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**Domestic Slavery and Societal Serenity: A Study into
the Liberation of Trokosi Women in South-Eastern Ghana**

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Introduction

Ghana has very rich and vibrant culture with many positive elements such as diversity, hospitality, respect and consideration for others irrespective of age, sex and status, and a preference for consensus instead of conflict. It is these elements, which have helped the country to survive in the face of adversity. However, like all cultures, Ghanaian culture is dynamic and contain positive traditional values (culture), knowledge and practices. An important element of this dynamism is its ability to change.

Culture provides individual with a set of common understandings that they use to fashion their actions. It allows us to fathom in rather broad terms what we can expect of others and what they can expect of us. Simultaneously, culture affords a kind of map or a set of guideposts for finding our way about life. It provides a configuration of dos and don'ts, a complex patterned mental "stop-and-go" sign that tell us about the social landscape: "Notice this," "Ignore that," "Avoid this action," and "Do that," as maintained by Huges *et al.* (2002). In providing common understandings, culture binds the separated lives of individuals into a larger whole, making society possible by providing a common framework.

Cultures which are not able to respond to new challenges, and leave behind practices which are no longer appropriate, became backward and negative instead of being a source of value. Cultural practices, which discriminate against the vulnerable (mostly women and children) and prevent them from fulfilling the sense of belongingness as full citizens of a nation need to be reconsidered and fashion to allow every individual of the society to operate to their full potential. Unfortunately, there are certain people who use culture to justify discriminatory practices against women and other vulnerable groups of people in the society.

Although legal measures have been put in place to eliminate discrimination against women and also improve the overall status of women, traditional beliefs and practices very often make the measures ineffective as women are often held to a higher standard of cultural compliance than men. *Trokosi* is one of such cultural beliefs and practices.

Trokosi is a practice in Ghana, Togo and Benin where fetish shrines take human beings, usually young virgin girls, in payment for services, or in religious atonement for alleged misdeeds of a family member (Lampsey, 2011). Thus, young virgin girls are taken to the shrine to atone for the sin or crime committed by a relative. These girls are permanently

removed from their family homes, taken to a strange place where they are forced into manual labour and sexual abuse and left there by their parents not knowing if they will even see them again. The girls go through emotional trauma. If somehow they are released, society and even their own family sometimes shun them. These girls work in the priests' field or shrine, deprived of the love of parents and community, grow into adult women at the shrine. At puberty, she may be subjected to the sexual advances of the shrine's priest and bear him children (Nukunya, 2003). All that the girls know is a life of sexual, mental and physical abuse and deprivation under the *Trokosi* slave system. They are stigmatized in the community, feared because of the belief that they are owned by the gods. The *Trokosiwo* (wives of the gods) become vulnerable and susceptible to all kinds of issues as they lack basic information on how to address them (International Needs Ghana, 2007). Currently there are over 17 shrines in the South Eastern part of Ghana which are practicing the *Trokosi* system and about 6 girls were sent to some of these shrines to atone for the sins committed by their relatives in this year alone (Lamptey, 2011).

Based on the recognition of the importance of the roles and status of women in development process, many organizations such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Community Based Organisations (CBOs), and government ministries and agencies are using an increasingly wide array of strategies to address the problem women are facing in society. These organisations are working on all fronts in an attempt to strengthen women's status, so as to give them economic security which in turn would help to guarantee food security and other forms of family livelihoods (Edwards and Hulme, 1995).

Turner and Hulme (1997), observed that the policies of donor agencies and the NGOs on the plight of women in the developing countries (of which Ghana is no exception) have evolved from welfare concerns that emphasized relief towards status enhancing programmes that aims at building self sustaining development opportunities for women. According to Hyde and Miske (2000), over the years, women empowerment and other gender issues have been discussed and debated across social, economic, and political sphere and the existence of significant gender gaps not only reinforce social inequality but also constrains girls and women's ability to participate in their own development and that of their communities. In some instances, there exist great limitations to women's contributions even at the household level and these inequalities and limitations have retarded not only national development but also the development process of individuals household and communities in general.

The contribution of women to the community and household economies cannot be overemphasised. To involve women in the planning of development programmes at local level is thus a desirable end in itself. As their involvement would be a mean to ensuring that development objectives have a chance of being achieved.

