 2010). The Trokosi practice has therefore been coined as an “evil”<sup>4</sup> and “heinous”<sup>5</sup> practice degrading women and children.

The abuses in the Trokosi practice have mostly been of concern to civil society organizations, and the Ghanaian government, primarily because the rights of children as specified in the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) and other legal instruments to which Ghana is signatory to are being violated. These NGOs as well as government officials, take the perspective of favoring the adherence to universal human rights, hence a law was passed criminalizing the practice.

Those in favor of Trokosi particularly the Afrikania Mission (AM) and the practicing Southern Ewe communities, assert the practice an age-old justice system embedded in traditional beliefs. Trokosi practitioners have not been receptive to the law passed, viewing it as discriminatory and accusing Christian NGOs of orchestrating and misrepresenting the practice to replace traditionalism with Christianity (Dovlo 2005: 629). For these practitioners, Trokosi is a necessary engagement for the effective functioning of the Southern Ewe society and in line with article 21 (1) of the Ghanaian Constitution guaranteeing the rights to religious freedom and the preservation the religious practices of their ancestors (UNFPA 2006: 88).

The following sections will explore the viewpoints of the relevant actors involved in the Trokosi discourse.

##### 4.1.1. The Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice

Article 1 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights states that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (The Universal Declaration of

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<sup>4</sup> [Ben-Arit 2001]

<sup>5</sup> [IN report 2001: 10]

Human Rights 2011). Furthermore, under the CRC<sup>6</sup>, children should have access to education (article 28) the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (article 24), and should not be exposed to any type of sexual abuse (article 19). Under the Trokosi system, all such articles are found to be in violation, however all this is done in the name of culture (CRC 1996-2007).

On June 12 1998, an amendment was made to Ghana's Criminal Code, criminalizing the practice (Dijkema 2009) and it states:

**Section 314A—Prohibition of Customary Servitude.**

*(1) Whoever —*

- (a) sends to or receives at any place any person; or*
- (b) participates in or is concerned in any ritual or customary activity in respect of any person with purpose of subjecting that person to any form of ritual or customary servitude or any form of labour related to a customary ritual commits an offence and shall be liable on conviction to imprisonment for a term not less than three years.*

*(2) In this section "to be concerned in" means—*

- (a) to send to, take to, consent to the taking to or receive at any place any person for the performance of the customary ritual; or*
- (b) to enter into any agreement whether written or oral to subject any of the parties to the agreement or any other person to the performance of the customary ritual; or*
- (c) to be present at any activity connected with or related to the performance of the customary ritual*

- Ghana's Criminal Code

It should also be noted that article 12 (2) of the 1992 Constitution states that “Every person in Ghana, whatever his race, place of origin, political opinion, color, 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...” (Bastine 2010: 84). Furthermore, article 12(1) calls for strict observance of human rights of Ghanaians by all persons, calling for the enforcement of those rights (Bastine 2010: 84). In addition article 14 emphasizes, “Every person has a right to personal liberty”, with article 16 explicitly stating “No person shall be held in slavery or servitude or be required to perform forced labour” (Bastine 2010: 84).

Ghana also ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child as well as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) from which an investigation commissioned by Ghana's CHRAJ concluded that Trokosi was discriminatory against women and children (Aird 1999). Unfortunately little enforcement has been undertaken to uphold these legal instruments as no arrests have yet been made (Bastine 2010: 89).

After careful examination of the significant ratified legal instruments to stop the practices which underlie Trokosi, Bastine (2010) concludes that its prevalence may be related

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<sup>6</sup> Ghana is signatory to the CRC which calls for its members to uphold the best interest of the child and protection from harm, all of which trokosi appears to be in violation of.

to the patriarchal essence of the Ghanaian society, which favors men over women. In the practicing Ewe communities, Trokosi is considered to be a form of crime control and for the Trokosi advocates, such as AM, they maintain that they are given freedom under Ghana's constitution to freely practice their religion (Bastine 2010: 85). With this, the tension between cultural relativism and universalism is considered as a major issue. However, the author holds the law should be enforced, i.e. international law should prevail over customary practices, in view that this practice is done at the expense of the freedom of Ghanaian women. He writes:

“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” (2010: 89).

In a similar vein, Boaten (2001) considers the Trokosi system as an instrument of discrimination against women. The author criticizes this cultural practice by pointing to its cultural specificity as Trokosi is only practiced by the Ewe tribe and located in a specific region of Ghana being the Volta region (with not all Ewes practicing this system). The author argues that Trokosi persists because it is females that are used as slaves since they are less rebellious than males. He concludes by asserting that parliament should make more of an effort to outlaw Trokosi. He calls the system “evil and should not operate in the twenty-first century” (Boaten 2001: 102).

In the Ghanaian government's quest to eradicate the Trokosi practice, it has been CHRAJ at the forefront of the campaign. I was privileged to meet with the Director of Women and Children's Affairs to understand the role of the commission in the on-going campaign against Trokosi.

To begin with, she defined Trokosi as a system which entails a young girl given as an atonement for a relatives' sin practiced in the Volta Region. Once given, she belongs to the shrine for the rest of her life. CHRAJ's stance is that the practice is against the human rights of the girl child. The director articulated the non-homogeneous nature of shrine activity since some shrines allow the girls to attend school, while others do not. Furthermore, she explained how violations exist not only in the aspect of access to education, but also in the girl's access to medical health and her right to freedom. Furthermore, when the girl bears a child by the shrine priest, that child also belongs to the shrine. This in all makes the practice a human right abuse.

Elaborating on the current law criminalizing the practice, she explained how Trokosi is still deeply embedded in the tradition of the people from the Volta Region; hence they do not view it as a crime. When CHRAJ began intervening in the liberation process, the girls and the women did not want to leave the shrine compounds because they thought if they left somebody in their family would die. The talk of human rights was foreign to them and they wanted to be left alone. The director explained that because of this, CHRAJ had to resort to educating the girls to understand that they didn't do anything wrong and that they had certain rights and could live a certain kind of life. In addition she stated it was not easy to incarcerate anyone because a formal complaint had to first be filed with the commission in order to start the investigation process. To date, not a single complaint has been filed and



the director assumed that this was due to the overall hesitation of getting the police involved and making arrests. Even for the girls who have been liberated from the shrine, the director explained that because of their belief in traditional religion, the girls would not want to go against the shrine as they think something will happen to them:

*“If a person decides to go and speak against the shrine, the family will beg, they will cry, they will do everything to stop the person so it will not be easy prosecuting anyone for Trokosi at all”.*

From CHRAJ’s intervention however, many girls are now enrolled in school including those remaining in the shrines, and this has been coupled with their access to medical services. In terms of lax government enforcement she spoke of few government representatives supporting traditionalism and the Trokosi practice. As to the CHRAJ investigative team, she explained how some of its members originating from the Volta Region are afraid to enter the shrine compounds, because they believe in the practice and they know if they enter and cause any hostility against the priest, something bad could happen. But for those members who do not understand the local tradition, they enter the shrine grounds. I spoke to the director of my visit to the shrine and how I had not seen any evidence of abuse. Although she admitted not going to the field and only reading the reports, she was stern in informing me that it was an external façade by the shrine priest.

When asked about the use of the existing law in light of the challenges of prosecution, and the *trokosis* not wanting to be liberated, she stated:

*“We have had other laws which are laws but it took a long time to enforce them. We will get there. But it takes time”.*

#### **4.1.2. International Needs**

Through literature it appears the leading organization in the fight against Trokosi is the International Needs. IN is a global Christian human rights organization established in 1985 to promote and defend human rights, with a branch in Ghana. The organization is headed by Reverend Walter Pimpong and is funded by donors from abroad and local sympathizers such as the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) (Bastine 2010: 86).

Although IN supports the need for the implementation of legal instruments to address the Trokosi system, it also believes that is it not enough, as law cannot eradicate fear. IN strongly believes that “education is the key to total eradication of Trokosi” (Bastine 2010: 86).

