

# Everyone's Problem

## The Issue of Shrine Slavery



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Note: The diagram is meant to be symbolic of the social, psychological & spiritual bonds that bind shrine slaves. We recognize that physical chains are not used, but sometimes the other kind are more powerful.

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## The issue of Shrine Slavery

“Everyone's Problem” contains the following information:

1. Introduction
2. What is shrine slavery?
3. Why is shrine slavery everyone's problem?
4. Why does shrine slavery exist?
5. What are the main practices of shrine slavery?
6. What is the history of shrine slavery and their liberation?
7. What everyone can do about the problem of shrine slavery

### 1. Introduction:

There's a huge problem in parts of West Africa. It's called trokosi, vudusi, fiashidi, ritual servitude. It is a form of slavery practiced in some shrines of African traditional religion, whereby a virgin girl is taken into the shrine or placed under the control of the shrine. It is not practiced everywhere, nor in every shrine, yet as long as slavery exists, it is everyone's problem, for since a crime against even one person diminishes us all, surely this crime against thousands upon thousands of innocent victims diminishes all of humanity, and those of us of African descent in particular.

### 2. What is shrine slavery?

Africa has had a long, hard battle with slavery. The African people have experienced so much harm due to slavery that one would think we would want to get rid of every vestige of it and never have anything to do with it again. Yet slavery exists today in West Africa, perpetrated not from the outside, but from within—Africans enslaving our own people. Evil dies hard.

One of the most active places in the world for child slavery is West Africa. There are several kinds of slavery. Some of it is based on exploiting children for free labor in order to make products cheap and profitable. This

is called child trafficking and illegal child labor. Some of it is based on exploiting children for the sex and pornography markets.

### **The meaning of “trokosi”**

Some of it is based on cultural traditions involving the requirement of a young virgin girl in payment for the services of the priests in certain shrines of African traditional religion. These girls are called “trokosi.”

The word “trokosi” comes from the Ewe (say **Ay-vay**) language and means “subservient of the gods.” The girls are considered to be wives of the spirit who is venerated at the shrine. In practical terms they are concubines and slaves of the priests of those shrines. They must obey his every command no matter what it is, but in turn they get no compensation and no affection. Not everyone likes to call them slaves, but we call them slaves because that is what they are in practical terms using any normal definition of the word, and also because that is what the vast majority of those forced to participate consider themselves to be.

We are far from the first to have used that term to describe the practice of trokosi. For example, Stephen Awudi Gadri, Founder of Trokosi Abolition Fellowship, whose great grandfather carried a shrine fetish (idol representing the spirit of the shrine) across the Volta River, has boldly proclaimed, “I declare Trokosi system as total “SLAVERY”.”<sup>i</sup> Mark Wisdom said that the trokosi was a slave of the deity of the shrine, “although euphemistically she is called the deity’s wife.”<sup>ii</sup>

### **Other terms for trokosi**

There are many other terms for the practice, depending on the specific area and the specific shrine. The most common include vudusi (with many variant spellings), fiashidi, worryokwe, and a myriad of names using the name of the spirit served and ending with “si.”

### **The location of trokosi**

The slaves are located in Ghana in the southern portion of the Volta Region, parts of Greater Accra and the Eastern Region, and in Togo and Benin, as well as some places in Nigeria, all countries of West Africa. Only in Ghana have any of the slaves been liberated.

### **The number of trokosi**

It has been estimated that there were about 5,000 trokosi held in shrines in Ghana when Christians began to get involved in the 1980's. On an average each trokosi slave ends up having an average of four children each as a result of being regularly raped by the priest. Although they are not technically considered trokosi, they also serve every whim of the priest without pay so they are in reality slaves as well. Considering this, the system involved at least about 25,000 lives in Ghana. In reality the number may be much higher for two reasons: 1. The shrines tend to hide or dismiss the trokosi whenever they are in fear of being investigated, then to call them back again. 2. The estimates included only those officially called trokosi, and not those call by the names of specific spirits.

In March 2010, a total of 3,800 trokosi had been reported liberated through the intervention of Christians, thus freeing a total of 19,000 lives considering the children of the trokosi as well as those officially called trokosi. As of this date, an estimated 2,200 remain bound to the shrines, involving slavery of 11,000 lives in Ghana alone, plus an untold number in the neighboring countries.

Until the practice is totally abolished, the number enslaved can continue to grow, because the slaves frequently give birth as a result of rape and because new girls can still be taken into the shrines. On the other hand, the number does not diminish through death, for the priests insist that every crime must continually be atoned for until the end of time. No matter how petty the original offense, when one trokosi dies, her family is obliged to replace her with another. Therefore, except for NGO's liberating these slaves, the number must always grow and can never be diminished on its own.

No attempt has ever been made to count or even to estimate the number of trokosi in Togo, Benin and Nigeria, but we know there are a substantial number. In those countries they are usually called vudusi or called by the name of the god served in the shrine.

### **Age at entrance into the trokosi system**

Although many of the girls were taken into slavery just before or at puberty, many also were taken as young as four years old. We have met one who was taken into the shrine so young that they had to make special arrangements for her mother to continue breastfeeding her. Of course, they grow up, and so the trokosi at the time of liberation may be any age.

**Status of the trokosi's children**

In addition, the girls have an average of four children each as a result of being regularly raped by the priest and sometimes by his relatives or by shrine elders. These children are not always technically trokosi, but they always belong to the shrine, having been born into slavery. We have talked to many young adults for whom the dehumanizing life of the shrine form their earliest memories. Whatever the age, slavery wastes and destroys precious human lives!

**3. Why is shrine slavery everyone's problem?****The practice restricts education.**

While traditionalists claim that the education given in the shrines is superior to formal education and trains girls for real life, many trokosi dispute this, claiming rather that they learned nothing of value for all their many years in the shrine. This has been the thinking of virtually every one of the hundreds of former trokosi I have interviewed, or whose profile interviews I have reviewed in my work with Every Child Ministries.

Yet even if it were true that the shrines prepared girls for real life, one might ask if that education could not have been better offered in the home. If the goal of such education is to prepare them to cook meals, prepare food, care for a home, etc., then would not this be better achieved by allowing them to stay with their families?

Again, even if it were true that shrines prepared girls for life, is not a formal education needed to live and to get ahead in the modern nations of West Africa? It is good that all our children know their native tongue, but if they know only that, will they not always be confined to their villages? Village life is important, but it could be that God has given our girls ability to contribute to the whole nation, to the whole continent. Formal education is needed in order to have the most possible opportunities in employment and in order to make maximum use of a girl's abilities.

Mark Wisdom of FESLIM has written, "Trokosi system prevents girls from going to school, it imprisons talents; it is in fact, one of the main causes of illiteracy, ignorance, poverty and backwardness in some communities in

Ghana.’<sup>iii</sup> There is no doubt about it. The practice of trokosi retards modern educational efforts, and for that reason it is everyone's problem.

**The practice robs Africa of the benefits of the gifts God gave its participants for the common good.**

God gave gifts, talents, and abilities to every person, including each of our daughters. He gave these gifts to them not only so they could use them selfishly or bury them in a hole, but for the common good. Every girl who is presently participating in the trokosi system has gifts and talents from God that were meant for the good of the whole community, the whole nation, the whole continent, perhaps even the whole world. Every girl who is presently participating in the trokosi system has been forced to bury her God-given talents. The practice has robbed the rest of us of the benefits of those gifts. Africa is that much poorer because of every girl who is forced into shrine slavery, and until we free the girls and abolish the system, we will never know what good gifts these girls may have brought our people. Yes, the practice of trokosi robs us all of the benefits of the gifts God gave our girls, and for that reason it is everyone's problem.

**The practice retards development.**

Because the practice of trokosi impoverishes our communities of the gifts of these sisters, development is retarded wherever trokosi exists and even for the nation as a whole. These girls might have become nurses and doctors to save our children's lives from disease. They might have become lawyers and judges, bringing justice to our nation. They might have become public servants, serving in government office for the good of all. They might have developed better ways to fish or a cure for cancer or AIDS. They might have become business leaders employing many who are now on the streets. They might have become faithful wives producing many children to the enrichment of the nation. They might have become loving mothers bringing stability to their families and teaching their children diligently. They will become none of these things, therefore the development of our communities is retarded. For that reason, trokosi is everyone's problem.

**The practice destroys families and family life.**

Think what the practice of trokosi does to families and family life. Many parents have expressed to me that they desperately opposed the idea of their daughter becoming a trokosi. Some resisted until immense family and public pressure was brought to bear upon them. Think of the pain of giving your precious daughter into such a life.

