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Ghana's Slaves to the Gods

*by Sarah C. Aird**

The Custom of *Trokosi*

According to Ghana's 1992 Constitution, as well as its obligations under international law, Ghana legally is required to eradicate all slavery and slavery-like practices within the country. Two international agreements to which Ghana is a signatory, the Slavery Convention and the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery (Supplementary Convention), define slavery as "the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised" (Article (1)). The Supplementary Convention further extends this definition to incorporate slavery-related prohibitions including, among other practices, the delivery of a child to another with a view to exploitation of that child. Article 16 of the Ghanaian Constitution, which incorporates the international concept of slavery into Ghana's domestic law, provides that "No person shall be held in slavery or servitude or be required to perform forced labor," and Article 14 guarantees every person the right to personal liberty.

Despite these constitutional and international prohibitions, a pernicious type of slavery known as *trokosi*, based on religious traditions and patriarchal superstitions, continues in Ghana, as well as in Togo, Benin, and southwestern Nigeria. According to this religious custom, when a relative commits a crime, ranging in severity from petty theft to murder, the family must offer a virgin daughter, typically from eight to fifteen years of age, to the local shrine, where she will become a *trokosi*, or "slave of the gods." The priest then exerts full ownership rights over the girl, beating her when she tries to escape, controlling her interaction with others, demanding labor and sex from her, and denying her education, food, and basic health services. Brutal conditions, such as those under which shrine priests keep *trokosi* slaves, meet the definition of slavery under the Ghanaian Constitution, as well as the Slavery Convention and its progeny.

Despite these constitutional and international prohibitions, a pernicious type of slavery known as *trokosi*, based on religious traditions and patriarchal superstitions, continues in Ghana, as well as in Togo, Benin, and southwestern Nigeria.

In spite of such conditions, most families willingly sacrifice a virgin daughter to a shrine. They do so in exchange for the gods' forgiveness, delivering their child to the priest for sexual and economic exploitation, an act that also falls under the extended definition of slavery in the Supplementary Convention. Families believe they will suffer disease, misfortune, or even a succession of deaths until the gods are appeased by providing a virgin. On occasion, they also send virgin daughters to acquire good luck and better fortune.

According to various estimates, there are a little over 5,000 *trokosi* slaves within Ghana alone, and as many as 29,000 to 35,000 among the four countries in which the practice continues. The custom of *trokosi* is part of a traditional fetish belief system, according to which gods or spirits reside in various ritual objects and shrine priests. Within Ghana, *trokosi* slavery endures primarily among the *Ewe* ethnic group, albeit in altered form since its 17th century origins. *Trokosi* slavery originated in Togo and Benin as a war ritual in the 1600s. Before entering combat, warriors would visit religious shrines where they offered women to the war gods in exchange for victory and a safe homecoming. Today, many Ghanaians revere priests of *trokosi* shrines, because they believe these priests communicate directly with the war gods and are particularly influential in the spirit world, even capable of determining life and death.

Modern *Trokosi* Practice

Modern *trokosi* slavery takes a slightly different form as seen from the story of a nine-year-old girl named Abla Kotor, whose family sent her, at the age of six, to the Awlo-Korti shrine in Tefle in southeastern Ghana to atone for a crime her father committed. Over nine years ago, Abla's father raped his own niece and the product of that rape was Abla. To pay for her father's crime, Abla must now live and work for the local *Ewe* priest, Kotinuor Akorli, until he decides she has appeased the gods. Abla's parents gave her up into this life of slavery, where she faces mental, physical, and sexual abuse, in hopes that by so doing, the gods will not bring vengeance upon the Kotor family as retribution for the father's crime. Having lived at the shrine for over three years now, Abla spends her days collecting water, cooking, cleaning, farming, and caring for livestock. Denied access to education, prohibited from leaving, banished from her family home, and soon to face the sexual advances of her master, the *Ewe* priest, Abla is just one of thousands of girls and women enslaved in this manner.

