

**The Role of Culture and Law in  
Sustaining *Trokosi*  
Institution in Southern Ghana**

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**Abstract**

The study carefully examined *trokosi*—the keeping of virgins (henceforth referring always to girls and not boys) in traditional religious shrines in Ghana, using a shrine in Afife as a case study. The study tried to find out whether culture, including its primary constituent, religion, and law play any role in sustaining the *trokosi* institution in spite of efforts by the Ghana Government and human rights activists to eliminate it. The study used qualitative approach that involved in-depth interviews with key informants, local people, and observation. The primary data was supplemented by relevant secondary data. The research identified that *trokosi* as an institution persists because of its use of religio-cultural techniques such as social structuring and meaning. Other findings that sustain the institution include the overt endorsement of the religio-cultural institution by local and international human rights laws; government's inability to enforce criminal laws; government officials' and *trokosi* practitioners' fear of reprisals from the traditional god that is the basis of the institution; and indigenes' adamancy to preserve *trokosi* as a religio-cultural heritage even if it infringes on fundamental human rights of women and girls. The study is important because, among other things, it contributes to existing discourses on religious and cultural institutions and practices both locally and internationally.

## **Key words:**

Trokosi, religion, culture, law, power

## **Introduction**

One of the most difficult things in scholarship is how to provide a universal definition of concepts such as religion and culture. This difficulty arises in view of the fact that the concepts mean different things for different people<sup>1</sup>. The best one can do in this instance, is define the concepts to meet the particular conceptual design one has in mind. Consequently, this study sees religion as part of culture. Culture in the context of this study is defined as inherited conceptions and practices of a specific group of people. This definition takes cognizance of the fact that religion is part and parcel of culture and located as a primary constituent at the ideational domain of culture. For example, *trokosi*<sup>2</sup>, the focus of this study, is an inherited conception that involves belief associated with the god *Nyigbla*, a god of justice, that controls the social order of the people. This entails cultic and other customary practices in the divine and human relationship. In this sense, *trokosi* is a religio-cultural institution created and practiced over the years by the practitioners and passed on to subsequent generations. As a religio-cultural institution, it is belief-based and originated from the religious thought or ideas of the people.

*Trokosi* involves the sending of virgins to traditional religious shrines as atonement for supposed crimes committed by some members of the girls' families<sup>3</sup>. *Nyigbla*,<sup>4</sup> a 'national' god or *tro* of the traditional Anlo satellite state or society, is the central point of power around which the *trokosi* institution and practice revolve. According to the field research, five districts namely

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<sup>1</sup> Victor S. Gedzi, *Principles and Practices of Dispute Resolution in Ghana: Ewe and Akan Procedures on Females' Inheritance and Property Rights*. (Maastricht: Shaker Publishing, 2009).

<sup>2</sup>*Trokosi* is a religio-cultural institution/practice in which a virgin girl is given out to serve at a deity's shrine to atone for a crime committed by a parent or a relative. This crime is deemed reprehensible by the local god. The virgin is known as *trokosi* (singular) or *trokosiwo* (plural) when they are more than one.

<sup>3</sup> R. K. Ameh, "Child Bondage in Ghana: A Contextual Policy Analysis of Trokosi." PhD Thesis, (British Columbia: Simon Fraser University, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> It is believed to be one of the powerful gods among the Southern people of Ghana. As such it is extremely feared by the population in the fieldwork location. It is traditionally considered a "state god" and believed to exist with the Southern Ewe before their migration to their present location in Ghana.