Along the same line, Rinaudo (2003) demonstrates how Trokosi cannot be eradicated by legal decrees alone, but rather by slowly changing the “cycle of abuse” as IN are doing through education. While acknowledging the significance of the universalism versus cultural relativity debate, he clearly stresses that IN uses a holistic approach in the way it tackles the system by allowing for meaningful participation, inclusion, equality, security and dignity that will ultimately improve the life choices of the *trokosis* and advance human rights.

Speaking to the Head of Gender Issues, she explained that IN was made aware of the Trokosi practice in the 1990s. She expressed that concerns were first raised by the

Queen Mother's Association in the Volta area at a time when women's empowerment became an important topic. The organization decided to take prompt action due to the human rights violations of women and children.

In her explanation of how IN defines the practice, she stated that "Trokosi" is a Tongu, Ewe word which means "slave of the gods". In other dialects it is called "Fiashidi". In the Tongu language, which she is very familiar with, "tro" means god and "kosi" which has various meanings, basically means "slave". There are some children that are born out of fertility shrines and women who are barren go to these shrines to pray for the gods to give them a child, which they would then sacrifice back to the shrine. If the child is a boy, he is "klu" or "kluvi", and if it is a girl she is "kosi". So the term "kosi" refers to a child that has been gotten out of fertility deities. But if it is "tro" added to the "kosi" it means that person is a trokosi. A child becomes a trokosi only when sacrificed at a particular shrine called "Troxovi", and it is within these shrines that the deities receive children or virgin girls. Hence the practice only happens in Troxovi shrines. And "Troxovi" means take a child.

Statistically, IN claims 99% of the children taken in to the shrines are girls. However through her research, she came across three men, who were also sent to the shrines for offences against the gods. Once in the shrines, the children (including males) are called "Mama" which is a term of endearment to mean, "you are special".

As to the period of atonement, she stated that some of the children are sent to the shrines for a period of three to five years, depending on the desired labor needed at the shrines. If the relatives are able to provide some resources to the shrine in terms of money or sacrificial items, in order to "appease the gods", then the child will live. However she spoke of the severe cases of children meant to stay in the shrine for life with the knowledge that if they ever escaped, their parents would die.

In addressing the autonomy of the local head office in the planning and implementation of projects, she explained that each IN location is empowered to independently identify locally specific problems. In this regard, the local organization has the freedom to implement which ever project it wants and does not have to seek the approval from a particular authority.

In terms of their sponsors, support for IN Ghana is two-fold; either in the domain of advocacy or research. She stated that recently Australia supported the research of Trokosi. The organization also received support from the Ministry of Women and Children who donated sewing machines to the IN rehabilitation school.

With regards to donor influence on the manner in which funds must be used, she argued that IN Ghana undergoes no such influence, and that before donors decide to fund their projects, IN has to present a proposal. Donors only agree to support the proposed project, if the latter is in line with their policies. Speaking about the education prior to the releasing of the girls she stated:

*"It is mere negotiation and education. You cannot condemn Trokosi upright if you do not know why people practice it. So first we went into research, and we realized people were engaging because it is part of their belief system, because they are so afraid that if they stop they will die. Because they do*

*not even realize that it is gender discrimination. Why not boys? Only girls? After understanding this, then we went in to negotiate and educate the people. Because of the lack of education they are not aware that sometimes tragedies happen. People die all the time of cholera and other diseases. But the people believe somebody caused it, and they forget that it is not the case. They need to be educated about natural disasters etc. Also people need to overcome their fear and talk about things and not be afraid that they will die if they talk about it. So we need to do grassroots education on a local and national level to create awareness. Then we get back to the people and establish a relationship and explain to them what are human rights. When they understand that this is a human abuse and that the girls have not done anything and that those that commit the crimes are not punished, when they understand this then they begin to think and we throw it at them, they come and say they want to understand and stop the practice. So they come and sign documents saying they wont go back to the practice”.*

Referring to the dialogue among the organization and the practicing communities, she emphasized that their dialogue is open with traditional leaders, opinioned leaders, educated people, uneducated people, all included, giving everyone a voice to speak and deliberate on the issue. She explained that initially, the people will admit to not understanding the organization’s talk of HR, but given some time, they come to understand but admit being afraid. When IN educates the people, they in turn work through their medium which is their deity. She asserted that the locals understand that IN is not after their shrine, and is only seeking to transform the aspects of the practice that are said to violate HR. The locals are also educated to understand that culture is dynamic and that not all cultural practices are to be carried down.

In speaking about the Christian foundation of the organization, the director explained that IN does not evangelize, as the focus is on human rights. However IN has planted churches in the various communities, so if the girls want to attend they are free to do so, but there is freedom of religious choice.

In addressing the rehabilitation center, she explained IN’s complete holistic rehabilitation system for released *trókosis*, which first works on their psyche through counseling, to deal with the fear in the girls minds. In addition, they are educated to read and write, are informed about family planning, and are equipped with various skills to sustain themselves. After being released, IN weans the girls off but stays in touch with them.

The last releasing ceremony was performed in 2003 and this was because in 1998 IN was able to influence parliament to pass a law against the practice. However she claimed that due to the fear surrounding the system, it has gone underground with the priests still practicing.

In terms of the monetary and material compensation which IN gives to the shrine priests in exchange for the releasing of the *trókosi* girls, she explained:

*“IN defines it as rehabilitation. People who do not understand the system tend to hate the priests. But we at IN do not hate the priests as they were born into it. There is a priest whose preoccupation is to sit in the shrine and have women around who go to farm and harvest. When the women leave what do you think will happen to priest? How do you think he will feel? So because the women are leaving, the priest must also live. So what we do is to try and rehabilitate the stakeholders of the*

*system. The priest is letting the girls go and there is no one to feed him so he needs to sustain himself. So we help them by implementing farming projects, bonding some of the priests together. The good news is that they never go back into the practice because education has gone very deep. We have a hierarchy system. We have clans that own the shrine and the understanding has come from all of them. Also, the liberation ceremony is very significant, because the priest promises before the Gods to never capture any more girls”.*

She exclaimed that at the core of the practice was and still is poverty and ignorance. If these are destroyed this will not happen. For this, IN continues to build schools and sponsor children to have access to education.

In closing, she asserted that the government has been supportive through the involvement of ministers and the law passed criminalizing the practice. However, they could be more supportive by enforcing the current law on Trokosi.

#### **4.1.3. The Afrikania Mission**

I was fortunate to meet with an elder of the Afrikania Mission, Professor Kofitse Ahadzi at his home in Accra in order to get an insider’s view of the mission.

According to the Professor, Afrikania Mission was founded by the late Osofo Komfo Damuah, a Roman Catholic father. While in the Vatican’s sacred museum he discovered that most of the texts that constituted the Roman Catholic faith came from ancient Egypt<sup>7</sup> containing information about the black man<sup>9,10</sup>. Damuah returned to Ghana to lecture, as he realized the greatest legacy anybody could leave his people was to reorient their minds.

*“All religions do acknowledge the fact that the creator is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. Hence no one has the right to say what religion is good or bad. Whatever was left with us [Southern Ewes] as a cultural heritage or religious heritage was good. How our ancestors were worshipping the creator was acceptable unto the creator. So how can someone come from his country to say that ours is bad, ours is satanic. If anybody was to say something is satanic, that should be the creator. Christianity is the rendition of African traditional religion. It has been Europeanized”.*

Damuah wanted to teach his people that the way they worshiped God, what others would call “fetish”, was in fact acceptable to God. Hence AM started from the legacy of intellectual freedom.

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7 According to Professor Ahadzi, Julius Cesar and Cleopatra had a son called Caesarion. When Cesar returned to Rome, he took Cleopatra and his son along. Cleopatra wanting the Romans to accept her as the wife to Cesar, took the most intelligent people with 200,000 scrolls on all aspects of ancient Egypt which remained in Rome.

8 According to Professor Ahadzi “the Egyptian book of the dead was discovered to parallel the Bible. In the British museum, the question of Adam and Even giving birth to Cain and Abel were part of Egyptian mythology and it was taken. Everything that the white man has today, originated from ancient Egypt.