Today, *trokosi* shrines run like businesses in which material goods and money are paramount. Priests will generally not even see visitors unless they are accompanied by an offering. Shrine owners, to whom fetish priests are accountable, are elderly members of the clan or family that owns the fetish shrine, and like the priests, they reap economic benefits from *trokosi* slavery. For both groups, *trokosi* slaves are a special and very welcome windfall. Priests often force slaves to work more than 12 hours a day, often in the hot sun, and do not compensate them for their work. Slaves must turn over to the priest the majority of any earnings they collect from farming and petty trading. The priest provides no financial support whatsoever to his slaves, making them dependent upon their families for sufficient food and clothing. Yet many families are afraid to visit their daughters at the shrines or do not have the resources to provide food and clothing, leaving many shrine slaves in a state of perpetual malnourishment and even semi-starvation. Furthermore, priests prohibit all fetish slaves from attending school and deny them any form of health care.

By tolerating the practice of *trokosi* slavery, Ghana violates its obligations as signatory to the 1930 Forced Labor Convention (ILO No.29) and the 1957 Abolition of Forced Labor Convention (ILO No.105), which define "forced or compulsory labour" as all work or service "exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily." Both Conventions require state parties to undertake to suppress the use of forced or compulsory labor within the shortest possible period. Yet under the custom of *trokosi*, families continue to give away their virgin daughters to shrines where priests force girls to labor in order to generate substantial personal income for themselves and shrine owners. If the girls attempt to escape or fail to fulfill their duties, the priests beat them.

In addition to the clear economic advantages that these fetish priests and shrine owners enjoy, *trokosi* priests also have absolute sexual control over their slaves and justify raping them by claiming that *trokosi* slaves are like priestesses who copulate with the gods through their earthly servants, the priests. In Ghana, the *trokosi* practice is most prevalent among two patrilineal groups: the *Ewes* of Tongu and Anlo, and the *Dangmes* of the greater Accra

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The Reebok Human Rights Foundation

Juliana Dogbadzi, a former *trokosi* slave and recipient of the 1999 Reebok Human Rights Award.

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region. Within these communities, the number of children a man begets determines his status, thus a fetish priest elevates his status within the community by impregnating many *trokosi* slaves. As a consequence, once *trokosi* slaves have had one menstrual cycle, priests rape them on a regular basis.

Ghana's Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice conducted an investigation of the *trokosi* shrines, finding that the *trokosi* practice discriminates against women and children. As a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Ghana is bound to abolish all existing laws, regulations, and customs that constitute discrimination against women (Article 2(f)), as well as ensure the full development and advancement of women (Article 3) and provide equal access to education for both genders (Article 10). Yet under the *trokosi* practice, families send only girls to the shrines, where they are raped, denied basic life necessities, including access to education, and are so stigmatized that even when released, many will suffer lifelong societal rejection.

Trokosi slavery also violates Ghana's obligations as signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Under this instrument, State Parties must strive to ensure no child is deprived of access to health care and must take measures to abolish traditional practices prejudicial to children's health (Article 24(1&3)). Traditionally, Ghana has not protected *trokosi* slaves, who are denied access to even the most fundamental health services. The Convention also recognizes all children's right to education (Article 28); protection from economic exploitation, especially when harmful to their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development (Article 32); and freedom from all forms of sexual exploitation, sexual abuse (Article 34), and torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Article 37). Clearly, *trokosi* slavery violates this international agreement by condoning, if not encouraging, the mass rape of children, their forced labor, and denial of their education.

The Practice of Generations

Under most circumstances, a priest will keep a *trokosi* slave for more than ten years, but he may hold her for her entire life, depending in part upon the severity of the crime her relative committed. Should she die in captivity, the family must replace her with another virgin daughter or offer the priest a large sum of money, which is generally beyond most families' economic capability. As penitence for particularly hideous crimes, such as homicide, some families must send generation after generation of virgin girls to the shrine. If the priest tires of a *trokosi* slave, he may release her from the shrine, but the family must replace her and the priest may demand her return at any time because she is a lifelong "slave of the gods." Any children born to *trokosi* slaves are also slaves of the priest and are known as *trokosiviwo*. When the priest dies, the priest next in line inherits his *trokosi* slaves and *trokosiviwo* children, so *trokosi* becomes a tradition in perpetuity. Only priests and shrine owners may release a *trokosi* slave from the shrine, with shrine owners maintaining the ultimate power to affect such releases.