Most of the trokosi tell me that their parents did not explain to them what was happening or in most cases even say goodbye. This is horrendous, but then, what can you say to a daughter that can in any way justify such an act? Most parents who give their daughters into this practice find it very hard to face them. Immense shame, immense guilt is involved. Social pressures may force them to do it, but something deep inside them tells them it is wrong.

Think how the condemned girl views her parents and family. The practice is so deeply hurtful that after they are freed, many struggle for years trying to find the inner strength to forgive those who placed them in the shrine and condemned them to the life of a trokosi.

Think about the unhappy plight of the family who sends its daughter to become a trokosi. She may give her whole life in the shrine or following the demands of the shrine, but even that will not be enough to atone for whatever crime brought her to the shrine.

When she dies, or if she escapes and flees the shrine, another unhappy victim will be found from the family. When a family gives a daughter, then, they do not solve the problem. They only begin a chain of problems that will stretch across generations, destroying the lives of one girl after another. The practice of trokosi does nothing good for our families. It rather destroys them, and for that reason it is everyone's problem.

### **The practice dehumanizes its participants.**

A good many of the practices of the shrine have no practical purpose but tend only to dehumanize the trokosi in her own mind and in the eyes of the community. She has to dress in ways readily brand her as a shrine slave and are not considered proper in the community at large, she has to go barefoot which is both humiliating and dangerous, she may be branded with distinctive marks on her cheeks, arms, chest and back, and she may have to wear a rope-like necklace showing to all she belongs to the gods.

She is denied affection by the priest, denied friendship and most normal human interactions, and this in the very social land of Ghana. On death, she cannot receive a normal burial. From the time she goes to the shrine, she is never again treated like a normal human being. God created us human beings. We all recognize that is special. Humans have rights that other

creatures do not have. The practice of trokosi dehumanizes its participants, therefore, it is everyone's problem.

**The practice promotes deceit and immoral practices.**

Immorality is not culturally accepted in Ghana, yet under the guise of trokosi, the priest is permitted to indulge his sexual passions freely with young virgins. Even if he is an old man four or five times her age, he is allowed to use these young girls. When visitors come to the shrine from outside, he often claims there are no trokosi associated with his shrine. Villagers about the area claim there is, but the priest denies it. The practice is based on immorality and is laden with deceit. Immorality and deceit are not qualities we desire in our society, so for those reasons trokosi is everyone's problem.

**The practice harms tourism.**

Tourism could be a greater source of income than it is. People enjoy seeing new lands and learning about different cultures, but many do not desire to support places that practice slavery. Others, especially those who are not Christians relying on the power and protection of Jesus, fear the shrines. The shrines are best known for the issue of slavery, so allowing the practice of trokosi to continue is detrimental to tourism. For the sake of the economy and for the fullest possible employment, we need more tourism. Therefore trokosi is everyone's problem.

**The practice gives a bad reputation to nations that allow it.**

What can be worse for the reputation of a nation than to knowingly allow the practice of slavery to continue even after it has been outlawed? What justification can be given for such neglect? Yet this is exactly the position in which Ghana has placed itself.

Most Ghanaians instinctively know this. That is why, when the subject comes up, they immediately begin to show one of two responses—either they (if they are not Ewe) blame the Ewe ethnic group for the problem, castigating them as if it were only their problem and not the whole nation's problem, or, they complain about those drawing attention to the problem. If we would just shut up, they reason, there would be no problem. Not so. The problem is not that attention is drawn to the issue. That is good and necessary. The problem is that trokosi is allowed to be practiced and continued.



I understand that it is impossible to be proud of the fact that a nation allows trokosi. Then let's get together and solve the problem! Trokosi gives a bad reputation to nations that allow it. The reputation of the nation is the concern of us all. Therefore, trokosi is everyone's problem.

### **The practice gives a bad reputation to our African traditions and heritage.**

All cultures, of course, have both good and bad in their heritage. We are, of course, human beings. We are great, creative, made in God's image, but we are also far from perfect. We have sinned and turned away from God. Yet in the African heritage there is much of which we can be proud. There are wise proverbs handed down by our ancestors, there are symbols that convey a whole idea in a single symbol, there are beautiful and intricate patterns of art, graceful pieces of pottery, skillfully woven cloths, intricate and interesting patterns of music, drumming, and dance. There are folk stories, and there is a history of survival and heroism. There are Africans mentioned in the Bible from the very first book and Africans in the history of the Christian church from the very beginning.

Then, like all cultures, there are other things we need not to be so proud of. Of those practices marring our tradition and heritage, our own practice of slavery stands in the forefront. We don't honor our traditions by clinging to that which was evil. We learn and grow. We go on to better things. All traditions are dynamic. They can and should and do change, often for the better. Like other peoples of the world, we need to let this happen. Practices like trokosi give a bad reputation to our African culture and heritage. That's yet another reason why trokosi is everyone's problem.

## **4. Why does shrine slavery exist?**

### **The most common reason—an attempt at atonement**

Girls become shrine slaves for different reasons, and the reasons vary from shrine to shrine. The most common reason is the it is believed or is proclaimed by the priest that some (almost always male) member of the family, living or deceased, has committed some crime or offense which is believed to unleash the wrath of the gods against the family. It is believed that an atonement is needed, lest all the family members die, one by one. (The ones who die are NOT the guilty one. The gods are said to strike other, innocent members of the family.) Out of fear and desperation, the family feels it has no choice but to offer one of its daughters as a "living sacrifice",

a trokosi perpetually doing penance in the shrine on behalf of the family. The girl does not volunteer, is not given a choice, and often is not even told what is going to happen to her, much less the reason for it. She is simply delivered to the shrine and left there.

### **Payment for the services of the priest**

Girls may also become shrine slaves because their parents sought the services of the shrine and they were required to pay for those services with a virgin daughter of their family to serve the shrine in perpetuity. These services may involve treating infertility, healing, getting a good crop, helping one to prosper in business, getting a good grade on an exam, getting elected to public office, finding a lost object, and on and on.... The girl may be said to have benefited from the services of the shrine, for instance, if she were born after a consultation on fertility, or if she were taken to the shrine for healing and survived. She does not choose to become payment for these service, however. Payment is demanded, it is said, by the gods. The priest knows this through a process of consulting the gods called divination, or by becoming possessed with the spirit of the god so that the god speaks through him. The parents usually feel they have no choice but to acquiesce.

### **Fear**

Shrine slavery exists because people fear the spirits worshiped in the shrines, and because those gods are believed to kill multiple members of a family in order to enforce their will. It is not that the families who give their daughters love them less than others. It is rather that they feel trapped. They feel they have no alternative. The more I learn about shrine slavery, the more I see stark, abject fear as one of the prime pillars upon which the system of trokosi is built.

### **Why the practice continues despite the Constitution**

Under the Constitution of Ghana, Article 21 (1), (a) and (c), all citizens of Ghana have the right to freedom of religion. Both supporters and opponents of the trokosi practice appeal to this constitutional right. Those who support the practice see it as strictly a cultural practice that is therefore protected under the Constitution. Those who oppose it see it as a violation of freedom of religion, since the trokosi themselves have no choice in whether or not they will serve.

## 5. What are the main practices of shrine slavery?

### **Hard & humiliating physical work**

The girls are treated horrendously, almost always. They are worked hard and severely punished if they do not meet their scheduled quota of work. In many places this involves hoeing the priest's fields all day with a short-handled hand hoe. The girls are made to understand that they will be cursed and die if they ever eat a single bite of grain from the fields. At night some of them stand over the priest, fanning him to keep away flies. One trokosi serving a priestess told of being forced to prepare her bath water before dawn, then remain kneeling beside the bucket for hours until she finally woke up.

### **Sexual demands**

At bedtime or whenever the priest desires, trokosi are summoned for sexual services. As one priest told the author when she asked how many trokosi he had, "Oh, many. Every woman who comes here is my wife." Yet even though he considers them all his wives, they are never shown any affection, even when the priest is having sex with them. An average of four children are born to the trokosi. The priest who is often the biological father, contributes nothing to their care or training and withholds from them the affection a father would normally give his children. Thus trokosi involves sexual demands without the commitment of marriage, without the affection of a spousal relationship, and without responsibility for the new lives those sexual encounters bring forth.

### **Harsh punishment**

If the trokosi refuse or if they displease the priest, or sometimes for no discernible reason at all, they are starved, severely whipped, or made to kneel for hours on shards of broken glass or sharp palm kernels, holding their arms over their heads. In a few of the shrines, the paying of fines is the main punishment.

### **Dehumanizing practices**

Many of the girls have confided to their rescuers that they felt absolutely worthless while in the trokosi system. So many parts of the practice seem to have this as their goal. They are stripped at the initiation and made to parade naked publicly. Their clothes and shoes are taken from them and they are only permitted to wear a wrap-around cloth of blue-black, or the color that is

the favorite of the deity of the shrine. They must go barefoot even in the hot sand, even over harsh gravel, even when it rains. People fear them and they are cut off from friendships, normal human relationships, often even from their families.