<sup>9</sup> Herodotus studied in Thebes, the capital of knowledge in those days. In his recordings he claimed Thebes to be an Ewe word (Ta-yi-bo) the land of the black headed people.

<sup>10</sup> According to Professor Ahadzi “Everything which you will find in ancient Egypt, up till today tell you the story. Look at the nose of the sphinx and you will see it is the nose of the black man. It is broad”

On the subject of Trokosi, “tro” refers to a deity. Parallel to the story of Hannah in the book of Samuel<sup>11</sup> in the Bible, when a woman cannot conceive and goes to the shrine to make supplications to the deity to be granted one, the first child received, if female is “kosi” and if male is “klu”. In the Anlo area there is similar practice to that of Trokosi, termed “Fiashidi”<sup>12</sup>. This refers to a king’s wife who must not be married to just anybody and while being the deity’s wife, the female in question cannot be toiled with. That according to the Professor, has been, and still remains one aspect of Trokosi.

Expanding on the on-going HR campaign, Professor Ahadzi expressed that in 2008, he along with a team of CHRAJ members, which he identifies as one of the “apostles of the anti-Trokosi campaign”, visited some of the shrines in their “so-called efforts to liberate the Trokosi slaves”. In all, twenty shrines were visited in the southern Volta Region. At the entrance of some of the shrines, the priests had told the CHRAJ team to remove their shoes, enter and free the girls if they saw any. They did not see a single person chained or enslaved in the compound and he claimed the girls that were around, were not prepared to go.

*“In another instance, the team was met by another CHRAJ representative working in the Sogakope town, but was first taken to a hotel to spend the night. That night, that same representative left the hotel and went to the shrine [we were to visit] to tell the inhabitants to organize some people to pretend to be slaves. The following morning, we set off and went to that shrine. During the interaction with the people, one of the women carelessly said ‘last night when you came, you didn’t tell us that these were the questions to be asked’. And I just looked at him”.*

In addition, the Professor visited the IN vocational center in Adidome, where he met a lady “claiming” to be a freed trokosi. Upon inquiring he discovered that her father was the keeper of the shrine from which she was “liberated”, and she revealed that IN came to them at the shrine and explained that if she agreed to come to the center and say she was a former slave, they would give her money.

In addressing the notion of crime control in the Ewe community, Professor Ahadzi explained the varied nature of each shrine. On the one hand, there are some shrines that strike the culprit directly, with the culprit kept at the shrine until the respective family goes to perform the necessary rituals and makes the necessary compensation to the deity, in order for the body to be taken for burial. On the other hand, there are those shrines which strike key members of the culprits’ family, and when a girl is sent to the shrine, the objective is not to enslave her. He explained the reason for crimes committed stems from the lack of training and discipline in the household, hence the girl child from that family is sent to the shrine in order to receive adequate training. As to why females are chosen, he explained that males just impregnate and are irresponsible. They do not have time for their children whereas women do. It is the women who bring up children and the future generation in a manner which will be acceptable to the society.

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<sup>11</sup> Hannah could not give birth, so she went to the temple shrine, crying that if God could give her a child, she would devote that child to the service of that deity and that no razor was to touch the hair of that child. And the child would remain at the service of the shrine, until he leaves to the world beyond.

<sup>12</sup> According to Professor Ahadzi, prior to the German nation changing the Ewe language to suit their ears claimed the ears of God, it was called “Fiashimadi”.

*“When she [the trokosi] comes out, she becomes a role model for society. As for the one who has committed the crime, the person will have to pay. But the girl, she must come out good”.*

Thus from the Afrikania perspective, the girl child who goes in to the shrine compound is meant to “atone” for the crime committed through the education she receives in the hopes that she will teach the others in her household as well as raise disciplined and morally upright children. She is not a slave, but regarded as a queen and that is why she is called “Mama”. The girls also attend formal schools and do not have to stay within the shrine compound. Also from the Afrikania perspective the female plays an important role in the Ewe community, as the molding of a virtuous child is her primary responsibility, with the male not able to assume such an important task.

As to the claims of the shrine priests abusing and forcibly marrying trokosis, he explained that polygamy is part of African culture as there are more women than there are men, with the needs of the former needing to be catered to. Also since the Southern Ewe communities are primarily farming communities, the more hands the better. With regards to marriage, the priests can marry a trokosi only with her and her parents consent. Addressing the claims of rape, he explained:

*“One thing about the traditional system, if you are a priest and you go and rape any of the girls under your care, you know what the deities do to you? The wages of sin is death. You will die. It is not whether you are a priest and therefore a custodian of the shrine or not. You cannot challenge the deities. They will take you off. And when the girls claim the priests are raping them, then what about the priestesses as they also take in girls? ”*

In recollecting the use of the term “fetish priest” by others, I asked Professor Ahadzi of its meaning. He postulated that the word “fetish” is demeaning as it refers to the Portuguese word “fetico” which means man made. Respectably, priests should be referred to as “divine high priest”<sup>13</sup>. On the concept of human rights, Professor Ahadzi expressed:

*“What is human rights? Is it human rights for you to go and kill Saddam Hussein? Whose human rights are you protecting? Is it human rights for you to go into Libya bombing? You have a right to your freedom, I have a right to mine. But where one person thinks that he has more rights than myself, then forget about it. Is it against human rights for you to claim that we have slaves, when you have sisters who are kept in enclosures? Pope Benedict apologizing for the behavior of some of the priests, but why did they not arrest them? Because they have more human rights than those whom they were defiling? As for human rights, it has become some relative term they use [the white man], depending upon which side of the divide you are standing”.*

On the anti-Trokosi campaign, Professor Ahadzi asserted that the campaign forms the last stage of euro-cultural colonialism:

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<sup>13</sup> Similarly Mbiti explained that the term “fetishism” was coined by early Portuguese traders referring to the charms worn by Africans. This “connotes something bad and primitive. It is a completely inadequate term to describe African Religion as a charm cannot be a religion, neither religion a charm” (1975: 18).

*“They [the white man] have done all they could and our traditional religious system is still thriving. Now they target these children. It is not just Trokosi, it is the eradication of the remnants of our traditional system, and they do not pretend that their objective is to destroy the shrine and they can destroy the shrines by claiming that they are imprisoning the children. So their objective is not the liberation of any kind, because they know the children are not there, but they have to get some ways of destroying our religious practice”.*

He continued by asserting:

*“We are using European items. We are eating food that brings us diseases. We are drinking stouts that are not good for our health. You go and drink beer, but we have the best beer. We were making drinks out of fermented corn [Aliba], but today they say we must be drinking malt. So the people producing Aliba have been knocked out of business. To show you are civilized you have to drink the white man’s drink. Then you see they are organizing Malta Guinness street dances and beauty contests with our ladies showing their thighs and they win cars. The mentality has been shifted to materialism. Traditional religion respects spiritualism. But Eurocentric religion believes in materialism, so everyone wants to acquire material wealth more than spiritual liberation, and when you acquire material wealth, what does it go with? Wickedness. You have to destroy in order to attain your objective. America has to destroy Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, in order to get oil. Where are we going? So get back to your roots, as he who has lost his roots has lost his way and spiritual sense. If you do not know where you are coming from, you won’t know where you are now, or where you are going. In Ghana we say we are developing yet we are looking at material things to propel us forward instead of coming back to look into ourselves and how we can unite with nature”.*

#### **4.1.4. Shrine priest and Practicing Communities**

At the “Mawu shrine” in Battor, I was introduced to a shrine priest, Mawu Ngogbia and two older women who sat beside him. They were referred to as “Kpesi” or “Zeklo” in the Anlo area. The priest explained that these women cater to the needs of the deities in the shrine by cooking, receiving visitors, and do whatever must be done as far as the deity is concerned. They are not under oppression or paying for anybody’s sin, but the deities had selected them to perform daily duties. The women are allowed to choose a husband, but he must first seek approval from the deities. None of the women are married to the divine high priest and the deities choose one person to serve at a time. In addition, it is the deity who compels them to come and serve at the shrine with no human having any control over it. According to the priest, the women have their places of residence, within the shrine compound, where they can stay with their husbands. He expressed that there is no situation where people are enslaved.