Akatsi, Ketu North, Keta, North Tongu and South Tongu in the Volta region of Ghana have 25 active shrines that are related to the *Nyigbla* god. The Afife trokosi shrine, which forms the unit of analysis of this study is located within the Ketu North district. The particular group that forms the study population is the Afife people in the Volta Region of Ghana. Previous studies<sup>5</sup> have extensively dealt with *trokosi* as a religious and cultural institution or practice, but not so much has been done on the role religion and culture, and human rights laws could play in sustaining the *trokosi* institution as a field of power. Michel Foucault's revolutionary understanding of the concept of power has extended the hitherto restricted juridical and sovereign notion to include the fields of magic, culture and religion<sup>6</sup>. Power, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is "the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events"<sup>7</sup>. As such, as a religious and cultural institution, the trokosi institution may rely on power that emanates from religion and culture and also law to sustain its existence by using discourses that do not only define it but also justify what it does<sup>8</sup>. Thus, the main objective of the present study is to find out in which ways religion and culture together with law, act as sources of power in sustaining the trokosi institution and practice among the Afife people in the Ketu-North district of Sothern Ghana.

The study used the qualitative research method involving in-depth interviews with key informants such as traditional priests/ritual functionaries of the shrine, liberated trokosi women, locals, the local chief, and observation. The study involves strategic sampling, consciously guided by the conceptual design. Demographically, twenty (20) of the informants comprising 10 freed trokosi women; traditional priests/ritual functionaries and the local chief were interviewed. Ten (10) local people consisting of

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<sup>5</sup> See A. Gadzekpo. "Sexual Bondage". *Awo Magazine*, 5, (1993): 5-7); H. Ababio. *Trokosi, Woryokwe, Cultural and Individual Rights: A case Study of Women's Empowerment and Community Rights in Ghana*, St. Mary's University, Halifax, (2000); Sarah C. Aird. "Ghana's Slave to the gods". *Human Right's Brief*, (2002). Available at: [www.wcl.american.edu/](http://www.wcl.american.edu/). Accessed on 30-11-2011; D. Alford. "Sex Slave's Slow Freedom." *Encyclopedia of Rape*; Suzanne Aho (1999) "The Trokosi I Fiashidi Ritual Servitude: Togo Experience". Accra, (2004).

<sup>6</sup>Michel Foucault. "Truth and Power." In Colin Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, (trans. by Colin Gordon et al.) (1980).

<sup>7</sup>Online Oxford Dictionary. Available at: <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/power>

<sup>8</sup> S. Phelan. "Foucault and Feminism." *American Journal of Political Science*, 34, 2(May 1990).

five (5) women and five (5) men were also strategically selected and interviewed. This method “facilitates close interactions with informants/respondents and their settings”<sup>9</sup> and thus, suitable for analysing the issues that affect them. The choice of the study unit was motivated by the active role that its members play in the trokosi practice. The primary data was supplemented by related literature on the research object<sup>10</sup>. The present study is important because it highlights religion/culture and law as the sustaining power base of the trokosi institution and practice and suggests ways of eliminating it. It also contributes to existing discourses on religious and cultural institutions and practices.

For a clearer understanding of the study, it is important to explain the primary concept, *trokosi*, as well as the traditional metaphysics of the Anlo people also known as the Southern Ewe. Explanation of Anlo metaphysics is important because it provides clues to activities of *Nyigbla* god and the people’s reactions to these activities of the god. It is important also to note that Afife, which is the field location of the study, is a subset of the Anlo people and therefore shares the same metaphysics with them<sup>11</sup>.

## Trokosi

The term, *trokosi*, a combination of two Ewe syllabic words: *tro* (‘a god’) and *kosi* (‘a slave’) refers to a female child who has been born as a result of an intervention by a god before which a barren woman made a pledge that should the child be born she would give her out to serve or belong to the god. Thus, *trokosi*, according to this understanding, signifies “a god’s slave”. That is, the girl becomes a slave of the god that intervened at her birth. The concept in the context of this present study, refers to the donation of a virgin girl to *Nyigbla* god by a family in order to atone for a supposed crime that a member of the girl’s family might have

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<sup>9</sup>V.S. Gedzi. “Property Relations and Women’s Access to Courts among the Anlo and the Asante in Ghana”. *European Scientific Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 29 (December, 2012b): 121 – 139.