### **Length of servitude**

Practices vary from shrine to shrine, but many of the shrines hold the trokosi slaves in the shrines for the rest of their lives. They are sent to the fields to work, of course, and sometimes to the market, but there's little worry of them escaping. Hardly anybody would be courageous enough to help them, for fear of being cursed by the gods themselves. And if they do escape, the priest will send a curse to bring all kinds of misfortune and even death on them. Whether or not the curse works, when misfortune comes their way, they will fear for their lives and return to the shrine again, where terrible punishment will await them.

Some of the shrines theoretically require only a certain number of years of servitude, but in reality the family is seldom able to pay the high feeds demanded for return to the family, so in practicality few ever escape this situation.

### **“Temporary release” or “Flaxoxo”**

Other shrines have taken so many slaves that they can no longer live in the shrine, so after a certain number of years they are granted “temporary release,” called “flaxoxo”. This allows them to physically leave the shrine and live in another close-by area approved by the shrine. Sometimes they can even get married, though only to a partner approved by the shrine and of course, one who brings many gifts to the shrine and serves the gods of the shrine. The term “flaxoxo” means “to bring peace”, but the researcher Dovlo said, “release from the shrine after flaxoxo hardly brings peace to the trokosi, for it does not mean release from the spouse relationship with the gods and concubinage with priests who act as the husband by proxy for the gods.”<sup>iv</sup>

While on temporary release, the slaves are still considered the property of the shrine, and must get the priest's permission to do anything. They must come whenever he calls, do whatever he says, and return to the shrine for the festivals, when they must bring expensive offerings that basically require all year to get together, and worship the idol god at the festivals.

Although the women may hear the Gospel while out in the villages on temporary release, most are afraid to listen and nearly all fear to become Christians, because they know they still belong to the shrine and the idol god. Liberation is necessary in order to break the cultural and spiritual bondage and to release the women from fear and from all obligations to the shrine.

### **Come and Go Shrines**

In some shrines, temporary release has become the standard, so that the women stay only a short time confined to the shrine, then live outside, but come when called and for the observance of festivals and rituals. Such women may even belong to numerous shrines, doing their shrine duties on different days. They may seem free because they live outside the shrine, but their lives are still until the total domination of the shrine.

## **6. What is the history of shrine slavery?**

### **Views of those who justify the practice**

According to Kofitse Ahadzi of the Afrikania Mission (a group promoting African traditional religion), a family could send a girl to the shrine if the family were experiencing difficulties beyond its wisdom. According to him, the girl would acquire divine powers and then come back. He calls the girl a queen, not a slave.

Ahadzi also sees the trokosi system as a means of social control. The presence of the trokosi reminds community members to live moral lives, he contends. Some priests claim they see trokosi as role models and that the existence of trokosi lowers the crime rate in communities where it is practiced. Ahadzi, too, claims that the trokosi is a role model for the offending family, thus bringing peace between it and society.<sup>v</sup>

Datey-Kumordzie in his writings contended that he saw the whole trokosi system as originally a kind of religious convent,<sup>vi</sup> ignoring entirely the fact that membership in a religious convent is usually a matter of personal choice, whereas becoming a trokosi is forced on the participant.

## **Evaluation of these claims**

One observation that can easily be made is that even if they were true (which I dispute), none of these ideas explain how the practice developed historically. They simply ascribe to it the values that traditionalists want to put forth.

All these things sound very nice. It is only because I have talked to so many former trokosi that I would beg to differ. Ahadji sees trokosi as queens. When I ask the women involved in the practice about that they look at me with horror or disbelief. Their comment is always something like, “That’s a lie” or “In reality we are nothing but slaves.”

Ahadji thinks trokosi are role models. It is only because I have am always talking to so many of my compatriots that I would disagree. I see people fearing trokosi, looking down on trokosi, keeping away from trokosi. Never have I heard of anyone looking to a trokosi as a role model.

Views of myself and others who detest and oppose the practice Many, including myself, doubt that these are the true values of the practice. If the shrine were to teach morality, one could certainly question what kind of morality perpetrates the killing of the innocent and the punishment of the innocent while the guilty go free. One could certainly wonder why those who have been forced into such a system, once they are permitted to speak somewhat freely, so often accuse the shrines of great wickedness.

We look, not to the wishful thinking or propaganda of those who want to justify the practice, but to what can be known of the actual history of the practice. I’ve tried to find out everything I could that might shed light on the origin, meaning, and development of the practice. This is what I have learned.

## **History of the Practice**

The giving of virgin girls to the gods and participation in cultic sex as an act of worship was an important part of many ancient religions involving the worship of many gods. Women associated with idol

temples who engaged in cultic sex were common in Sumer, Babylon, and throughout the Middle East, as well as in Egypt, Europe, and India. For example, Baal, the male god of the Canaanites and Ashteroth, (sometimes called Astarte) their female deity, (both mentioned in the Bible), were worshiped in “lewd” and “lascivious” sexual rites<sup>vii</sup> The widespread appeal of Baal worship in the ancient world, some Bible scholars believe, was due to the “licentious character” of the worship.<sup>viii</sup> Smith says that this worship was also found in ancient Phoenicia and even in the ancient British islands. It was also common in the time of Moses amongst the Moabites and Midianites, and presented a constant temptation to the people of Israel whenever they fell away from God.<sup>ix</sup> Amongst the Greeks these women were called “Hierdoules”, the word having practically the same meaning as “trokosi”. The practices associated with these ancient gods seem very similar to that of modern trokosi. The Catholic Encyclopedia out-and-out calls it “cultic prostitution.”<sup>x</sup>

According to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, the “Fertile Crescent” between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, recognized by many as the cradle of civilization, had many ancient temples devoted to various deities where sacred prostitution was commonly practiced.<sup>xi</sup>

One scholar believes that the later kings had the custom of establishing and demonstrating the legitimacy of their authority by taking part in a sexual ceremony in the temple for one night, on the tenth day of the New Year festival Akitu.<sup>xii</sup> He believes that the practice came to an end only when the emperor Constantine destroyed the goddess temples when he became a Christian.

The Old Testament in the Hebrew Scriptures used two different words for prostitute, *zonah* (זונה), an ordinary for-pary prostitute or loose woman,<sup>xiii</sup> and *kedeshah* (קדשה). literally meaning "consecrated (feminine form)", from the Semitic root *q-d-sh* (קדש) meaning "holy" or "set apart", in other words a sacred or religious prostitute.<sup>xiv</sup> Qedasha was also used as the Canaanite name for their goddess of sex (or perhaps a title for either the goddess Astarte or the goddess Asherah in this role), adapted into Egyptian as Qetesh or Qudshu.<sup>xv</sup> The Hebrew Bible commonly uses both words in one passage, showing that in God's sight, so-called sacred prostitution is as evil as

common prostitution undertaken for profit. For example, Deuteronomy 23:17-18 warns followers of God:

None of the daughters of Israel shall be a sexual shrine servant (*kedeshah*), nor shall any of the sons of Israel be a male sexual shrine servant (*kades*)*h*.  
You shall not bring the hire of a prostitute (*zonah*) or the wages of a dog (*keleb*) into the house of the Lord your God to pay a vow, for both of these are an abomination to the Lord your God.

The fact that two words exist for the two kinds of prostitutes shows, of course, that the existence of prostitutes in temples of the gods was well known even in the time of Moses.

### **Comparable practice in early 1900's in India**

Indian children sold to Hindu temples were considered “married to the gods,” and were then made available to Hindu men who frequented the temple. This fact was largely secret. Even some missionaries refused to believe it was as prevalent as missionary Amy Carmichael claimed. They said she wasted her time looking for children who did not exist. Undaunted, with the help of converted Indian women, Amy scoured the country as a spy. From 1901 to 1913, she had 130 such children in her care. Hundreds more were later taken in by Dohnavur Fellowship. The Dohnavur Fellowship was started in India as Amy Carmichael's home for rescuing girls from temple prostitution. She was not alone in resisting the practice. Indian reformers were also outraged by it. <sup>xvixvii</sup>

Comparable to modern Hindu practice

The practice continues today in the Hindu practice known as devadasi, in which a virgin marries the Hindu gods and claims to draw closer to them by copulating with men.

Even the term is very similar. Deva refers to a deity, just as do the African terms “tro” as in “trokosi,” “vudu” as in “vudusi,” or “yeve” as in “yevesi.” The Devadasi system, like trokosi, was widely debated, and was outlawed in India in 1988, ten years before trokosi was outlawed in Ghana. Like trokosi, it thrived in temples of the gods and like trokosi, it remains in practice today even after being outlawed.