For the girls who go to the shrine to “atone” for the misdeeds committed by a family member, he explained that in the Ewe culture, they are locally referred to as “Mawu srɔ” (wife of Mawu). When I asked of the validity of the term “Trokosi” to refer to the practice, he expressed that a lot of Ewe words have been taken out of context. He also explained that it is not only girls who come to the shrine, and that the overall period of “atonement” is for three years, which is also agreed upon by the US Department of State (2005) in its report on religious freedom in Ghana. Once at the shrine, the girl can choose to live anywhere that allows for easier access to the shrine. The priest expressed that these girls are not “serving”

at the shrine, rather “offering services”. As to why the “atoning” of another’s crime, in the form of training, mostly falls on the girls, he echoed the arguments of Professor Ahadzi, stating that it is the women who cater to the needs of the children and instill morals and values within them during their upbringing. If you train a woman in the right way, she will be bring forth a responsible generation. As for the criminal:

*“ The fact that someone [a trokosi] has been sent to learn the skill of proper upbringing doesn’t mean you as a criminal are free. The evil that men do lives after them”.*

The priest expressed that at present there are no individuals atoning for any crimes at the shrine as people are getting wiser, and they know if they commit an offence, they will experience trouble. In this regard, the last time the shrine had any “Mawu srɔs” was about ten years ago. This has also been the case for other shrines, which he claimed, all remain connected.

As to the surroundings of the Mawu shrine, he expressed that it is a fishing based community, with little land to farm on. With regards to the shrine compound he explained that the ancestors put up the buildings and positioned the deities. The huts that surround the shrine also house the chief of the enclave. He explained that the shrine is merely a building in which the deities reside. If the locals or elders want to perform prayers or rituals, this is done at the entrance of the shrine. While each shrine has its own colored cloth that the “Mawu srɔs” and “Kpesis” must wear when in the shrine, they are always fully clothed and can wear items of their choosing when they leave the shrine compound [see appendix 4].

In speaking about shrine priests who sexually abuse the girls he explained that the priests have no right to mistreat the girls and that the deities would eventually kill them if they did. The priest can be the head of the shrine but the deities’ authority will always supersede theirs.

*“I did not marry a trokosi. I had my wives before I was called to serve and I brought them with me to my house. I cannot have any sexual relations with any of the women serving at the shrine. The deities would strike me. Being a priest does not put you above the law. There are some priests who take advantage of their position. Some of the shrines you go there, and you don’t see priests in charge again because he assumed he was in charge of the shrine and thought he could do what he wanted without recording to the deities. And the deities disciplined them. If you go against the deity as a priest, your punishment is more than those from the outside. So you see some shrines without deities because the latter have taken them away”.*

In a passionate response, Mama Kpesi 2 also expressed how giving birth is not an easy experience, hence to take a child and keep he/she under bondage without food is unacceptable, and something they would not tolerate at their shrine.

I asked the shrine priest if he and the surrounding community had had any encounters with IN. He recounted only meeting IN representatives once, but since they did not see any evidence of enslavement they left.

On the anti-Trokosi campaign, Professor Ahadzi on behalf of the priest articulated:



*“We have been mentally enslaved. Emancipate yourself from mental slavery. If you were to have followed the path taken by our ancestors, you would be freer by now. We would not be using somebody’s language to communicate among ourselves. When they [the white man] came they partitioned everything to tiny bits and pieces. They first come with the adulterated version of what the ancient Egyptians were doing and called it modern Christianity. So they set up a program to destroy the remnants of what we have kept. They have done what they could and now the last stage is to ground our faith based educational system as enslavement. They call it Trokosi. The objective is to destroy our shrines. And they tell us to hold faith in some imaginary Jesus Christ”.*

In ending my discussion at the Mawu shrine, I was left with these final words by Mawu Ngogbia:

*“What you have seen with your eyes, spread it. Let the world know the truth”.*

The same day I was later introduced to a former schoolteacher at a Junior high school in the Aveyima district. According to him, the Trokosi system had been a tradition for some time, but no longer exists in their area. However he explained that IN continues to propagate its continuous existence. Specifically, he claimed that IN representatives went to his area and met with his Queen Mother. He argued that they deceived her by providing or compensating her with cows and cornmeal so she could rally 200 young girls in order to project them as trokosis. In addition, he claimed that IN collected about 50 girls from his school, 20 from another, and 30 from another school, grouping them together and claiming to emancipate them as trokosis. After realizing what had happened, he got in touch with reverend Pimpong, taking the case before the then NPP government. Following this, they were taken to the presidential castle, were they met with the then director of CHRAJ, and this was in 2003.

*“I told her [CHRAJ director] that those girls IN say they emancipated came from my school and I sent the school register to them. In fact I don’t know why they are saying there is Trokosi in our area, you cannot come today, go the shrine and see a single person over there as trokosi. If somebody is a trokosi she might be in the shrine, not in the schools. So you cannot come and take a school child and say she is a trokosi. And that school child has a Christian name. If she is a trokosi you wouldn’t have that. This was my argument and we discussed this issue at length but because they have their agenda, I don’t know what they were about so I left the case on hold. I am amazed as at now, that people are saying that we still have trokosis and they are being emancipated. Go to the IN center and ask how many trokosis are in there now, none. They collected a lot of girls around this place, masking them as trokosis and training them in the schools, which is not true. My sister, a Christian, a church elder, attended that school at Adidome. She is not a trokosi. We do not have trokosis in our family, but three, four, five girls from my family attended that school, just because they wanted to learn a trade. So there is no trokosi in the system as at now. In the olden days, yes, to pacify the gods if you offend, and the gods are killing your family. The atonement is that you send one girl to the shrine to stop the deaths. And that is what is called Trokosi. This time we don’t have those things in the system, so I don’t see why they should say there is Trokosi this time. I have given a lot of literature to AM. I am a believer in AM. I like them because they follow the rules and norms of our tradition. I am a retired school teacher now”.*

Interesting to note, 2003 was also the last time IN performed any liberation ceremonies, prompting one to wonder whether this case did in fact put their campaign on hold. Also when I tried getting in touch with CHRAJ regarding the case, I was never given a response.

I asked the schoolteacher, with Trokosi no longer practiced, what the local community does when crimes are committed. He replied that currently, the people give fowls or rams as items to pacify the gods. As to why the practice has changed, he asserted that due to civilization and formal education, the practice has been altered. More specifically he explained that before the term “appeal” did not exist in the dictionary of the divine high priests, hence they allowed the deities to exact their judgment. However, they learnt that if they appealed to the deities, the latter would listen. In that case, if the priest thought the crime was menial, there would be no need for someone coming to the shrine.

I then asked if there was any truth to the claims that in the olden days the girls were enslaved, to which he answered:

*“No it is not enslavement. In the olden days of our forefathers, there was no Christianity so they were worshipping idols and the leaders of these gods were having those girls to help them. So if you commit a crime against the deities your parents will have to bring you to the shrine to serve there. Whatever was stolen would be given to you as a name, to identify you for your crime. So this continued for a very long time. When you stay there for 3 years the 4th year, you will be liberated. Later when you die, you would be sent back to the shrine grounds to be buried there. That was the system then. But this time no. Now we use cows, cattle, sheep or goats to appease the gods. At one of the symposiums we had at Adidome, people said the trokosis were beaten, subjected to rape. No, It wasn't so. Okay you are beautiful, you come to the shrine, if I am the fetish priest and I like you, I will consult with your family that I want to marry you, and if your family says yes, then it's fine. But if you say no, then I cannot force you. And no calamity will come on you because you rejected my approach”.*

In concluding, Professor Ahadzi expressed the difficulties in getting the local practitioners voices heard in the subject of Trokosi since:

*“Reporters are Christians, and you need to pay them before they write your story. Even if you pay them, they don't put the right story on”.*

#### **4.1.5 Voices of the Trokosi Women**

In the Adidome area, I was able to come across three women who were among the first group of liberated trokosis. The following is a narrative of one of the women.