Research Questions

Based on the background, the following research questions are formulated for the study:

1. what are the background characteristics of the liberated *Trokosiwo* in Ghana?
2. what kind of interventions are organizations undertaking to assist in the liberation of the *Trokosiwo* in the area?
3. how do the women view the liberation interventions on their societal reintegration?
4. what are the challenges faced by released *Trokosiwo* during bondage?

Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to assess the societal reintegration of the liberated *Trokosiwo* in South-Eastern Ghana. Specifically, the study is set to:

1. determine the background characteristics of the liberated *Trokosiwo* in Ghana;
2. ascertain the contributions of intervention organizations undertake in the release of the *Trokosiwo* in Ghana;
3. find out the perceived influence of the interventions on their reintegration into society;
and
4. determined the challenges faced by the released *Trokosiwo* during bondage.

Methodology

The study was conducted among the *ex-Trokosiwo* in the South-Eastern Ghana where the *Trokosi* system is practiced. The study employed descriptive survey design, and used both quantitative and qualitative data to understand social and human problems, based on building a complex, holistic picture, from a natural setting. Due to the fact that most of the respondents could neither read nor write, interviewing as a scientific tool of social research was used as the principal technique to collect primary data directly from the field. Also, because of its flexibility, the interview schedule enabled the authors to have the chance of interacting with the research subjects by adopting their local language as a means of communication and therefore making it possible to get an in-depth explanation of issues.

The face-to-face interactions with respondents helped build good rapport, and created a relaxed and healthy atmosphere and therefore, increased the response rate.

Snowball sampling technique was employed to locate the respondents because they were scattered in their communities and could not be easily identified. By this method, one of the liberated *Trokosiwo* was identified and she also showed the location of others who benefited from the *Trokosi* liberation intervention. This process continued until a sample size of sixty (60) liberated women were obtained for this study. The data collected were processed, analysed and presented in frequency distributions using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. To ensure a high quality study, several strategies including data triangulation, establishment of chain of evidence, and explanation-building analytic strategy were adopted to improve dependability and transferability of the findings.

Results And Discussions

Background characteristics of the respondents

The study tried to find out the background information of the *Trokosiwo* who were liberated from the enslavement under the *Trokosi* tradition. These background characteristics include age, marital status, number of years in bondage and number of children born while in bondage (Table 1).

Table 1: Background characteristics of respondents (n = 60)

Background characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Age distribution		
20 - 24	6	10.0
25 - 29	33	55.0
30 - 34	15	25.0
35 - 39	6	10.0
Marital status		
Married	34	56.7
Single	22	36.6
Divorced	3	5.0
Widowed	1	1.7
Number of years in bondage		
6 - 10	10	16.7
11 - 15	27	45.0
16 - 20	17	28.8
21 - 25	6	10.0

Number of children born in bondage

1	5	8.3
2	24	40.0
3	24	40.0
4	7	11.7

Source: field survey, 2008

Age Distribution of Respondents

With the aim of finding out the age categories of those liberated from the enslavement, the results in Table 1, revealed that the majority of the respondents (55.0%) were in the age bracket of 25 – 29. There were also a substantial number of the respondents in the age group of 30 – 34 representing 25.0 percent of the respondents who were freed from the *Trokosi* bondage. Besides, respondents in the age range of 20 - 24 and 35 - 39 were 10.0 percent each. None of the respondents were above 39 years of age and most of them were below 30 years. As argued by Hoyer and Roodin (2003), this is the early adulthood stage of life which is characterised by the greatest energy, contradiction and stress. This is the stage of forming and pursuing aspirations (fulfilling dreams), raising family, and establishing a senior position in adult world. This period can be immensely rewarding in terms of love, occupational advancement, and the realisation of one’s major goals. However, it can also be disastrous if the individual is denied the necessary opportunities in attaining her or his dreams.

Marital Status of Respondents

In Africa, and Ghana for that matter, marriage plays important role in the life of most men and women. More especially, as the respondents were forced to ‘marry’ and have sexual intercourse with the priests at anytime without any hesitation (Dovlo *et al.*, 1997; Nukunya, 2003), the ability of these women to find their true partners will be a significant stride for society. It was therefore, necessary to find out the current marital status of the respondents. The results reveal that majority of the respondents (56.7%) were married. Also, a small number (5.0%) maintained that though they were married after their release from the bondage, they got divorced, and only one respondent claimed that she was widowed. A substantial number of respondents (36.7%) indicated that they were not married. It is very significant to note that the high number of respondents who were married could be interpreted to mean high regard for marriage despite the respondents’ status as *ex-trokosiwo*.