What is clear, then, is that the practice of keeping girls in temples of the gods and using them for sexual rites connected with the gods was not new to Africa. It existed in virtually every ancient religion where spirits other than the Creator God were invoked.

Although most modern cultures have left it behind, it still exists today in cultures that are highly polytheistic, like Hinduism and African traditional religion.

## History in Africa

### History in Ancient Egypt

Sacred prostitutes were also known in ancient Egypt. “The temple also had a priestess with a superior at the head; they included hierodules, sacred prostitutes, whose actions... were supposed to provoke the sacred marriage of the gods in the sky, the source of fertility on earth”.<sup>xviii</sup> One can easily see in this practice something very similar to trokosi, in which the genitals of the priest are dedicated to the gods of the shrine, so that to have sex with the priest is deemed in effect to copulate with the gods themselves.

### History in West Africa

#### **In Old Dahomey (Benin)—Ahosi of the king-priest:**

In West Africa the practice has gone on for at least several hundred years. Similar practices using similar terminology were found in the royal court of the Kingdom of Dahomey (in what is now Benin), in the 1700's and 1800's. Wives, slaves, and in fact all persons connected with the royal palace of Dahomey were called "ahosi", from "aho" meaning "king", and "si" meaning "dependent" or "subordinate."<sup>xix</sup> The kingdoms of this age, not only in Africa but the world over, were by no means modern democracies. Individual rights were subjugated to the will of the all-powerful king. The difference between wives and slaves was often one of semantics. By one estimate there were 5,000 to 7,000 ahosi living in the palace at Abomey<sup>xx</sup>, and no men lived there except for a few hundred eunuchs were charged with controlling the women.

#### **Associated with human sacrifice--**

After sunset no men at all were allowed in the palace except the king, and he was guarded by powerful, specially-trained female guards called Amazons. The king controlled every aspect of the lives and even the deaths of the ahosi. Visitors to old Abomey today are shown a mass grave and told that the king's wives "volunteered," on his death, to be buried alive with him in order to accompany him and serve him in the world to come. One researcher pointed out, "Of course, one should not make the mistake of ascribing modern democratic meaning to the word "volunteered" as if the wives wanted to die or had any choice in the matter."<sup>xxi</sup> Ahosi who became too powerful or too independently-minded were simply sacrificed (literally and physically) in the annual office ceremony lasting several days in which the power of the king was renewed by hundreds of human sacrifices, usually performed by public beheadings.<sup>xxii</sup>

Another researcher on the history of the trokosi system, A.E. Amoah, reported that in former times virgins sent to the shrines were sacrificed to the river and eaten by crocodiles.<sup>xxiii</sup>

### **Possible origin amongst the Ewe**

Some claim that the deities of the trokosi shrines were war gods used to fight enemies and brought with the Ewe from their ancestral home at Notsie in Togo. After the tribal wars ended, the deities were institutionalized in shrines where their devotees are able to visit them and consult them.<sup>xxiv</sup>

### **The practice amongst the Ewe in the late 1800's**

The practice was documented by A.B. Ellis who was an eyewitness of the practice in the Dahomey Empire (now Benin) in 1895. According to Ellis, one god called "Khebioso" had 1500 wives in Dahomey alone, the women being called "kosio". He said they cared for the shrines of the gods, but their main business was religious prostitution. According to Ellis, most of the gods of the Ewe-speaking people at that time had such women who were similarly consecrated to their service and were commonly considered "wives" of the gods.<sup>xxv</sup>

One might argue that those ahosi were wives of the king and lived in the palace, not wives of the gods living in the shrines. But that distinction is not nearly as clearcut as it might first seem, for the palace was the center of Dahomean religious life, and the place where

sacrifices were made and rituals to the ancestors were performed. Over time, then, it was an easy jump from being ahosi living lives totally controlled by the king in the palace where sacrifices were offered and rituals were performed, to being trokosi living lives totally controlled by a priest in a shrine where sacrifices were offered and rituals were performed. It was a very easy transition indeed. Even in the time of the Kingdom of Dahomey, one reads of the vodun or gods successfully demanding that someone become a devotee or vodunsi (wife or follower of the god).<sup>xxvi</sup> This point is further strengthened by the fact that in the Kingdom of Dahomey, the king was “regarded as the head of the priesthood,”<sup>xxvii</sup> so that to be an ahosi of the king was indeed to be an ahosi of the priest.

### **Amongst the Yoruba (Nigeria):**

At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the Yoruba empire was united under the the King of Old Oyo, who is sometimes called Katunga. The tribes of this confederation included the Yoruba of modern Nigeria, Dahomi of modern Benin, and Ashanti of modern Ghana. Like the people of Dahomey, amongst the Yoruba human sacrifices were customary at the annual office which was believed to renew the spiritual power of the king for another year. In Yoruba land, victims were placed in baskets, thrown from a height, and then beaten with clubs. In prosperous times the victim was sometimes spared and became a temple-slave instead.<sup>xxviii</sup> The temple slave would have been much like a modern trokosi, a living sacrifice instead of a dead one. A similar thing probably happened in the other cultures that were closely associated.

### **The practice in Ghana, early 19<sup>th</sup> century**

As people migrated within West Africa, the practice spread. Sandra Greene has noted that in Ghana, the practice dates to at least the late eighteenth century. At that time the Amlade clan Sui became very powerful and began to demand female slaves from those who sought its services. The practice called "replacement" also began in Ghana at that time, if not before. Under this practice, if a shrine slave died or ran away, the family was required to replace her with another girl.<sup>xxix</sup>

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Nyigbla became the chief Anlo deity, and its shrines also began to demand slaves for its services. Involuntary slavery, however, may not have been common

at that time and in that place common, since Nyigbla also instituted a practice called foasi, whereby two servants were recruited annually on a more-or-less voluntary basis. At that time, the slaves were often married to members of powerful priestly families.<sup>xxx</sup>

### **Royal slavery**

The king controlled every aspect of the lives and even the deaths of the ahosi. Visitors to old Abomey today, for example, are shown a mass grave and told that the king's wives "volunteered", on his death, to be buried alive with him in order to accompany and serve him in the world to come. Of course, one should not make the mistake of ascribing modern democratic meaning to the word "volunteered," as if the wives wanted to die or had any choice in the matter.<sup>xxx</sup>

Some ahosi did not even make it to the point of the king's death, for Ahosi who became too powerful or too independently-minded were simply sacrificed along with captured slaves in the annual office, a days-long ceremony in which the spiritual power of the king was renewed by hundreds of human sacrifices.<sup>xxxii</sup>

The concept of king-priest has already been mentioned, but we should clarify that it was not only in Abomey but also in Ghana that the two offices were often intertwined. Vorsah, who was once a trokosi herself, writes that in the Mafi Traditional Area, part of the N Tongu District, "choice of priest-chiefs devolved entirely on the gods...usually, the priest-chief's election was through divination".<sup>xxxiii</sup> She also refers to sources in the Mafi Traditional Area of N Tongu who claim that in the past, in time of war men went to the shrines to be fortified by the gods, and promised to donate virgins to the shrine if the gods enabled them to survive.<sup>xxxiv</sup> This shows the connection with the war gods, but if they were to give virgins as gifts to the shrine, this shows that the practice of receiving virgins must have already existed.

### **African traditional religion enters the modern era**

Somewhere along the way, as cultural groups entered the modern era, many of them dropped their practices of ritual servitude along with their practices of human sacrifice. Today, thankfully, many shrines of African traditional religion do not practice trokosi or vudusi. This shows that the practice of ritual servitude is not an essential part of

traditional worship, and leaves one wondering why any traditionalists would still be defending it, since their religion would certainly be more attractive without it.

## **Opposition to the practice-- Ghana**

### **Published eyewitness accounts, turn of 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century**

A.B. Ellis at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century, opposed the practice in his own way by carefully documenting it and publishing his reports.

### **Early Bremen missionaries to Ghana**

Traditionalists have reported that since the mid-18th century the Bremen missionaries outspokenly opposed the practice and purchased freedom for individual trokosi, converting them to Christianity and calling them "new made slaves."<sup>xxxv</sup> Although the traditionalists (Pyramid of Yahweh is a site of African traditional religion) are not happy about this, it shows that the earliest missionaries to Ghana encountered trokosi, recognized it as a form of slavery, and fought against it.

### **Complaints to the colonial powers**

From the colonial archives of Ghana (then Gold Coast) we learn that then, too, a few citizens complained about the practice. The colonial masters were aware of it, but for their own economic interests they chose to turn their heads. When one person courageously spoke up about the practice, they derided him as "the blind man who wants to help others see." The colonial masters were primarily interested in ruling so as to promote trade beneficial to the empire, not for the welfare of the population and certainly not for the development of a state that recognized human rights.