Fetish priests who favor *trokosi* slavery view the practice as an effective means to keep people from breaking community norms. They perceive *trokosi* slaves as links between the gods and the family, reminding family members to lead moral lives. According to the priests, the *trokosi* slaves constitute role models, saving the entire family from punishment, and their example deters crime within communities. Yet, as Mark Wisdom, Executive Director of Fetish Slaves Liberation Movement, has pointed out, "If it is intended to serve as a check to crime, then we can say that it is not effective because it has existed since time immemorial but people continue to commit crimes." Some families are so dedicated to the *trokosi* practice that they have sacrificed as many as five generations of daughters to the shrines. There are even instances in which the offense occurred so long ago no one remembers what it was, let alone who committed it.

Families willingly participate in the *trokosi* tradition, turning their daughters over to local shrines with complete conviction that if they do not do so, the gods will wreak vengeance upon the family, or even the entire community. This belief is so strong relatives often forcibly return escaped or released *trokosi* slaves to shrines. Many people also fear former *trokosi* slaves, believing they bring misfortune. When community members easily can identify escaped or released slaves by their *trokosi* names or scars from beatings, they may reject them just as the former slaves' own families already have. Uneducated, with no employable skills, and no resources of their own, former *trokosi* slaves often are unmarriageable and unable to make a living on their own. Desperate and having encountered rejection from all sides, some return to the shrines, as they may be the only places the former slaves are welcome.

> If the priest tires of her, he may release her from the shrine but the family must replace her, and the priest may demand her return at any time because she is a lifelong 'slave to the gods.'

Reform and Opposition

International obligations and constitutional protections outlawing slavery and slavery-like practices alone have proved ineffective in ridding Ghana of the *trokosi* custom. Therefore, over the last decade a variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government bodies, and individuals have been working to eradicate

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trokosi slavery, focusing on educating the general public about the existence of this inhumane practice, as well as pressuring the Ghanaian government to pass legislation specifically outlawing all customary and ritual enslavement. Juliana Dogbadzi, an ex-*trokosi* slave, has brought the issue to light internationally, braving the difficulties of returning to life outside of slavery and speaking out at every opportunity to encourage other *trokosi* slaves to escape as she did. Dogbadzi escaped from her shrine the day after a priest ordered three men to beat her. The beating was so severe that Dogbadzi almost lost her unborn child. For her work to free *trokosi* slaves, Dogbadzi received the 1999 Reebok Human Rights Award. International Needs Ghana, a local NGO, also took a leadership role in this fight and coordinated efforts among the various entities working to eliminate the practice. Along with Dogbadzi and International Needs, the burgeoning women's movement in Ghana has played a particularly key role in challenging *trokosi* slavery and other practices that discriminate against women. As a result of such collective efforts, on June 12, 1998, the Ghanaian Parliament passed the 1996 Criminal Code Amendment Bill (Amendment), which amends the 1960 Criminal Code, banning all forms of ritualized forced labor. In September 1998, President Jerry John Rawlings signed the Amendment into law.

The Amendment adds Section 314A to the 1960 Criminal Code and criminalizes all customary or ritual enslavement. It provides that "(1) Whoever (a) sends to or receives at any place any person; or (b) participated in or is concerned in any ritual or customary activity in respect of any person with the purpose of subjecting that person to any form of ritual or customary servitude or any form of forced labour related to customary ritual commits an offence and shall be liable on conviction to imprisonment for a term not less than three years." The Amendment defines those persons "concerned in" as anyone who sends, takes, consents, or agrees orally or in writing to the taking or receiving of anyone for the performance of the customary ritual. It also includes anyone present at any activity related to the ritual. Along with these provisions, the Amendment establishes indecent assault as a criminal offense and facilitates the prosecution of rape cases, both crimes regularly committed against *trokosi* slaves for which the Ghanaian judiciary should punish priests.

To date, the government has not enforced this new legislation criminalizing ritual enslavement and have made no arrests. According to its obligations under ILO No.29, however, Ghana must enforce this legislation. Article 25 of the agreement obliges all state parties to ensure that the illegal exaction of forced or compulsory labor be punishable as a penal offense and that the penalties imposed be adequate and strictly enforced. ILO No.29 also requires signatories to issue regulations requiring the examination of any complaints received from victims of forced or compulsory labor.