Ameyo was seven years old when she was first sent to the shrine. Her grandmother was visited by a trokosi who unfortunately dropped her gold earrings, which were later retrieved by an unknown member of the family. People in her family started dying because the case was taken to the deities. In the end, she was the one to suffer by going into bondage to serve the deities for life. When she realized she had become a trokosi she was very unhappy, and in all recounts her life in the shrine as mental torture. She explained that when one entered the shrine, they were named after the crime, in her case being “earring”. With

regards to clothing, they were dressed to their chest with a white cloth, but were always barefoot. The priest was referred to as “Tɔgbie”.

Her relationship with the priest was of a forcefully sexual kind. She became pregnant at the age of eleven and had four children with him. During her pregnancy, she was not permitted to visit an anti-natal clinic, and instead was herbally treated by the priest. When her children were born, she was left alone to care for them, a task she expressed would have lead to their death had IN not intervened. Her mother visited her only once when she was twelve. She would attempt to escape at times and run to her family only to be brought back out of the fear of the negative repercussions that would befall them. Sometimes the girls were allowed to visit their families but permission was not always granted.

In terms of marriage, some shrines allowed the girls to choose their husband with the permission of the priest, but they had to find a replacement. In her shrine however, they were not allowed to marry. As to the claims of slavery, she recounts:

*“You are not a slave per say but you are enslaved. Enslavement comes in many forms. A slave is chained, but the girls are allowed to move around and go to the market. It’s only the restrictions and even when not chained, it is the fear attached. It is mental bondage, mental enslavement. Once you are not freed in your mind you cannot think of doing something in an abnormal circumstance. You cannot think of running away because you know what the result will be. It is mental enslavement not physical”.*

The daily shores in the shrine compound consisted of farming, with the harvested crops given to the priest. The land belonged to the priest but each girl was allocated a certain acreage to cultivate. If they did not complete their task, they were flogged and sent back to finish their assignment. Normally they would cultivate on an empty stomach and would seldom be given food upon their return. Since the eating culture in the shrine was very poor, they had to look for menial jobs outside in order to get money to eat.

At the time of their liberation, IN struggled to convince the priest to release the girls, but after he finally agreed, they were sent to the vocational center where they were schooled and trained in sowing and baking. Eventually she was employed by the IN center as a cook.

As to the Christian faith on which IN is grounded, she explained that it was not forced on her by the organization but eventually she received the teachings of the gospel wholeheartedly although initially being afraid of the wrath of the gods. But once she realized Jesus was her savior and liberator, she accepted the Word and has devoted her life to Christ. Now she has forgiven her parents. As to life after the vocational center, she explained not facing economic challenges after becoming a working professional and gaining a good salary. Also she is no longer feared by the community but embraced.

Ameyo asserted that shrines be abolished since they serve as punishment grounds. And even with their presence, evil deeds still persist in their society. If Trokosi should be altered, sacrifices in terms of cows or heavy fines should be imposed, rather than humans. At the end of the day, people should be taken to the court of law as it is there to serve the nation. She says the practice secretly still persists.

Ameyo felt deprived of her part to play as a citizen and to be of good use to her country. In closing she asked for the Lord's protection and expressed her joy and appreciation for being considered to clarify the issue and spread awareness.

The narratives of Ameyo and the other women were similar to the hardships described by other released *trokosis* in available literature as well as the claims made by anti-Trokosi campaigners. All three women were sent to the shrine under false pretenses, with their families abandoning them. Life in the shrine consisted of hard labor, little food, and sexual advances made by the priests. The girls made reference to their enslavement as mental and not physical, with one shrine allowing the girls to return home during their menstrual cycles. Also contrary to Afrikania's claim, the girls asserted there were no skills taught in the shrine and they were all happy to be liberated by IN. The narratives, and the sincerity from which they come from, show there have been women who underwent shrine brutality in the name of Trokosi.

What struck at me was the earlier statement made by CHRAJ about the released girls who did not file a complaint out of fear of going against the shrine priest. However for those who converted into Christianity attesting they are no longer in ties with such beliefs, why did they not come forward and present their cases?

IN was not able to refer me to or organize a larger sample of *trokosis*. Also, apart from the "Kpesis", I did not encounter any *trokosis* at the Mawu shrine. Having a larger sample of former or current *trokosi* women would have been preferable, to see if different viewpoints exist in the experience of the women in the shrines. To use the experiences of these three women, which I interviewed (liberated more than 15 years ago) to frame the overall practice as homogenous in its exploitation, would be difficult, especially since I could not locate more than three of them.

Rather than address the position of a *trokosi* and Southern Ewe woman from a Western feminist's point of view, as it applies to her rights, efforts must be made for these women to be included in the dialogue. Specifically, they must be given a space to define their view on empowerment, dignity and overall role as a part of the functioning of their society. Due to the scope of the paper this will not be elaborated on.

## Chapter 5

### **Implications of the Various Discourses on Trokosi: Power leverage Between Actors**

In lieu of the above narratives, the implications of these various perspectives will now be analyzed. The following section will explore the power leverage involved in the HR discourse and break down the process of HR translation. Here the cause of local tensions will be linked to the cultural irrelevance of the current HR framework.

#### **5.1. Local Sentiments and the “Savages-Victims-Saviors” Metaphor**

Based on interviews with AM and the local practitioners, strong resentment exists in response to the HR approach used by IN and CHRAJ in addressing the practice. For the most part the locals feel their beliefs threatened by Western morals and values wrapped in the notion of Christianity and development. The local perspective on the anti-Trokosi campaign can be channeled through the SVS metaphor.

As to the first dimension of the savage, this connotes the state that does not submit to human rights norms. In this situation, the state can also be understood as a figure of authority, here being the shrine priests and the elders of AM. From the way Trokosi has been framed, they have come to understand that outsiders view them, or more specifically their manner of operation, evil because of the unwillingness to internalize the human rights principles asserted by CHRAJ and IN. Primarily it is the traditional belief system which is seen as evil, and the Trokosi practitioners encapsulate this evilness because as an instrument of operation, they have embraced and continue to channel this “evil” belief. A good priest is thus one that will stop shrine activity since such activities are premised on inhumane and demonic principles. Trokosi practitioners and followers of African spirituality assert that the latter is not evil and neither are the principles upon which the practice is founded on.

IN and CHRAJ in their reports distinguish that not all Troxovi shrines implement the same methods of atonement. Whereas some girls attend school and do not live within the shrine compounds, other shrines keep the girls and they do not have access to basic services, such as education. The practice is therefore not homogenous and cannot be approached as such. From the perspective of the locals, even though the organization and government acknowledge that not all shrines are the same in activity, the latter two generalize the practice and address the activity of female enslavement as commonplace in all Troxovi shrines. Professor Ahadzi expressed that even in the Catholic Church, Catholic priests sexually abuse little boys but catholic convents are not banned and those involved in such abuses are not being brought to justice. Yet in the context of African spirituality, those deviant priests who are going against the good morals and principles highly upheld by the gods are being used as a point to generalize all other priests and their conduct in the Troxovi shrines. This sentiment is also echoed in the community’s response to the law criminalizing the practice, seen as targeting the Trokosi practice as a whole and not just those deviant priests who take advantage of the girls (I will go into more detail further down).

In continuing along the lines of local sentiments, the Trokosi practitioners have also come to understand that the victims here are the *trokosi* girls whose dignity and worth have been violated by the savage state, regarded here as the shrine priests. The victim is “powerless, helpless and innocent” (Mutua 2001: 203). This is upheld because of the treatment she is said to receive in the shrine. Primarily sexual abuse, forced labor, limited accesses to health care services and education have reduced the *trokosi* girl to a slave. However AM and locals at the Mawu shrine have asserted that Trokosi was not meant to enslave and manhandle women, with priests facing death if engaging in such activity.