The colonial government's Commissioner of Native Affairs investigated the practice of trokosi at Atigo shrine near Battor from 1919 to 1924. The investigating District Commissioner, W. Price Jones, concluded that it was "a pernicious habit of handing girls over to the fetish," but for economic reasons, he too decided not to interfere. As a result of that inquiry, however, shrine slaves held at the Atigo shrine were told by the colonial ruler that they could return

home if they wished.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The colonial rulers took no note of the social, cultural, psychological and spiritual forces that kept the slaves at the shrine.

Soon after, the colonial government received and ignored another complaint that the shrine was still keeping trokosi.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

### **The Sixty Years' Silence**

After that, the practice slid back into secrecy, where it was widely practiced but not openly talked about. The subject was not brought to the public consciousness again until 1980.

### **Renaissance of the 1980's & 90's**

#### **Challenge of Mark Wisdom**

The practice was drawn into the national spotlight again in the 1980's when Mark Wisdom, a Baptist pastor, responded to what he claims was a vision God gave him in 1977. Pastor Wisdom claimed that as he prayed, he saw a vision of women in bonds, desperately crying out for help. He didn't understand it and struggled with it for some time. Then, he claimed, on one of his later evangelistic missions, he recognized the very same women he had seen in his dream, held in bondage in a shrine just across the Volta River from his home, but previously unknown to him. As a result of seeing the plight of these slave women, he investigated the matter. What he saw and learned horrified him. He met with the Paramount Chief of the Mafi Traditional Area, the late Togbui Asem III, and explained his intention to fight against the system. The astonished chief admitted that he was himself afraid of the system, but agreed to lend his support. Wisdom organized the first public meeting to discuss abolition at Mafi Adidome in N Tongu District in 1982. He also began to openly challenge the trokosi system in the national media, publicly denouncing the practice.

His challenged was picked up by the newspapers, and soon, headlines in Ghana screamed that Pastor Mark Wisdom declared was not afraid of the shrine priests. Wisdom wrote a book on the subject of trokosi, founded FESLIM (Fetish Slaves Liberation Movement), and was instrumental in some of the earliest liberations, but his greatest

contribution to the anti-slavery movement was his boldness in publicly and fearlessly talking about it in the news. Wisdom's courage to speak up pricked the national consciousness.<sup>xxxviii</sup> He brought about a kind of renaissance of resistance to the practice.

### **Vincent Azumah**

In the early 1990s, a Ghanaian journalist, Vincent Azumah, wrote courageously and publicly about the practice—not just reporting Wisdom's challenges to the priests, but publicly exposing the practice which had remained hidden for so long. His articles sparked a nationwide debate that may be considered the beginning of widespread and active resistance.

### **FIDA**

Soon after, the International Federation of Women Lawyers in Ghana (FIDA) organized an investigation into practices in the shrine. Their report was issued in 1992.

## **Opposition against a background of official favoritism to traditional ways**

### **In Ghana**

These events took place while Jerry Rawlings still held the presidency of Ghana with an iron fist. Rawlings and his administration were defenders of African traditional religion of which trokosi is a practice. Rawlings and his group called traditional religion the "African Heritage" and a cause for national pride.

One example of Rawlings open favoritism towards traditional religion was his granting of free air time to the founder of the Afrikania movement, Okomfo Damuah, at a time when Christian churches were virtually denied access to both radio and TV. Afrikania has always been the primary defender of trokosi, so they did everything possible to squelch the growing public outcry over the practice. One can easily see, then, that journalist Azumah and FIDA's actions were very bold indeed in the light of the political climate of the day.<sup>xxxix</sup> Rawlings did, however, provide a platform, a press conference, for the bold Mark Wisdom to address the nation on the issue.<sup>xl</sup>

### **In Togo**

In Togo, too, the official powers favored the traditional worship, called voodoo in Togo (a vodun being a god roughly equivalent to the Ewe tro). When the late President Gnassingbe Eyadema came into power in Togo in 1967, he promoted a policy called “authenticité” (authenticity) similar to what the president-dictator Mobutu Sese Seko had done in Zaire in the early 1960's. This was a deliberate promotion of ancestral tradition to the point of giving it official legitimacy and discouraging, sometimes forcibly, expressions of other African spirituality.<sup>xli</sup> Of course, the trokosi/vudusi system is a part of ancestral tradition, so this granted it official favor in Togo.

### **The push to criminalize trokosi in Ghana**

These Ghanaian journalists revealed what had been a secret known only to a few. After these revelations, opposition to the practice developed quickly. The Ghana National Commission on Children brought attention to the issue during the celebration of the Organization of African Unity Day of the African Child on June 16, 1993. In 1994 and 1995 Ghanaian lawyer Anita Heymann Ababio researched the practice in the light of Ghanaian law. Recommendations from this research became a Law Reform Commission report to the Ghana government in 1995.<sup>xlii</sup> According to Emmanuel Kweku Akeampong, a Ghanaian professor of history at Harvard University, the practice of trokosi was still much in the national attention in 1996 and 1997.<sup>xliii</sup>

### **Trokosi outlawed in Ghana 1998**

In 1998 the Law Reform Commission, drawing on the recommendations of Ababio and others, drafted a law specifying “ritual or customary servitude” as a crime<sup>xliv</sup> under the Criminal Code Amendment Act. The law passed, the Criminal Code of 1960, Act 29, was amended, and ritual servitude was outlawed, requiring a mandatory three-year prison term for those found guilty.<sup>xlv</sup> The general public in Ghana hailed it as a great breakthrough. However, no one has ever even been prosecuted under the law, let alone be convicted, and the practice continues to this day.



## **Possible Reasons Why the Outlawed Practice Continues**

Some contributing factors in its continuance might be fear, which although waning is still strong in many places in all matters relating to the shrines; possible involvement of some politicians and officials in seeking spiritual help from the shrines, thus rendering it difficult for them to support prosecution of the guilty, and reluctance of the government to interfere with traditional practices. There is also the aspect that in general, public officials like to emphasize positive aspects of African culture. Of course, the continuing practice of shrine slavery is a reality that is more than a little embarrassing to them, and they are understandably reluctant to highlight it.

Because the practice is outlawed, one frequently hears officials talk of the practice as having been eradicated. However, the truth is that the practice has been eradicated only on paper. It is illegal, true enough, but it is still practiced widely and without prosecution. Yet even the manner in which it is discussed tends to imply it was a problem of the past that has now been dealt with effectively. Not so. A thousand times, it is not so.

## **International Attention with Human Rights Award, 1999**

In 1999 Juliana Dogbadzi, a former trokosi, won the Reebok Human Rights Award for her efforts in speaking up on behalf of her fellow trokosi,<sup>xlvi</sup> thus drawing international attention to the plight of the enslaved women and girls caught up in the trokosi system.

## **NGOs take up the fight**

NGO's are more centered on working to correct what is wrong, and less concerned with factors of tourist appeal, so it is natural that they have continued the fight. Some NGOs had already worked to liberate shrines even before the practice was criminalized. The first liberation was carried out in 1997 by Mark Wisdom's group FESLIM, with help from the Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund for University Women, Inc. of the US.

After it became clear that the 1998 law did not solve the problem, NGOs began to get even more seriously involved in advocating

against the practice and in working for agreements to reduce the practice by negotiating agreements to liberate individual shrines.

The government of Ghana has supported their efforts by sending delegates to make supportive speeches at liberation ceremonies, and some have spoken out on the issue. In general, most government officials have seemed happy to let the NGO's carry the ball so that the government itself is not seen as directly opposing a traditional practice.

Some of the organizations that have joined the effort are UNICEF, Missions International, International Needs Network Ghana, the Swiss "Sentry Movement", Trokosi Abolition Fellowship, the Anti-Slavery Society, and Every Child Ministries. Christian NGOs and human rights organizations have been fighting it—working to end the practice and to win liberation for the shrine slaves. Rev. Walter Pimpong of IN Network has become one of the well-known and much-respected spokesmen for liberation.

They have carried out their activities with strong support from CHRAJ—The Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice—and the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs.

A Court of Women was organized in Accra in 2003 to continue the fight against the practice.

Survivors for Change is a group of former trokosi who have banded together to speak up against the practice. Many trokosi have courageously spoken up about the devastating experiences they went through, but since most are not literate and do not speak English, their influence has been powerful but limited in scope.

### **Method of liberation**

Liberation has been done on a shrine-by-shrine basis, with NGO's most often seeking to reach community-wide agreements that all the slaves of a particular shrine will be liberated. After learning from some early mistakes, NGO's now require the official and public signing of documents guaranteeing that the practice of slavery or ritual servitude is permanently ended in that place. When such an agreement is reached, a public ceremony is held for the signing of the

documents and often, liberation certificates for the former slaves. The shrine may be compensated for its loss or some alternative means of making a living provided rather than taking in human beings as slaves.