This invalidates the public perception that most *ex-trokosi* slaves are often unmarriageable. This results also deviate from the assertions made by Nukunya (2003) and Aird (2007) that since the *trokosi* women have no formal education, with no employable skills, and no resources of their own, *ex-trokosi* slaves are unable to make a living on their own and often find it very difficult to get somebody to marry them mainly because of the stigma attached to them. However, the considerably high number of respondents not married could perhaps mean that they were yet to come to terms with the trauma that they had gone through while in bondage, or the societal influence and stigmatization by regarding them as *Trokosiwo*, though they are freed, still stands.

Number of Year(s) in Bondage

The study obtained information on the number of years that the respondents spent in captivity. This aspect of the study revealed that substantial number of respondent (45%) were in bondage for 11 to 15 years while approximately 29 percent of them said that they were in bondage for 16 to 20 years. Again, 16.7% maintained that they were in bondage for 6 to 10 years. Ten percent of the respondent reported they were in bondage for 21 to 25 years.

Comparing these results with the ages of respondents, it could be deduced that most of them were enslaved in their tender ages or early childhood where in their psychosocial development, these girls are expected to develop the unbroken determination to exercise free choice as well as self-restraint in spite of the unavoidable experiences of shame, doubt, and a certain rage over being controlled by others. It is by this stage that they have the courage to pursue valued goals guided by conscience and not paralysed by guilt. As asserted by Hoyer and Rooding (2003), the individuals' exploration and discovery of ways to overcome feelings of powerlessness leads to a self-view of being competent and effective. Alternatively, the individuals may fail to discover how to overcome feeling powerless, leading to feelings of guilt about being dominated by primitive urges. This result concurs with other reports that it is young girls who are taken to the shrines to atone for the offenses of their family relations (Nkunya, 2003; International Needs Australia, 2007; International Needs Ghana, 2007 and Lamprey, 2011).

Number of children born while in bondage

The results revealed that most of them (91.2%) had at least two children for their slave masters with majority (51.7%) having at least 3 children for their slave masters. This high number of children could be as a result of their inability to say no to the sexual desires of their slave master, thereby preventing them from any family planning and reproductive spacing of children. On the average, each respondent had approximately three children which is similar to the report by Every Child Ministries (ECM), an NGO, which maintained that averages of four children were born by each *trokosi* slave women to their slave masters (ECM, 2008). This revelation also concurs with reports by Nukunya (2003) and ECM (2008) that the decision to have sex is not at the control of the *Trokosiwo*, but their 'slave masters'.

Problem Faced while in Bondage

Respondents were asked to indicate the major problems that they faced while in bondage.

Table 5: Problem Faced while in Bondage

Problems Identified	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sexual Abuse	60	100.0
No Access to Formal Education	60	100.0
Improper Health Care	48	80.0
Insufficient Feeding	20	33.3
Restriction of Freedom of Movement	29	48.3

Source: Field survey, 2008

It was maintained by all the respondents that they were sexually abused; and also denied access to formal education. Also, 80.0 percent of the respondents further stated that they were not properly attended to any time they fell sick. The only medical treatment they were provided with was the herbal treatment. On feeding, about 33.3 percent of respondents indicated that while in bondage, they were not given sufficient food to eat. Furthermore, 48.3 percent of the respondents indicated that they had no freedom of movement; and that each time they moved out of the shrine compound it must be with permission and at the prerogative of their slave master. The respondents' assertions substantiate the claims by Dovlo and Kufogbe (1997); Nukunya (2003); ECM (2008) and Lamptey (2011) that *ex-trokosiwo* passed through very atrocious and inhuman treatments whilst in bondage. Their lives are a living hell, in constant dread, shame and abject despair, surrounded by others who have also had their hopes and dreams shattered by the lives they are living, some of whom had been enslaved for their entire lives (International Needs Australia, 2007).