Finally the third dimension, the savior, is the one who redeems, protects, civilizes and safeguards, in all bringing the promise of freedom. The local communities hold the sentiment that IN and CHRAJ view themselves as saviors because of their mission to liberate the women, violated by the savage practitioners. According to Mutua, embedded in the savior are a set of norms and practices inherit from the West subsequently the “white man”. The human rights discourse which these saviors approach the communities with have indeed been locally regarded as a set of standards constructed by the white man, whose conception of African culture and spirituality is demeaning. The local practitioners do not want to do away with their cultural practice and they assert that not all *trokosi* women need saving.

In all one can observe that the HR approach used by CHRAJ and IN has been met with tension, specifically in the way the Trokosi practitioners feel their ways threatened by an alien concept of rights and the misinterpretation of their culture. Also with the Christian foundation of IN and the perceived notion of CHRAJ and the Ghanaian government operating under Christian values, a religion introduced by the white man, there is the fear that underlying their mission is the replacing of African religion with the “white man’s Christianity”.

## **5.2. Breaking Down the Human Rights Approach to Trokosi**

In an attempt to further explore why the HR discourse used by IN and CHRAJ have been met with resistance from local Trokosi practitioners, a break down in the HR translation will be presented using the vernacularization model presented by Merry.

The intermediaries/translators are the IN representatives. They work in the middle in an attempt to extract the global rights agenda, molding it to a local context. According to Merry, such translators work in a field of unequal power being both powerful and vulnerable. Translators are powerful in their ability to negotiate the knowledge between “culturally distinct social worlds” but they can also be vulnerable when under the authoritative influence of either the donors or targeted community.

Based on the interview conducted with IN, the organization is not influenced by a supervisory board or their donors in the implementation of projects. As described earlier, the process of vernacularization entails the translation of HR extracting from the universal language then adapting to a local context. Specifically, the process of framing is defined as “indigenization”. From this trickle down process the manner in which indigenization occurs is either through “replication” or “hybridity”. Again replication refers to the process in which the universal human rights framework is used but the local context provides its

distinctive content. In this sense, the human rights framework remains the same however the local context influences the way the community is approached and shapes the way the work is carried out. The source is dominant. In the process of hybridity, the universal concept of human rights is utilized but the framework is shaped by the merging of symbols, ideologies from one locality with those of other localities producing new hybrid institutions. Here the target is more powerful.

In the case of Trokosi, the process of replication is illustrative of the on-going HR campaign against the practice. Specifically the global HR framework has been used, approaching the practice as a gender-based human rights violation. As to the distinctive content of the HR framework, it is the knowledge of the practice and the culture from which it stems, which guides the way the practitioners are approached. IN understood that the practice is cultural and therefore has a place in the workings of the Southern Ewe society, who have little knowledge of the alien concept of rights. In this regard, IN was sensitive to educate the communities on HR and rights violations so they could understand why it has been criminalized. Also understanding that economic factors may have played into the abusive “nature” of the practice, efforts were made to financially compensate the shrine priests, viewed as losing their labor force, once the trokosi women were released.

In addition, acknowledging the Southern Ewe’s culture as embedded in the spiritual, IN also understood that the interaction with the gods would be a necessary engagement. However, the manner in which IN stated the people should be educated that tragedies come from material and not supernatural sources, was demeaning. This statement demonstrates the organization’s disregard to their reality as guided by supernatural forces, instead forcing them to adhere to another society’s conception of reality.

According to the practicing communities little effort was made to understand the spiritual structure of the people and the attainment of goodness, virtue and morality, also embodied by the gods. Professor Ahadzi also mirrored this observation when he emphasized that African spirituality is not “satanic”. Clearly AM has caught on to outsider’s negative perception of traditional religion.

Furthermore, in the interview and research reports IN and CHRAJ have observed that Trokosi shrines differ in their treatment of trokosis. Yet the practice has been framed as enslaving, with all priests engaging in the exploitation of the trokosis. This has also led to resentment felt by the local practitioners who assert that sexual and physical abuse is not part of the practice, with the US Department of State (2005) also asserting that “while individual instances of abuse may occur and many priests have eventually taken trokosis as their wives, there is no evidence that sexual or physical abuse is a systematic part of the practice”.

Although IN can be applauded for attempting to understand the culture of the Southern Ewes as it applies to the practice, from the local perspective it appears little effort has been made to truly understand the original value system from which Trokosi emerged and to display the non-homogeneity of shrine bondage which has and potentially continues to occur. Having spoken to the AM and a shrine priest, a lot of emphasis was placed on the claims that Trokosi/Fiashidi comes from a place of crime deterrence and the upbringing of morally upright women who pass this on to their children. This aspect of Trokosi, also emulated in the writings of Greene and Quashigah, shines a different light on the practice,

making one understand that there was indeed a time when Trokosi did not reduce the girls to slaves or sexual objects. The assertion made by Professor Ahadzi that Afrikania seeks to teach the locals about the origin and effective ways of the various practices of Southern Eweland to which Trokosi is among, makes me think that the practice has changed in form and has been implemented in a manner that has deviated from Trokosi's initial structure. But neither IN nor CHRAJ made allusion to this in their framing of the practice. This could mean that the community dialogue that IN undertook did not end up in mutual understanding and learning, rather of IN imposing universal HR on a people in hopes that they would eventually accept what it entails. This is not reflexive of an open and mutual inclusive dialogue.

Clearly the deviation from Trokosi's original structure, which connotes the current HR framework, has created tensions at the local level. In all AM and Trokosi practitioners have viewed the human rights approach by IN and CHRAJ as a form of "neo-colonialism" with the spreading of Western ideas and moral values, primarily the white man's Christianity. For them, the talk of human rights is a pretense under which the eradication of local culture is the real aim. In my interpretation, these sentiments come from a people who feel a sense of imposition. The human rights translation from global to local in the case of Trokosi has been met with resistance, because the source has been the focal point and not the target. HR here has not been "tailored to the local context" and has not resonated a cultural framework. Specifically when Merry asserts that human rights emphasize individualism among other elements, when implemented to a culture whose core is the collective, one must be sensitive to this aspect and understand how to go about the HR framework in a manner that fits this collectivity.

According to Merry, translators whose interests and commitment are vested in the target group, produce more hybrid transplants whereas those vested in the source create replicas (2006: 48). In the case of Trokosi, it appears IN has produced more of a replica than a hybrid. This is mirrored in the local sentiments when they expressed that IN is against them and trying to "eradicate their way of life". Furthermore the conspiracy expressed about IN masking girls to act as Trokosi slaves as an attempt to receive donor funding, shows the local view of IN as being more interested in the source.

It must be understood that IN's purpose has been to come to the needs of the girls in the same time attempting to preserve the cultural aspect in which Trokosi is practiced. However IN's inability to effectively approach the locals with a culturally resonant HR framework has made them appear to be against the community, which was not their intention.

This shows that no matter how adamant translators are to work for the people, the way in which a HR campaign is addressed can make translators look otherwise. Although IN has had the best intentions, their inability to be culturally sensitive in the HR framework used has not worked to their advantage and instead of getting closer to the people, the people have in turn become weary of them, thinking that their loyalties lie with the donors (and financial profit) not the community itself. This situation is also illustrative of Merry's argument that translators work in a field of vulnerability and power, with their loyalties uncertain to the different groups.



### 5.3. Trokosi Law: Fair or Discriminatory?

District: Volta Region	No. of Settlements	No. of Shrines	No. Living in Confinement	No. Living out of Confinement	Total No. in Bondage	Total No. Liberated as at Sept. 1997	Total Remaining in Bondage
Adidome	10	19	141	1,828	1,969	328	1,641
Ho	2	2	6	40	46	-	46
Kpando	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
Sogakope	4	8	56	349	684	279	416
Akatsi	1	1	19	30	49	-	49
Ketu	5	10	93	289	1402	-	1402
Keta	2	2	12	300	312	-	312
<b>Total</b>	30	51	355	4,359	4,740	672	4,042

**Table 1.** Estimated Number of Victims Under Trokosi/Fiashidi Bondage in the Southern Sector Districts

The practicing communities equate the passed law as discriminatory because it appears to target all shrine rituals and customs whether reducing girls to bondage or not. The terminology used in the law is not specific to the incidence of girls remaining in the shrines, as rituals, based on the research, can also be conducted for those children who are initiated into the shrine yet do not live there, and only come during special events. Table 1 was pulled out of an IN report<sup>14</sup>, and it represents the estimated number of victims under Trokosi “bondage” in the Southern Ewe districts. The table shows that in the Troxovi shrines, therein exists girls who stay in the shrine and those who go to the shrines to perform specific rituals and then return home. The number of the latter incidences are even higher than those remaining in the shrine. Yet those girls who are not living in the shrine are considered to be under “bondage”, and this is seen in the addition of their numbers to the total of enslaved women.