After liberation, the former trokosi begin a process of rehabilitation which usually includes learning vocational skills and well as other forms of teaching and counseling.

The most active groups in liberating shrine slaves through negotiated community agreements were first FESLIM (Fetish Slaves Liberation Movement), then International Needs Network, and more recently, Every Child Ministries.

The first liberation ceremonies were held at Lomo and Me shrines in Volo in October 1996, at three shrines in Dorfor in December 1996, and at Atigo shrine in Battor in January 1997. International Needs Network liberated 400 trokosi from a group of small shrines in November 2000, and 126 at Adidome in November 2001.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Every Child Ministries began by working cooperatively with other groups. They cooperated with International Needs Network to liberate 465 trokosi from three shrines of the Agave area in January 2003. ECM then collaborated with FESLIM continued to liberate 94 shrine slaves from Aklidokpo shrine near Adidome in January 2004 and finally worked on their own to liberate 120 from Sovigbenor shrine in Aflao in December 2005 and 52 slaves of the thunder god shrine called Kadza Yeve shrine at Aflao in March 2010.

### **3 major ways of liberating trokosi**

There are three major ways NGO's have liberated trokosi:

1. The most common way has been through negotiation to reach an agreement with the shrines, supported by a massive prayer effort. The more recent agreements include the total abolition of the practice of slavery at that shrine, the unconditional liberation of all held in slavery, and the breaking of all spiritual ties to the shrine.

A payment is made to the shrine based on the total number to be liberated. Although the shrine is free to use the money as it pleases, some have said they would buy corn mills with which they make money, since in freeing the slaves the shrine loses a way of making a

profit and the priest loses a livelihood (although he is still free to ask other compensation for his services). Once an agreement is reached, documents are prepared, translators go over them with all parties to make sure the agreement is solid, and a public liberation ceremony is planned. It is believed that the public liberation helps both the trokosi and her family to understand that she has been freed.

2. At least one group, Ghana Baptist Convention, has negotiated individually for the liberation of girls. A negotiator visits the shrine, asks for a certain number of girls, and compensates the shrine for them. These girls are taken into vocational training with the understanding that they will never go back to the shrine.<sup>xlviii</sup>

3. One group, Every Child Ministries, has succeeded in liberating a shrine through the effect of the Gospel taking root in the life of the priest so that he requested to liberate his shrine servants and did so without even asking for compensation.

### **Aftercare**

After liberation the girls who are of adult age are given the opportunity by other missions to receive vocational training. The girls are given an introduction to various skills by which they can make a living, and specialize in one. They can learn dressmaking, soapmaking, dying cloth, baking, catering, hairdressing, or traditional kente cloth weaving. They also learn to cook traditional Ghanaian dishes in order to prepare them for normal life. They may also begin literacy training, receive counseling, attend chapel, and have the opportunity to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Many of them do choose to become Christians. After graduation, many of them go into business for themselves. At present, there are at least four vocational centers offering this kind of training: BREDA, the Baptist vocational school at Frankadua in the Eastern Region, Mutual Faith Ministries center in the S Tongu District, Mission International's center at Adidome operated by Sharon Tatian, and IN Network's school at Adidome in the N Tongu District. At present, Every Child Ministries has conducted short-term training and is preparing a vocational center in the Ketu District near Aflao.

In almost all cases, an attempt is made at reconciliation with their families, and this sometimes succeeds. Some of the girls are able to

return to their home villages. At other times the families still refuse them. When the families refuse them and the girls are too young for the vocational training center, special efforts are made to place them with welcoming families. Every Child Ministries' Haven of Hope Home is open to child trokosis who need a stable, loving Christian home.<sup>xlix</sup> Every Child Ministries also maintains traveling counselors to continuously help the women work through the numerous issues of rebuilding normal lives after liberation.

### **Do liberations perpetuate the cycle of misery?**

Many have expressed concern that the purchase of freedom for some slaves may only perpetuate the cycle of slavery and misery. This is a truly legitimate concern. It was one of Every Child Ministries' first concerns in considering this project, but it is an unnecessary fear. In Ghana, not one single shrine area we have dealt with has taken new slaves or re-enslaved former slaves after release. This is partly because of the 1998 law making trokosi a crime, and partly because rather than working for individual release, we work for a community-wide agreement to release all the slaves in given shrines and to end slavery permanently in those areas. Every area that releases its slaves adds to the pressure of public opinion to help influence other areas to do the same. Your "freedom money" in no way perpetuates slavery, but does much to end it. This is ECM's goal and the goal of all NGO's working on the issue—an END to the suffering and shame, with freedom and healing for all of the victims. This is a big job, but possible through Jesus, the Great Healer.

### **Do liberations observe the religious freedom of those freed?**

Another common concern involves religious freedom, which is guaranteed to Ghanaian citizens under the constitution of Ghana. In reality the NGO's working for the liberation of trokosi are Christian, but fiercely uphold freedom of choice in religious matters. Every person is free to choose her religious affiliation, of course. Some do hold on to traditional ways. A study done in 2000 found of trokosi interviewed, about 39% still held to traditional ways, usually claiming it was all they had ever known. About 26% experienced extreme pressure from their families to maintain traditional ways.<sup>1</sup> Some become Muslim, some follow no religion at all, and many of them choose Jesus Christ and become fiery and devoted followers of

His. This is not because of any coercion on the part of the liberating agencies.

At Every Child Ministries, we affirm the right to freedom of religion for everyone, including those who choose to worship in the shrines of African Traditional Religion. As Christians we do not try to impose our religion on anyone because we understand that it was God Himself who created us with the right to choose. It is a part of our personhood, and we would never deny anyone that right. However, every person's freedom stops short of enslaving another person. One person's freedom stops where another's begins. These girls should have freedom, too.

No one has the right to enslave another, even if that enslavement wears a religious face or speaks in religious terms or uses religion as justification for slavery! We at Every Child Ministries have interviewed many women coming out of trokosi, and so far, not one has given consent to a life of servitude. The truth is, trokosi in the shrines have no freedom of religion at all. They are forced to worship the idols. By liberating them from servitude, we are giving them back the dignity of freedom that God gave them in the beginning.

Further, the liberation does not stop the shrine from functioning. It is still there, and people still consult the idol gods. The liberation agreement does, however, stop the shrines from taking slaves and from taking human sacrifices.

### **Why many do become Christians**

For hundreds of years their tribe has been bound by the beliefs that put them into slavery. These women know first hand and in intimate detail what those beliefs and practices are all about. They have lived day by day with the priests. After these girls are freed, it is not uncommon that they no longer want to have anything to do with the traditional ways.

Remember too, their lives were torn from them in a futile attempt to atone for some misdeed until the end of time. When these girls learn that Jesus ALREADY PAID the full sacrifice for our sins, and that God has accepted His sacrifice as FULL and COMPLETE, well, you

can imagine that this is good news indeed!

It is tragic that these girls underwent the sufferings that they did endure, but many of us believe that God is using it to open up a new and better way of life for these people..

**And still, right now, the problem of shrine slavery continues....**

Through the efforts and influence of Christians, the practice of trokosi was outlawed in Ghana in 1998. However, it continues because it is not enforced. There are two reasons it is not enforced. The first is the government's natural and appropriate reluctance to interfere with the customs of the people. Trokosi is a cultural injustice. The second and more powerful reason is the widespread fear that anyone who opposes the priests of the shrines will be cursed. The idols of many of the shrines are war gods obtained at a time when the Ewe tribe was seeking help in tribal wars over land issues. The basic function of the idols is to kill, so people live in abject fear of the shrines and the priests who serve there.

The problem of fear is illustrated in an interview a reliable informant had a few years ago with what was then the first lady of Ghana. "Madame Rawlings," he said, "You speak up for women's and children's rights all the time. Why do you not speak up for the trokosi slaves?" She reportedly looked aghast and answered, "What? Do you want me to be killed?"<sup>li</sup>

Shrines of the Anlo clan in Ghana hold trokosi, but have resisted liberation and defended the practice, defending their practice of trokosi as being more humane than the practices of other districts. Human rights organizations insist that the practice must be totally eradicated.

## The way forward

In seeking to find the way forward, many mistakes have been made and we have learned much. We have learned that unless there is a public agreement and the situation in the shrines is closely monitored, shrines may liberate trokosi today, only to take in new ones tomorrow. We have learned that unless there is careful follow-up with counseling

and an opportunity to develop the skills necessary for a better life, those liberated may return to the shrine. (Of course, they are free to do so. Liberation frees them from obligations to the shrine, but they have freedom of religion and can still choose the path of traditional worship if they so desire.)