Kinds of emancipation interventions made by organisations

Besides the International Needs Ghana (ING), which was instrumental in their release and empowerment, other organisations and ministries such as Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWAC), Commission of Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), Planned Parenthood Association of Ghana (PPAG), Ghana Education Service (GES), District Assemblies (DA) and Religious Bodies (RB) contributed in making them feel acknowledged by the society. As they put it, “the ING played diverse and pivotal roles in our release and empowerment to feel part of the society again”. Also, 41.7 percent of respondents asserted that the ING actually provided funds and logistics to the priest for their release while 58.3 percent also asserted that the NGO in some cases supported the priest with money. All these were done to pave way for their eventual release. All these assertions were corroborated by the representatives of ING. It was revealed that initially, ten cows were demanded but six were presented. When the practice of *Trokosi* slavery was made a criminal offense by the Government of Ghana in 1998, the compensation for their release ceased. Nowadays, to help free the enslaved women, assistance is given to the priests in their farming activities. For instance, the ING made available a tractor which ploughed and prepared the land for sowing and planting of their crops.

Table 6: Type of Interventions and Organisations Involved in the Emancipation of the Enslaved Women

Kinds of interventions made	Organisations involved						
	ING	MOWAC	CHRAJ	PPAG	GES	DA	RB
Negotiations for their release	+						+
Provision of funds and logistics for their release	+						
Guidance and counselling	+						+
Entrepreneurial training	+				+		
Civic education	+		+				
Provision of food during the training	+						
Provision of training materials	+	+			+		
Provision of uniform	+						
Accommodation during their training	+						
Provision of initial working capital	+	+				+	
Micro-credit	+						
Regular experts’ business advice	+						
HIV/AIDS education	+			+			
Supervision and monitoring	+						

Source: Field survey, (2008).

As part of empowering the ex-slave women, ING in collaboration with some of the other organisations gave them entrepreneurial training in the various vocations and trades. It was

revealed from the survey that 25.0 percent of the respondents offered bread baking, 21.6 percent and 20.0 percent also offered batik, tie & dye making, and soap and pomade making, respectively. About 17 percent of respondents indicated that they offered dress making while another 16.7 percent also indicated that they offered hair dressing as a vocation. As to who selected vocation for the respondents, it emerged that all respondents selected their own vocation and trade. In terms of the criteria used in the selection, all the respondents indicated that they considered personal interest, and capability to complete the chosen vocation. Assertions by respondents were confirmed by the project coordinator of ING. It was also indicated that even before selecting their vocations, respondents went through entrepreneurial guidance and counselling to prepare them emotionally and mentally for them to make the best decision in choosing their favourite vocations. The assertion of the project beneficiaries that they selected the trades/vocations themselves appears to confirm Dighton's (1971) views that when the students/apprentices select occupational course which they prefer, they are much more likely to be motivated than they would be in the absence of such free choice.

The study also sought to find out who actually footed the cost of the training. From the study, all the respondents maintained that the entire cost of entrepreneurial training was borne by the ING. The respondents expatiated that not only did the NGO provided all the training materials needed for the entire duration of the training but also provided food, clothing (uniform) and accommodation throughout their stay at the training centre. These claims were also confirmed by two facilitators and the project coordinator. According to the coordinator, the essence of the sole-sponsorship was to whip up the interest of the liberated *Trokosiwo* to participate fully in the socio-economic empowerment training course.

Results of the study also indicated that all the respondents were provided with working capital as well as working tools to enable them to establish their various trades and make a living on their own. Other forms of assistance from the ING included micro-credit (38.3%) at affordable interest rate and business advice (83.3%). The study also indicated that the majority (68.3%) received assistance from the District Assembly, about 18.3 percent of respondents also stated that they had received assistance from some religious organizations while 13.3 percent said the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs also provided them with some assistance.

The study further tried to find out whether the liberated women were having regular supervision and monitoring or not in their business activities. Seventy percent of the respondents indicated they had been visited a number of times while the rest reported they did not have any visits. These visits were mainly done by the ING. Because monitoring and evaluation were considered indispensable in business management, ING kept track records of visits to beneficiaries who had completed their training and this also helped management to know whether those who undergone the training were interested and dedicated to their chosen vocations. For those who benefited from the training, monitoring mechanisms include regular visits to the business site by the ING monitoring team to assess progress of work. However, the co-ordinator identified some difficulties in tracking some of the liberated *Trokosiwo* who were beneficiaries of the training programme. Some of them were reported to have relocated to other places making it very difficult for the monitoring team to track and visit them.