With the terminology used in the law, it assumes all shrine rituals lead to enslavement of the girl child, therefore meriting incarceration of the parties involved with such rituals. The law should be rewritten to better address the non-homogenized circumstance of female bondage, which does not take place in every Troxovi shrine. Regardless there are laws against slavery and sexual abuse, especially of minors, so is there reason to have a law specifically targeting this cultural practice when other religions such as Catholicism also have their human rights violations?

<sup>14</sup> [IN Report 1998: 94]

IN asserts they are not after the shrines of the Southern Ewes, however their insistence of having the law enforced, also makes them questionable to the practicing communities, as the law also condemns ritual activities whose purpose are not confine the subjects. This shows that sensitivity to the terminology used in the passed law has not been realized.

Again this overall analysis is not meant to defend any one particular side. Rather it is meant to unearth all these issues in order to shed light on the complexity of the Trokosi practice and the real need for the relevant actors to engage in mutually inclusive dialogue to understand how best to maintain the value system of the practice while also upholding the best interest of those at the center of it, the *trokosi* women, whose voices must equally be heard.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

The Southern Ewe's perceive their reality as spiritual, with the idea of living a good and peaceful life in union with the gods as central. According to the practicing communities, the Trokosi practice has its unique place in the maintenance of this "good life" by deterring crime and appeasing the gods. Trokosi was not set-up to objectify women but to train and bring them up in a morally upright manner, so they would in turn bring forth a good future generation. Somewhere down the line, however, Trokosi underwent some transformation. Regardless, local practitioners assert that the abuse of trokosi women in the current practice is not commonplace, and should not be viewed as such.

IN states that it is not after the practitioner's shrines or their culture, yet it is adamant in putting into effect a passed law that undermines the whole practice and not just its negative aspect. To the practitioners therefore, the passing of a law to specifically target a mechanism of social control indirectly insinuates that the Western judicial and police system is a better way of crime deterrence. From the local perspective, there exists a religious hierarchy with African religion understood by "Christian" anti-Trokosi campaigners as evil, with little effort made to truly understand their belief system. Here a process of "othering" is occurring making the Trokosi practitioners more weary of IN's mission, being a Christian organization.

Based on the research findings, existing tensions present at the local level can be linked to the process of vernacularization, through which the human rights framework was not made locally relevant. From the local perspective, the translator appears to focus more on pleasing its donors and getting funding, instead of the community. In this sense, there appears to be more of a process of replication rather than hybridity. Culture should be incorporated in the human rights discourse, as "even though human rights standards and norms are universal in terms of their general formulation, their actual application and exact content has to take cognizance of cultural diversity" (Ncube in Amoah 2004: 4). Effective vernacularization can only come about through cross-cultural dialogue, with emphasis on mutual understanding and learning. More importantly the trokosi women, whose voices have been marginalized, should be included in the dialogue and given a space to articulate their understanding of rights and overall role in the Trokosi practice.

As to the universal human rights rhetoric, its framework must not only be made relevant to local communities, but its overall Eurocentric corpus should be re-defined and not seen as a "poster child" that other nations should follow. Every nation should be allowed to frame and define its concepts of human dignity as relevant to local understanding instead of fitting to ideals that are held constant by another culture, implying its morality to supersede others. "Human rights are Eurocentric in origin and inspiration, yet at the same time, they are some of the only tools available to struggle for rights of the disenfranchised" (Merry 2006: 49). This said other nations should be encouraged to create their own tools to deal with their personal struggles of rights attainment. After all the idea of human rights did come out of the locality that was the "West".

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 - Methods of Primary Data Collection

In Accra, my first interview was conducted with the head of Women and Children's Issues of CHRAJ. This was done privately in her office. Also in Accra, my translator with the help of an acquaintance of his, introduced me to Professor Kofitse Ahadzi, an elder of the Afrikania Mission. He was interviewed in his home, and we were among the presence of my translator and his acquaintance.

In Adidome, specifically the town of Battor, I interviewed a shrine priest, Mawu Ngogbia, accompanied by my translator and Professor Ahadzi. At first we met the priest at his home grounds and he then took us to the shrine compound where he is the spiritual head. Because of the collective nature of the community the priest was seldom alone and always surrounded by his family, other community elders or curious by-passers who live on the shrine grounds. With this, the interview was done alongside Professor Ahadzi, serving as a translator as the priest's English was a bit limited, my translator and other community members. We were also in the presence of two women who serve at the shrine, known as "Kpesi". These women were also interviewed and one could assume that in the mist of the shrine priest, their answers could have been influenced. However their passionate responses and the fact that they weren't expecting our visit, meant there was no time for the priest to coach them as to what to say, although this could have been done earlier due to their knowledge of the on-going campaign against shrines. But the women sounded very sincere and not coached. That same day, Professor Ahadzi also took my translator and I to meet a schoolteacher in Mafi, who came in conflict with International Needs. The teacher spoke fluent English.

A few days later, again in the Adidome district I alongside my translator interviewed 3 former *trókosi* women all in their late 30s. My quest to find past *trókosi* was a mission in itself. When asked to visit the Adidome center, I was met with hesitation and told that there were no more *trókosis* as they had graduated and left the center. However, there was one lady who remained in the center as she was hired as a cook. Still this left me with just one girl. Apart from that, I remembered the director had mentioned that IN keeps in touch with the girls and implemented projects within the various communities to empower the women. Realizing this, I asked to be allowed to come to the center in order to also look for *trókosis*. Surprisingly I was not given much information other than two names and their potential job locations. Insistent on finding these two other ladies I made my way around the town, and with the help of friendly locals I was finally able to locate them. This showed that contrary to their statement, IN has kept very little contact with the girls and is therefore not aware of what they have become. The interviews were conducted in their various location of employment being a roadside canteen, on school grounds and in a room at the International Needs vocational center. The women selected these locations and the interviews were conducted with the help of my translator, since they only spoke Ewe.

Back in Accra, I interviewed the director of Women and Children's Affairs of CHRAJ, and this was done in her office.

## Appendix 2 - Trokosi Women

### **Enyonam**

At the age of seven, Enyonam was sent to the shrine by her father, under the pretense that she was ill and in need of healing. Her father had married a trokosi who had to be replaced, and this fell on her head. When she realized the situation, she cried and remembered being in agony. When asked about her atonement period, the priest exclaimed that unless she was replaced, she would remain in the shrine for life. Once at the shrine, she was adorned with beads around her waist and body and told she had become the wife of the priest who was referred to as “Mya Srɔ” (our husband). She kept her name. As part of her daily routine, she was to do house chores such as sweeping the compound and the small idols dotted all over the shrine compounds. She also had to farm on an empty stomach. When the girls returned with farm produce, such as corn, those eaten by rodents were rejected by the priest but given to them to eat. If the girls were fortunate, their parents would send money which they would hide in order to buy local bread. Most times, the girls would not eat for the whole day, and to make ends meet, Enyonam would secretly collect firewood, or render services to people in town to receive some earnings to survive. She remembers her relationship with the other trokosis as sisterly and they took care of each other, with some also having their own children. The community was also compassionate and would allocate some tasks such as tilling of the soil, sewing, weeding, and give them food items upon their completion. Having no food yet working all day became part of the shrine culture. Her family never visited her, and she assumes it was out of fear. However, the girls could return home only during their menstrual cycles. It was sacrilegious and unholy for the girls to stay in the shrine during this time.