<sup>10</sup>Special acknowledgement to the *Political Science Journal: Critical Thinking*, for providing the copy right to use “Field of Power: A Religio-Cultural Analysis of Trokosi in Ghana”, published 2016 by Victor Selorme Gedzi, Yunus Dumbe and Gabriel Eshien for other literary purposes. As the main contributor, Dr. Dumbe and Dr. Eshien have consented that I publish this work in a different way alone in my name. I am grateful for all of this.

<sup>11</sup> R. K. Ameh, “Child Bondage in Ghana: A Contextual Policy Analysis of Trokosi.” PhD Thesis, (British Columbia: Simon Fraser University, 2001).

committed against the god. The term therefore connotes a state of being a slave to the god<sup>12</sup> even though she (the slave girl) may euphemistically be referred to as the deity's wife<sup>13</sup>. The term does not only refer to the slave girl, but also to the practice and the institution of the *trokosi*.

In the *trokosi* practice, as indicated, virgins are given out to serve at a shrine of the god *Nyigbla* to atone for crimes of parents or relatives, which are "deemed reprehensible by gods". Crimes punishable by payment with a virgin vary and include murder, adultery, theft and sexual intercourse with a *trokosi*<sup>14</sup>. The offender's family may be unaware of the offence until a disaster such as a sudden death, an accident or some sort of misfortune strikes a member<sup>15</sup>. The source of the calamity is detected through oracular consultation by the offender's family. The virgin becomes a *trokosi* (singular, or *trokosiwo* plural). Thus, girls who become *trokosiwo* are not kidnapped or abducted, but freely surrendered by relatives or parents who believe that it is necessary to atone for a sin of a family member in order to avoid punishment from the *Nyigbla* god. The girl remains in the shrine serving the priests and other ritual functionaries of the deity for a period ranging from few years to entire life<sup>16</sup>. The girl who is a victim to the system becomes a sexual partner of the priest. This is why the *trokosi* is also referred to as the "deity's wife"<sup>17</sup>.

The *trokosi* system is one of the most ancient practices and its origin is shrouded in mystery, tradition and obscurity<sup>18</sup>. This makes it difficult to know the exact period when the system began. However, oral tradition corroborated by indigenous priests/ritual functionaries, elders and the chief of Afife, estimates the practice as starting in the 17th century. Some also link the origin of the *trokosi* practice to Togo and Benin in West Africa. For this school of thought, it originated as a war ritual in the 1960s by warriors who were offering women as sacrifices to war gods in shrines. This

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<sup>12</sup>See K. D. Ekem, footnote 15.

<sup>13</sup>Mark Wisdom. *The Trokosi System*. (Accra: Mercury Press Ltd., 2001).

<sup>14</sup>A.B. Boateng. *African Women and Children: Crisis and Responses*. (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> An interview with a ritual functionary and some elders at Afife on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2015

<sup>16</sup>CHRAJ, (1998) "UN Human Rights Council Report of the Second National Workshop on Trokosi system in Ghana".

<sup>17</sup>G. K. Nukunya. *Tradition and Change in Ghana*. Legon: Ghana University Press, (2003): 34.

<sup>18</sup> Refer to G. K. Nkunya, footnote 21.

practice is believed to have found its way into some parts of Ghana<sup>19</sup>. This narrative seems to concur with Nkunya's finding<sup>20</sup> that attributed the practice to the custom of paying gods for services rendered. According to the scholar, in the past, clients who consulted gods for one reason or other were made to pay for the services in cash or kind. Items that were presented included animals. As time went by, those who were particularly pleased with the work of the gods began to offer their own children, mostly girls. Nkunya further indicated that clients who were about to carry out very important endeavours or needed something important would also pledge to offer their daughters to the gods if they achieved success. Also, couples who experienced frequent deaths of children consulted deities for protection. This category of people also thanked the deities with their daughters for making the children live. But with time, the practice would seem to have shifted from a voluntary to an obligatory offering. Other versions of oral history maintain that the practice originated in Ghana and was initially an institution meant for cultivating girls into socially acceptable women<sup>21</sup>. The *trokosi* is therefore supposed to be a virtuous girl or woman, but not a symbol of a slave that she now is. Thus, it appears the practice has transformed over the years and lost its original purpose<sup>22</sup>.