Some activists, however, do not criticize the government for its failure to enforce the 1996 Amendment. During a 1998 national workshop held in Ghana on the *trokosi* system, participants, including the Ghanaian Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice, Amnesty International, and the Ghana Human Rights Coalition, agreed that it would be wise to allow two years to educate fetish priests, shrine owners, and communities about the new law before prosecuting them under it. Because superstition and fear are the leading factors driving the tradition, local Ghanaian abolitionists have expressed skepticism that legislation alone will end this custom. In particular, activists have expressed concern that without education and dialogue with priests, shrine owners, and the general public, the practice will be pushed underground rather than eradicated. Shrines might not continue to practice *trokosi* openly but might, nevertheless, maintain the tradition, making it even more difficult to eliminate. Community members, unconvinced of the immorality of the practice, but wanting to avoid punishment, might send their virgin daughters across the border to Togo or Benin where the practice continues unrestricted.

Beginning in September 2000, which will mark two years after the Amendment's passage, activists plan to begin lobbying vigorously the government to implement the legislation. In the meantime, local groups' efforts to keep the issue alive in the news, and the resultant growing awareness and unpopularity of the practice have led to a number of negotiated liberations and rehabilitation of *trokosi* slaves. As of November 1999, International Needs Ghana, the most active of the local abolitionist organizations, has successfully negotiated the liberation of 2,000 girls and women from approximately 132 different shrines in Ghana and estimates there are another 3,400 who remain in bondage. Unfortunately, because community beliefs surrounding the *trokosi* practice are strong, some Ghanaians still believe the only way to ensure the safety of the community and the family is to replace liberated *trokosi* slaves with others.

Another aspect of the liberation movement that has proved troublesome is trying to convince *trokosi* priests to change their practices. Activists have had to appeal to priests' and shrine owners' economic concerns, as well as to their sense of morality. In exchange for the release of *trokosi* slaves, shrines often request cash, cattle, and alcohol. Activists hope that these incentives will replace the economic benefits derived from having *trokosi* slaves, leaving shrines self-sufficient. To encourage shrine owners and priests to participate in the negotiation process, International Needs Ghana gives them 200,000 cedis, or approximately $74 U.S. If the shrine owners and priests agree to release the *trokosi* women and girls, International Needs Ghana gives them 2.5 million cedis, or approximately $925 U.S., to use for the liberation ceremony. Some activists worry that the offer of cash and other material incentives in exchange for the liberation of *trokosi* slaves will encourage priests and shrine owners to try to acquire more slaves in hopes of reaching profitable settlements. During the liberation ceremony, the priest and shrine owners sign legal documents acknowledging that the *trokosi* slaves and their families are henceforth free from any and all obligations to the shrine. In addition, a rehabilitation package of five heifers and one bull is donated to each participating shrine, and each liberated *trokosi* slaves receives a vocational training package to help her develop the skills necessary to become economically self-sufficient.

Opposition to Reform

Despite such progress, many fetish priests and local communities continue to resist dissolution of the *trokosi* practice. One priest clearly expressed his frustration, shared by many priests, that there is no way to replace a fetish slave's forced sexual services when he said: "You can't have sex with a cow." A few priests, after agreeing to the liberation of their *trokosi* slaves, have later lamented the decision, feeling that the compensation provided in exchange for their slaves' freedom was inadequate. They resent the sudden loss of girls and women who had guaranteed income to the shrine.

The greatest opposition to the eradication of *trokosi* slavery comes from those people who view the changes as attacks against their fetish beliefs and religion. Article 21(1)(c) of the Ghanaian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, stating that all persons have the right to "practice any religion and to manifest said practice," and a vocal and aggressive minority of fetish priests have used this provision to resist attempts to eradicate the *trokosi* practice, claiming that this right trumps Articles 14 and 16 prohibiting slavery. Officials have been hesitant to restrict *trokosi* slavery due to this constitutional debate and because many view the practice as an integral part of their religious beliefs. The most virulent group of fetish priests, known as the Afrikania Renaissance Mission, is determined to maintain the tradition, claiming a right to preserve the culture of their forefathers. Other proponents of the *trokosi* practice claim