The girls would sleep together on local mats which they would spread on the ground. Their room was semi roofed and they were subjected to mosquito bites. They also wore a red T-pad, like a sling, around the shrine compounds, and could only wear a cloth under the mosquito net in their rooms and normal clothes when out in town. On one occasion she recounts being exposed to severe cold one morning forcing her to fully clothe herself in the shrine compound to protect herself. When the priest saw this, he broke bottles mixed with broken plates, anything that could pierce her and told her to kneel down on this with her womanhood exposed in front of people to ridicule her. She showed me the scars and expressed how bad she felt everytime she remembered this moment.

Her relationship with the priest was also of a sexual kind. He would invite her into his room and because of the fear or myth surrounding him alone, she did not have the courage to refuse his approaches. He slept with the girls on a rotation process. At 14 she had her first child, eventually bearing another. Unfortunately both children died due to the conditions and hardships in the shrine, which prevented her from seeking medical treatment. She could only give them local herbal treatment which did not work.

Eventually, the priest died and this accelerated their release. She was liberated 25 years ago, and felt free and happy to no longer live in a little enclosure. She accepted Christ and currently attends church.



After graduating from the center, capital was the first challenge she experienced. Having no friends and few living relatives, she had no place to go, and even the village her mother resided in, had no financial opportunities. In terms of the support received by IN, she was given 200, 000 cedis to start with, to which she claimed was not substantial enough to sustain herself. She was also given a dryer and two buckets, which were not enough to establish a hairdressing business, because a kiosk, electricity and other such capital-intensive items were needed. She thus resorted to opening a roadside canteen with the help of a friend.

As to the persistence of the practice, she heard of a woman recently sent to the shrine. She assumes the reason this continues is because the priest was succeeded by his son, therefore perpetuating the practice. She never came across a male *trokosi* and this was because the priest could not have an affair with them.

To address the practice, she recounted that it should totally be abolished. As to crime control, this should be the role of the court or the chief's premises or palace so that the law should go accordingly and punishment should also come in to be served as a deterrent to other culprits. As to the *Trokosi* practice, she expressed that the shrine compound was not a heavenly place for any human being rather it was like a condemned cell full of misery, pain, enduring dispositions and a lot of unhappiness which always crowns the efforts of one's day no matter what. She advises that everybody should be law abiding and no one be sent to the gallows of death. To the Ghanaian government and NGOs, she asks that they come to their aid and empower them financially to make life more comfortable.

## **Gloria**

Gloria was first sent to the shrine at eight years. Her mother lured her under the pretense of visiting family, only to be given to the care of another lady who then took her to the shrine. Her grandfather had stolen from his sister and when no one confessed to the crime, his sister summoned the help of the gods. As atonement, Gloria was sent to serve at the shrine, where she replaced the other girls who kept dying. When she realized her situation she began to weep and characterized her time in the shrine as sorrowful with the most painful memory being the deserting by her parents. No one came to bring her food, she was not allowed to visit her family and lived a life of total detachment from them.

Each new *trokosi* was referred to as “new lady” or “recently arrived lady”, but once another girl arrived the title would be lost and the girls would go back to being called their legal names. The priest was referred to as “Mya Srɔ” and he was a lazy man. He would only relax in the shrine and make the girls bring home the food produce. It was the task of the women to go out and look for menial jobs in order to bring income to feed the children. The girls would even go to the market and assist people to carry items. The relationship with the priest was also of a forcefully sexual kind as he impregnated the girls, and he did not care for the pregnant women or the sick and hungry children. The community did not like funerals in their society, so they did not sympathize with the girls being in the shrine.

A typical day at the shrine started as early as 3 am, when they were forced to get up, go to the riverside to fetch water, do all the household chores, and then go to the farm. The

girls were given a daily farming quote and if not obtained, they would be flogged mercilessly and sent back to finish, before they could return. Everyday was characterized by lack of food and because of this, the girls were not always in the mood to interact with each other. Once in a while they would come together as a family to share problems not jokes with each other.

Three of the girls runaway and never returned while three others remained. Gloria tried to run away many times, but everytime she did, the priest would send men after her. They would find and return her back to the shrine where she was beaten mercilessly. She had many wounds on her body, but that did not discourage her from continuously running away. She was taken to the shrine at an early age and did not know her parents nor remember her house, so she did not have a place to go. Instead she would attempt to runaway to find work, in order to sustain herself since the hunger was too unbearable in the shrine.

She recounted her most bitter memory of being raped young and she had two children with the priest. Also her lack of common education really ruined her life as she could have been well educated and in a better place. She could not remember any happy moments in that enclave.

Gloria heard about IN and their vocational school and wanted to go there. When she attempted to escape, the priest's men found and returned her to the shrine where she was flogged again. Later she was able to escape, this time running into the arms of IN, where she was schooled and trained. That was one of her happiest moments. At the center, she discovered God through the gospel, and accepted the Christian faith, converting into Christianity and this brought her freedom.

Gloria was one of the privileged girls to leave her shrine as none of the other girls came out. They were scared that if they left, people in their family would keep dying. They stayed in the shrine out of fear. Their mentality was that they would not be free in the outside world, but instead remain in the shrine and serve the gods till their death. Nothing would make them sway from their way of thinking. The girls knew they were suffering but they still did not want to liberate themselves mentally, physically and spiritually. Gloria became an enemy to the *trokosi* who remained in the shrine.

Gloria was in the shrine for 15 years, released at the age of 28 and has been released for 14 years now. She was among the pioneers who graduated from the IN center. The sewing lessons were not too good she said, but she learned to bake bread, which was not economical due to the Because of the market challenges. Currently she works as a cook for the IN elementary school. In all the economic challenges were the most pertinent aspects post graduation, especially having to take care for her children's education and other expenses

After graduation the girls were left to return home and were only given a sewing machine to start their new life with. She had nowhere else to go, and returned to the shrine, where she was beaten up. However she was liberated once again by another NGO and given a place to stay. Seven years following her graduation, the elementary school she currently works in was built and she applied for the job.

In addressing the practice, she expressed that the treatment in the shrine was too inhumane for anyone to experience, and If Trokosi should exist, animals should be used to either appease the gods or settle the punishment. The practice should thus be abolished since conditions in the shrine carried many untold inhumane hardships, which are too inhuman, sometimes leading to death.

As to the persistence of Trokosi, she explained that since the NGO intervened, people are no longer daughters to the shrines and it is therefore coming to an end.

In concluding she stated that the only consolation wanted from either the public, NGOs or government was for them to assist former trokosis. Even though the women have left the house of bondage, their financial problems still persist and it brings them back to the bad memories of the old days. Her prayer is that people would come to their aid so they can be well settled.

Appendix 3 – Fieldwork Photos



↑Interview conducted at the Mawu shrine with Professor Ahadzi, Mama Kpesis, Mawu Ngogbia and other community members. Pouring of libation to summon the gods before beginning the interview↓



Shrine priest Mawu Ngogbia



Mama Kpesi 1



Mama Kpesi 2





Front view of the shrine



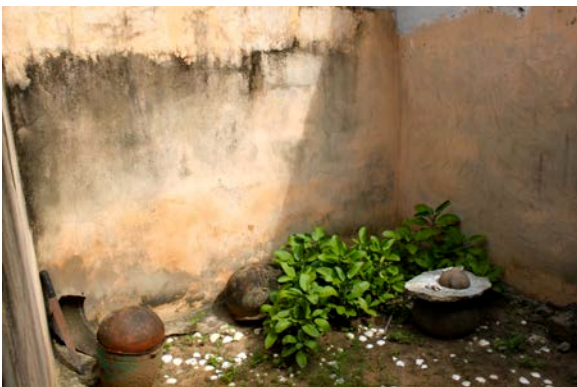
Side view of the shrine



Inside view of the shrine



The white cloths worn by the Mawu shrine members within the shrine and during special events.



Other side of the shrine. This is where infertile women come to be bathed with the fertility plants.



Mawu Ngogbia squatting next to the stool upon which infertile women sit on to be bathed with the fertility plant, also displayed in the picture.





... Life on the Mawu shrine compound ...