## Metaphysics of Anlo

The traditional metaphysics of the Anlo comprises *Mawu*, the Supreme Being, who is considered as the Creator of everything in the universe. *Mawu* is believed by the people to operate through vicegerents such as *trowo* (gods) and ancestral spirits, who are considered intermediaries between humans and *Mawu*<sup>23</sup>. *Trowo* "are owned by individuals, families or the 'state'" and are said to "perform protective, welfare and truth searching functions for worshippers."<sup>24</sup> *Nyigbla* is one of such gods. It is around this god that the *trokosi* institution revolves. *Nyigbla*, according to the

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<sup>19</sup>M. Gillard. *Trokosi Slave of the Gods*. (Florida: Xulon Press, 2010).

<sup>20</sup>Refer to G. K. Nkunya, footnote 21.

<sup>21</sup>This oral tradition has been maintained by key informants in Afife.

<sup>22</sup>Refer to CHRAJ, footnote 20.

<sup>23</sup> Chris Abotchie. *Social Control in Traditional Southern Eweland of Ghana: Relevance for Modern Crime Prevention*. (Accra: University of Ghana Press, (1997): 65.

<sup>24</sup>M. Ohrt. "Conflicting Discourses on Trokosi Practice in Ghana: Exploring Tensions in the Global/Local Human Rights Translation." Graduate School of Development Studies, ISS, The Hague, (2011):14.

fieldwork, is revered as a “god of war” that has its adherents. It is worshiped as a ‘state’ god of the Anlo people. It has developed into a cult or a religion - a variant of African Traditional Religion in Anlo traditional state. Annually, the people honour this god in a migratory festival popularly known as *Hogbetsotso*.

This *Nyigbla* religion fosters a morality of collective responsibility, which affects the people’s way of life generally. Thus, socially, the Anlo society “operates on a system of collective responsibility, with the actions of an individual potentially having consequences for other clan members”<sup>25</sup>. This means that clan member(s) can be held responsible for an individual’s wrongdoing. Clan or family members therefore try to be of each other’s keeper by way of disciplining a member who goes wayward.

The *Nyigbla* god is believed to use the same principle of collective responsibility in carrying out its justice. In view of this, families try hard to find the truth about crimes committed in order to avoid prospective punishment<sup>26</sup>. To identify a perpetrator of a crime, the people consult oracles through hexing. Normally, the one who is offended reports the case to the *Nyigbla* priest who through a specified ritual, on behalf of the offended, asks the god to identify the offender. For the traditional Anlo, oracles serve as the medium for humans to communicate with supernatural forces. Hexing is used to deal with the offender. According to the fieldwork, whenever a hex is put on a family, the family experiences serial death before it gets to know the reason for the frequent death. The reason for the death is known through oracular consultation. Mostly, the innocent family members are those who die leaving the one who has committed the offense. The offender’s family having enquired about the reason for the death or the calamity, offers a virgin girl to pacify the *Nyigbla* god.

## **Results**

### **Life in Afife *Trokosi* Shrine**

Fieldwork in the study unit has revealed that there are five districts - namely, Akatsi, Ketu North, Keta, North Tongu and South Tongu districts in the Volta Region of Ghana that are involved in the *trokosi* practice. The Afife *trokosi* shrine, as indicated, is located in the Ketu North district. The districts have 25 active shrines that are

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<sup>25</sup>See M. Ohrt, footnote 8.