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LEGISLATIVE FOCUS

Attempts to Close the United States Army School of the Americas

*by Barbara Cochrane Alexander**

In 1989, then-Speaker of the House of Representatives, Thomas Foley, initiated a Congressional investigation into the murders in El Salvador of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter. The investigation began amid growing concerns that U.S. funds were used to train the murderers in military tactics. Representative Joseph Moakley headed a commission (the Moakley Commission) that traveled to El Salvador to investigate the deaths. The Moakley Commission learned that 19 of the 26 Salvadoran officers responsible for the murders received military training at the United States Army School of the Americas (SOA). The SOA is a controversial U.S.-operated military training school, funded by U.S. taxpayers, which instructs members of Latin American militaries in combat tactics and strategies, with questionable results from the perspective of human rights activists. After the Moakley Commission discovered the U.S. involvement in the 1989 murders, a movement to close the SOA began. Subsequently, this movement has endured many unsuccessful legislative attempts.

Legislative Background

In the 103rd, 104th, and 105th Congresses (spanning from 1993 to 1998), Representative Joseph Kennedy introduced several bills seeking to severely reduce funding to the SOA or simply close the school. These pieces of legislation either died in committees, were unanimously withdrawn, failed to make it to vote, or were defeated when brought to a vote. During these years, Representative Kennedy was able to gather growing support in opposition to the SOA. When Representative Kennedy left Congress, Representative Moakley reassumed the lead role in the ongoing campaign to close the school.

Substance of H.R. 732

On February 11, 1999, Representative Moakley introduced a bill (H.R. 732) to close the SOA. The House of Representatives (House) referred H.R. 732 to the House Committee on Armed Services, where it has remained since its introduction. The bill outlines Congressional findings that there is a history of SOA graduates committing human rights abuses (sec. 1(2)). These graduates include Salvadoran death squad leader Roberto D'Aubuisson, Panamanian dictator and drug dealer Manuel Noriega, and Argentinian dictator Leopoldo Galtieri, a leader of the "dirty war," during which some 30,000 civilians were killed or disappeared. The Congressional findings also linked the SOA with the 1989 murders, as well as the well-publicized murder of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero on March 24, 1980.

Recent Events Delaying H.R. 732

On July 29, 1999, the House voted 230-197 to include House Amendment 368 (H.AMDT 368), which reduced SOA funding in the House version of the Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2000 (H.R. 2606). On August 3, 1999, the House passed H.R. 2606 and H.AMDT 368 by a vote of 385 to 85 (14 representatives abstained). According to both proponents and opponents of the bill and the SOA, if the SOA did not receive its funds, it would be forced to close. The bill was referred to both the House and Senate Foreign Operations Appropriations Conference Committees. On September 22, 1999, however, House and Senate conferees voted to restore the funding that H.AMDT 368 restricted. The result is that the SOA will remain open for at least another year.

Implications of H.R. 732

According to Representative Moakley, closing the SOA will send the message that the United States will not condone human rights abuses such as those that SOA graduates perpetrated. Opponents of H.R. 732, such as Secretary of the Army Louis Caldera, however, argue that the SOA plays an important role in addressing real threats to U.S. security interests.

Those persons wishing to see the SOA closed hope that the U.S. Army received a message from H.AMDT 368. According to Representative Moakley's office, there are indications that the Army's leadership is prepared to make substantive changes in the SOA. In the interim, Representative Moakley will continue to work on gathering support to push forward with H.R. 732 and related legislation, such as an amendment to next year's appropriations bills in the 107th Congress.

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slavery does not exist in Ghana and that women and girls held in the shrines are priestesses, not slaves. These traditionalist groups organize press conferences, circulate defamatory information to discredit the work of the abolitionists, and have even tried to disrupt abolitionist press conferences. In fact, resistance has proved so strong that many activists have received death threats for their work.

Conclusion

The disheartening effect of such heavy resistance is that some children, such as nine-year-old Abla Kotor, remain enslaved. Abla is in a race against time. According to Mensah Wisdom, Programs Coordinator of International Needs Ghana, it appears that Kotinuor Akorli has decided to sexually initiate Abla and has not allowed her release. Following *trokosi* practice, Akorli may treat her as his concubine as soon as Abla experiences her first menstruation. Although International Needs Ghana has succeeded in negotiating the release of thousands of former *trokosi* slaves, Abla has not been one of the lucky ones and remains enslaved to this day, a stark reminder to activists challenging this practice that the fight to eradicate *trokosi* slavery is far from over.

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