We have learned that shrines may inflate the number of trokosi, adding names of relatives so that they will receive a greater compensation package and so that those relatives will be eligible for aid following the liberation. While NGO's have been careful to liberate only those whom the shrine claimed were trokosi, this problem has persisted and been made worse by having traditionalists accuse NGO's of dressing up church members and presenting them as trokosi. Because the shrines are secretive and normally allow access only through appointment, it is hard to verify who is a true trokosi. Part of the purpose of a public liberation ceremony is to publicly and openly verify the veracity of the liberation, but the Africans practice of solidarity or supporting one another, especially clan members, despite its many and obvious values, in this case tends to contribute to practices of deceit. Because of this practice of solidarity and because many still fear speaking out against the practice, public liberation still does not guarantee that anyone would speak up if they knew someone was being presented as a trokosi who was not one. This has presented a serious stumbling block to the liberation effort.

In any effort of this magnitude, we should expect many problems. Ending such an enormous evil is never easy, but we cannot give up because of these setbacks. Groups desiring to see an end to the practice of ritual servitude may discuss amongst themselves the best way forward, and several paths are possible. One thing is sure, however. None of us want to slip back into the mode of pretending the problem does not exist. We cannot accept the notion that it exists only for a few, only for a certain tribe, or that we have made sufficient progress and can now let the issue rest.

God did not make girls to be enslaved, to be sexually exploited by priests often much older than they, outside of marriage, and with neither affection nor commitment to their welfare or that of their children. The idea of enslavement, even for religious purposes, flies against the dignity with which God endued humankind at their



Creation, male and female. Freedom of choice was so essential to our personhood that the Creator allowed us to make the ultimate choice—between good and evil, even knowing the dire consequences of our first parents making the wrong decision.

As abolitionists, we can regroup and rethink our approach toward eradicating the problem. We cannot and we will not give up. We cannot and we will not stop working for the total liberation of all trokosi everywhere and the total eradication of the practice.

God help us. We commit to that, whatever it takes.

## 7. What can everyone do about the problem of shrine slavery?

None of us can say this problem does not affect us. None of us can say there is nothing we can do about this issue. Yes, there is! There is a part for all of us to play. There is something everyone can do about the continuing problem of shrine slavery. Please, find our part and do it! Help to make this practice a thing of the past as we move on to a better and brighter future. Here are some ideas for different groups:

### **Churches and individual Christians can pray.**

**We can PRAY!** This problem is bigger than human power alone can address. We need intervention by God Almighty if we are ever to conquer this great evil.

- Pray that the practice will end or that remaining shrines will be willing to liberate.
- Pray that the efforts of those who seek to justify the practice and to stop liberation of shrine slaves will be null and void.
- Pray that every curse anyone casts on those working for liberation will be returned undelivered on the head of the sender—not out of hatred or a desire to harm anyone, but so that those sending curses may know

that they are dealing with the power of the Almighty.

- Pray for the miraculous salvation of shrine priests and owners, shrine elders, and the leaders of the Afrikania Mission.
- Pray against the spirit of idolatry, the spirit of slavery, the spirit of bondage, the Moloch spirit of child sacrifice. Pray they would no longer be able to operate in West Africa.
- Pray that spiritual lines of communication would be cut off so that shrine priests would no longer be able to consult their idol gods.
- Pray that Christians would have a greater understanding of how abhorrent idolatry is to God and how destructive it is to us.
- Pray that Christians would understand how destructive idolatry is and they would no longer frequent idol shrines.
- Pray that national and local leaders would be moved to call on the Almighty rather than idols.
- Pray that families would begin to give a firm 'NO' when the shrine priest tells them that some alleged offense demands the sacrifice of a virgin daughter.
- Pray that those already liberated would understand the Gospel and come to faith in Christ.
- Pray that those who have received Christ may stand firm and may become affiliated with Bible-teaching churches.
- Pray that churches may welcome former shrine slaves who try to visit or to affiliate with them.
- Pray that Christians may not fear former shrine slaves, but may reach out to them with love and an accepting heart.

- Pray that former shrine slaves may be diligent and highly successful in business.
- Pray that former shrine slaves may find good Christian husbands and that their husbands may fully accept them and not resort to fear and accusation even in hard times.
- Pray for the physical and emotional health of former shrine slaves.
- Pray against all attempts to poison former shrine slaves. Pray that such attempts may be of no effect, and that anyone attempting such a thing may be exposed and prosecuted.
- Pray that Christians would increasingly speak up against shrine slavery at every available opportunity and through every available means.
- Pray that the communities surrounding shrines that still practice trokosi slavery may speak up, expose and denounce the practice.
- Pray for the liberation of shrine slaves in Togo, Benin and parts of Nigeria, where none have as yet been freed.
- Pray that God may direct agencies seeking to liberate slaves to effective methods of liberating and of rehabilitating.
- Pray that anyone who seeks to use this tragic situation for personal gain may be exposed and brought to public shame.
- Pray for the truth may become so manifest that shrine leaders will no longer be able to hide or deny the existence of trokosi in their shrines.
- Pray that former trokosi would find their voices and speak up loudly against the practice. Ask God to set an extra hedge of protection about them as they speak the truth.
- Pray for former trokosi struggling to forgive those who hurt them. May they be able to forgive and find peace of heart.

- Pray for those trying to spread misinformation and define terms in a manner that would minimize the severity of the problem. Pray that every effort at misinformation will instead bring the truth to light.
- Pray for those for whom the physical scars they received as shrine slaves are a source of ridicule and ostracism. Let them learn to accept those marks and use them as proof that God can save even shrine slaves. Pray that those marks that were intended for shame rather be used to promote the Gospel.
- Pray that God may give wisdom, strength and health to those seeking to counsel and teach former shrine slaves.
- Pray that financial resources equal to the project needs may be released to those who need it for the work of this ministry.
- Pray that those receiving funds for this work may remain faithful in the utilization of those funds and in their reporting practices for the glory of God.
- Pray by name for every organization you know of that is seeking to liberate shrine slaves or helping them afterwards. Pray also for churches that are trying to help and those that are welcoming former slaves. Pray God's protection and a special blessing on them.
- Pray by name for every person you know of who is seeking to liberate shrine slaves or helping them afterwards. Pray God's protection and a special blessing on them. Pray for any specific needs you know they have.
- Pray especially for the leaders who are strategizing and organizing the campaign to end trokosi slavery. Pray that they may not be touched by the enemy. Pray they will be faithful in their personal and public lives. Pray they will be guided by God. Pray a hedge of protection around them. Pray that they may enjoy physical health, spiritual purity, emotional and psychological strength.

- Pray specifically by name for any shrine slaves you may meet at the market or elsewhere. Pray for their liberation and for their salvation.
- Pray specifically by name for former shrine slaves you know who have been liberated. Pray they will be fully restored to a productive life in Christ.
- Pray specifically by name for shrine slaves you know who are yet in bondage, by name for the shrines and the priests and shrine owners who are holding them. Pray that God may protect them and that their time of freedom may quickly come.

### **We can SPEAK UP!**

- Use every opportunity to speak up against trokosi boldly, trusting in God's protection. This means speaking up to committees that may come to your neighborhoods investigating the practice. Tell them everything you know. Say the whole truth. It means writing responses to articles in newspapers, calling in to radio talk shows, writing letters to public officials urging them to take action, taking any other opportunity to expose or denounce the practice. Every Christian can do this, and those in positions of Christian leadership have an even stronger voice by reason of their influence and position, and therefore an even stronger responsibility.

### **Those of us who live in regions where trokosi exists can MINISTER TO SHRINE SLAVES.**

- Welcome former trokosi slaves to your services and membership, after they have received Christ. Let them feel a warm welcome when they come to your church.
- Teach your people to welcome former trokosi, both why they should do it and how to do it.
- Seek out former trokosi living in your area. Invite them to church and seek to befriend them and help them in practical ways, much as you would widows and orphans.
- Purchase goods made and/or sold by trokosi when feasible to do so.

- Seek to befriend and to take the Gospel to any slaves still in the shrine when you see them at the market or anywhere. Let them know you love them and are praying for them.
- If you know the Word of God well, volunteer to disciple a shrine slave from your area.