Perceived influence of the interventions on their societal reintegration

The study also sought to find out the current status of the respondents in society after the interventions and reintegration. From the study, 93.3 percent of respondents claimed it had increase their economic status in society while 91.7 percent asserted there was improvement in their decision making power in society (Table 7). This revelation concurs with the findings of Krishnaraj and Kay (2002) in field studies conducted under International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) gender mainstreaming review in Asia in which women who benefited from economic empowerment indicated that they could decide on how to spend their own income.

Table 7: Perceived Influence of the Interventions on their Reintegration into the Society

Areas of influence	Frequency	Percentages
Increase in economic status in society	56	93.3
Increase in decision making power	55	91.7
Increase in recognitions as part of society	45	75.0
Reduction in societal stigmatisation	44	73.3

The study attempted to establish whether members of their communities still regarded beneficiaries as *Trokosi* or not. It revealed from the study that about 25.0 percent of the respondents were still regarded as *Trokosiwo*. In their survey, International Needs Ghana

(2007) asserted that 83 percent of the liberated *Trokosiwo* indicated that people in their communities did not regard them as the enslaves. The study further tried to ascertain the effect of the intervention on stigmatization from the society. A substantial number of the respondents (26.7%) claimed they are still stigmatised in the society. Some of them further stated that the stigmatization has negatively affected their status and daily activities in the society to the extent of recording low sales in their businesses.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The respondents in this study were predominantly young adults. None of them was above 39 years of age. It is therefore expected, at this stage of life, that they will be pursuing a lot of dreams in their socio-economic life in society. Also, as a characteristic of these age category of raising families, most of the respondents were married which was against public perception that they are unmarriageable. The outcome of the survey provides evidence that many of the respondents spent from 6 to 25 years in bondage and as high as 83.3 percent of them spent more than 10 years in bondage. Enslaving women for such amount of years in a world-acclaimed democratic country like Ghana is a disturbing issue that demands urgent need for affirmative action in their liberation and empowerment.

Most of the respondents gave birth to at least 2 children for their slave masters. This is empirically due to the fact that they do not have control over when to have sex and how to have family planning and birth spacing. This is absolute decision of the slave masters, hence, the slave masters sleep with them at anytime so desired. In addition to the sexual abuse, other major problems the respondents faced during bondage include lack of access to formal education, poor health care and restriction of movement. These are some of the inhumane ordeals that *Trokosiwo* faced during bondage and some of them spent their whole life under these atrocious experiences. There is therefore an exigent need for continual and regular counselling and guidance for these women to have complete emotional and psychological emancipation that will enable them to feel part and parcel of the normal society and to acquire all the societal needs.

There were elaborate networking and collaborations efforts by both governmental and non-governmental organisations in the emancipation and reintegration of the enslaved women into the society. Based on their area of expertise, and functional duties and responsibilities, these institutions played diverse roles in contributing to the emancipation of the women. For

instance, the Commission of Human Right and Administrative Justices (CHRAJ) provided human right education to the women; Ghana Education Service (GES) also assisted in training the facilitators of the vocational training; and Planned Parenthood Association of Ghana (PPAG) provided respondents with HIV/AIDS education. The main governmental agency responsible for advocacy on behalf of women and children (MOWAC) also made available sewing machines and other working tools while the District Assembly made available boxes of tools.

These collaborative efforts by the various organisations led to improvement in decision making power, improvement in socio-economic status and social recognitions, and reduction in the level of stigmatisation from the society. According to the respondents, not only could they provide livelihood and sustenance to themselves and their children, but were also capable of playing leadership role, and also take decision without necessarily seeking permission from someone else. It could be inferred that the interventions had positive social and economic effects on the respondents. However, more than a quarter of the respondents claimed society still regards them as slaves of the gods and therefore do not want to associate themselves with them. This eventually affected their business, hence, they are not able to derive the optimum benefits from their business.

Since Ghana was a signatory to many international conventions that frowned on any practice which forced women into servitude and slavery, decriminalization of *Trokosi* practice would not be in the best interest of the nation. There is therefore the need for all parties-at-interest in the emancipation and empowerment of these women to intensify efforts to get tough on all activities of the perpetrators and put an end to this social menace.

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