### **Church leaders can TEACH THEIR PEOPLE.**

- Teach your people about the horrors of idolatry. Teach them to seek God's help in every situation and to accept His answers as best and right so that your people will not be tempted to consult idol shrines. See Leviticus 19 vs.4, 26: vs.1, Deut. 5 vs.6-10, 27 vs.5, 29 vs.26-27, 30 vs.17-18, 31 vs.18, Jeremiah 1 vs.16, 2 vs.5, 2 vs.10&11, 2 vs.26-28, 10 vs.2-5, Ezekiel 14 vs.2-9.
- Teach your people what the Bible says about divination. Many families end up sacrificing their daughters because they sought divination at the shrine, and when the gods spoke, they asked the terrible price of their daughters. See Leviticus 19 vs.26, Deuteronomy 18 vs.14, Ezekiel 13 vs.6.
- Teach your people that Christians need not fear trokosi, priests, or curses of the shrine because the power of Jesus Christ is greater than all and God has given believers in Christ authority over evil spirits.

### **We can EVANGELIZE THE COMMUNITY.**

- Those who have come to Christ are much less likely to consult the shrine.

### **We can KEEP OURSELVES PURE.**

- Avoid consulting the shrine yourself. Any answer and any power that does not come from God is not an answer Christians need or want. Healing that comes from the enemy is healing that comes with too great a price.

### **Christian families and individual Christians can:**

- Politely and respectfully express your concern about these issues to your pastor and church leadership. Ask them to please take action. Pray that

they will do so.

- If they don't, you can keep praying while you as a family or as an individual Christian do so anyway.
- Parents, teach your children about these issues.

**Choirs, musicians, and choreographers can:**

- Compose and sing songs exposing and denouncing the practice.
- Compose and sing songs encouraging believers to call on God for help, wisdom, protection, and power.
- Compose and sing songs encouraging believers not to fear the power of evil spirits.

**West African government officials can:**

- Refuse any corruption connected with the practice. Refuse to seek personal benefit from the practice in any way.
- Encourage those working against the practice by offering your services for free and following through on what you promise to do.
- If you are invited to attend a liberation or speak publicly on the issue, speak the truth. Don't promise help or information at the liberation and then deny it privately when NGO representatives visit you at your office.
- Report known trokosi practices in your area. Report what you know truthfully to commissions when they come to study the practice. Report it to NGO's seeking to liberate remaining slaves. Report it to those over you in authority. Report it in writing so that your report becomes official and helps to document the practice. Keep a written copy of your reports so that you can verify what you have reported.
- Help practitioners of trokosi to understand that they are violating the national law of Ghana and that when the prosecutions begin, they will be subject to a mandatory punishment of three years in prison.

- Help practitioners of trokosi to know that times are changing, that the mood of public sentiment is against the practice.
- Speak out publicly against the practice at every opportunity.
- Cooperate fully with the first person, family or group brave enough to bring a lawsuit against the practitioners of this destructive practice.
- Refuse to accept pressure from superiors to cover up the practice or to minimize its extent. Have the courage to be a leader.

**Embassies and international observers can:**

- Take into account the personal interest of those supporting the practice. A prime tactic of those who support the practice is to alter the information gained by embassies so that critical reports will be less condemning than the reality on the ground.

**Villagers and community members can:**

- Stop hiding the practice in your area. Speak up to investigating commissions and NGO's and government officials. When a commission visits and the shrine leaders have sent the trokosi away and tell the commission there is no such thing as trokosi there, you speak up and tell the truth. Tell it quietly or privately if you must, but DO TELL IT. Don't let the shrines keep lying and keep hiding the practice.
- Report harsh punishment and inhuman treatment of trokosi to authorities whenever you observe such. God will protect those who speak up for justice.
- Stop collaborating with the deceitfulness of shrines in presenting for liberation women who are not trokosi, but who are relatives of the priest hoping they will get assistance. If you see someone being presented as a trokosi whom you know is not one, speak up to the NGO sponsoring the liberation.
- Speak up against the practice at every opportunity.



- Refuse to send your daughters to be trokosi. God will protect your family when you call on Him.
- After former trokosi are liberated, accept them back into the community as normal members of society. Greet them, befriend them, help them, pray for them.
- Draw pictures of trokosi life observed in your community. Give the pictures to NGO's fighting the practice and allow them to use them to draw attention to the practice.

**Business people in trokosi communities:**

- Hire appropriately-trained trokosi after they have been liberated.
- Donate to organizations fighting the practice in your area.
- Offer apprenticeship training to former trokosi. NGO's fighting the practice can help you identify good candidates.

**Schools, headmasters and teachers can:**

- Educate students about these issues. Help them understand that ritual servitude is against the law of Ghana and punishable by a mandatory three year prison sentence. Help them know that times are changing and that soon practitioners of trokosi will be prosecuted under the law.
- Encourage students to know that once a trokosi is liberated she is fully free and a real person like them in every way except that she will be behind in her education. Teach them that liberation breaks all ties with the shrine so there is nothing to fear. Encourage them to accept former trokosi who have been liberated and to befriend them.
- Set an example yourself by accepting and befriending former trokosi who have been liberated.
- Those of you who know of girls who dropped out of school to go to the shrine as trokosi, speak up and complain to every local official you know, and to the NGO's fighting this practice.

- Volunteer your help to enable a former trokosi to learn basic literacy and math skills. Any of the NGO's working on the project can connect you with someone you could help.

**Writers, journalists, & media talk show hosts can:**

- Bring this evil to the public attention at every opportunity. When people are no more talking about it, many assume it has died.
- Look at this evil from many different perspectives.
- Help to educate the public on the issue.
- Discourage the tendency to blame one ethnic group, pulling ourselves up by putting them down. This is everyone's problem.
- Counter false information and propaganda with the truth.
- Encourage the victims of the practice to speak up, and teach them how to do so effectively.

**Police and judges can:**

- Sooner or later someone will gain courage to prosecute these offenders. Be ready when that happens to offer justice without consideration of personal gain.
- Let people in your area know that shrine slavery is not only against the law, but that it carries a MANDATORY three-year prison sentence upon conviction.

**African traditional worshipers can:**

- Realize that the practice of trokosi is not essential to your faith, as seen in the fact that many shrines do not take in human beings as living sacrifices. Stop sending your daughters to the shrine. African traditional religion recognizes the existence of one true and living God, the Creator of us all. This God is universally recognized as greater and more powerful than the "lesser" gods worshiped in the shrines. He is surely able to protect you. Ask the priest to consult the Great Creator God rather than the smaller spirits of the shrine. That Great Creator God will

not ask for the sacrifice of your daughter.

- Stop believing that the ancestors will be offended or angry if you do not sacrifice your daughter to the shrine. The ancestors are now wiser than they were even when they were on earth. They will not be pleased with the sacrifice of another one of their children. Honor the ancestors by sending your daughters to school and allowing them to contribute to Africa's future.

**Priests and priestesses of African traditional religion can:**

- Stop taking in trokosi. Many priests and priestesses have already freed their trokosi and stopped taking in more. Since they can do that, and since they have not died or gone crazy, it is clear that it is possible to stop taking in slaves. There is nothing to keep you from beginning to take in animals or money or other goods as payment for your services. You do not have to take in human beings.
- Say the truth about the practice. When the time comes that you do liberate, deal honestly with the NGO that is trying to help you. God Almighty will honor you when you say the truth and do what is right.
- Do not allow yourself to be coerced into continuing the trokosi practice when you do not wish to do so. No outside group has legitimate control over you, and no traditional group can force you to continue the practice. You have the right to liberate your trokosi when you are convinced you should do so. If you allow outside traditional groups to tell you what to do, are you not in effect becoming their slave, too? Think about it. As a leader, you can show courage and make your own choice.

**Friends of West Africa and of human rights around the world can:**

- Help educate others about this issue. Tell everyone you know about it. Blog about it. Write a letter to the editor about it. Write a school paper on it. Distribute website information of organizations fighting it.
- Help support organizations who are fighting this evil practice. Go to their websites and make donations or write to them and ask how you can help.

- Respond to articles on the internet regarding the practice. Many news stories and blogs have places where you can respond.
- Discourage the tendency to blame one ethnic group. When evil exists in the world, it is everyone's problem.

### **A Final Appeal**

Your involvement in finding solutions for the trokosi problem would be a wonderful way to demonstrate that every human life is precious to God. What would you hope others would do if YOU were in slavery? Didn't Jesus tell us, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you?"

Besides obedience to that command of Jesus, recognized even by those of many faiths as "The Golden Rule", your involvement will definitely make a real difference in the lives of some child or woman who may never be freed without your help. If you don't act, she may never experience the blessing of freedom. She may never know a normal life. She may never have a chance to come to Jesus. You can be a channel of rich blessing to her and her family, and to coming generations who will never, by God's grace, know the humiliation of slavery. Please consider prayerfully what you can do.

**If you have information about trokosi or other forms of shrine slavery or if you have ideas on what more can be done to help end this evil practice, or if you would like to work together with Every Child Ministries to help end the practice of shrine slavery, please contact us:**

**Every Child Ministries**

[Ecmafrica@ecmafrica.org](mailto:Ecmafrica@ecmafrica.org)

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