<sup>26</sup>Refer to M. Ohrt, (2011): 15.

related to the *Nyigbla* god. Besides these five southern districts of the Volta region, *trokosi* is also practiced in the Dangme East and West Districts of the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. This finding concurs with the 2008 annual report on the subject by the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ). A national survey conducted by the Department for the Study of Religions in University of Ghana, Legon, for International Needs, estimated over 5,000 women and girls serving in 51 major shrines and over 200 minor shrines in Ghana. It has further reported that since the call for the liberation of *trokosiwo* by the Government of Ghana and human rights activists, 2,800 women and girls have been liberated<sup>27</sup>. CHRAJ in its 2008 Annual Report, also described *trokosi* subjects as unfortunate persons who are abused in all forms—physically, spiritually and sexually for long periods.

There is no exact date for the origin of the Afife *trokosi* shrine. But at least, it is believed to have existed since the settlement of the first people in the town. The practice is said to have started with one shrine, but four other shrines grew out of it. This growth may be attributed to the large number of inmates and the fast spread of the practice. Presently, it is estimated that the *trokosi* population under the Afife shrine is over a thousand. The shrine had been headed successively by many priests. Its current head is Torgbui Nasa, a priest of the *Nyigbla* god. The chief priest who periodically does ritual visits to *trokosi* shrines lives at the main *Nyigbla* shrine at Alakple, one of the Anlo towns.

The fieldwork showed that there are two categories of *trokosiwo* at the Afife shrine. The first group comprises those who have not placated the *Nyigbla* god and are still in the shrine under the supervision of the shrine priest. While in the shrine, families of this category of *trokosiwo* are allowed to visit their girls. Key informants made it clear that at times, girls stay in the shrine because their parents or relatives have not got the necessary funds to perform pacification rites. When such girls get married, their husbands help them to perform the rites and are consequently allowed to leave the shrine. Informants also indicated that while in the shrine, the girls could visit their families with permission from the shrine priest. The second category of *trokosiwo* consists of those who are allowed to live in their own family homes, because their pacification rites have been performed. But this latter group is also

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<sup>27</sup>C. Okutu. "The Ghanaian Times - Newspaper." Accra, (2001): 6.



expected to observe taboos, including visiting the shrine as and when necessary.

The interviews revealed that before a new *trokosi* is admitted into the shrine, she goes through a series of rituals, beginning from her home. The ritual, which includes drinking of a special concoction, is said to induct her into the shrine, making her a faithful and dedicated devotee to the *Nyigbla* god<sup>28</sup>. The fieldwork also indicated that as part of the rituals, there is the pouring out of a libation<sup>29</sup> to the *Nyigbla* god to halt potential curses that may befall the victim's family. The *trokosi* is then dressed in *bishi*, a traditional dark blue cloth, and she carries a chair and other personal effects from her home to the shrine. These personal effects include cooking utensils, buckets, cloths, comb, sleeping mat and others. Having arrived at the shrine, she is kept in a room for five days to continue her induction. After this, she is brought out and taught how to cook, wash, sweep and perform other household chores.

Various reports about life in the *trokosi* shrines indicate that the victims are subjected to treatments that are degrading. This was testified by a former *trokosi*:

I lived and worked in the priest's fields and kept the compound clean. While doing so, I was raped repeatedly by the priest on tom mats on the cold floor of windowless huts. The other female slaves and I received neither food nor medical care. We had to find time after working on the priest's farm to bum charcoal or to sell firewood in the nearest town in order to make money to buy food. There were times we lived on raw peppers or palm kernel nuts to stay alive<sup>30</sup>.

Juli's (pseudonym) narrative is a sampled case that illustrates the manner in which the *trokosi* practice subjects its victims. Another aspect is that the *trokosi* does not put on any footwear and cloths

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<sup>28</sup> Refer to G. K. Nkunya, (2003): 248

<sup>29</sup> This is a traditional way of praying. Things used include, water and alcoholic beverages. These are poured on the ground and are interspaced or preceded by ritual utterances.

<sup>30</sup>Parade Magazine. 'One Voice', New York, New York Media, (2000): 7.

apart from those prescribed for her status. There are also a number of dietary taboos, including the avoidance of some common species of fish. The *trokosi* is required to work on the farm, run errands, and perform other house-hold chores. Even though she cultivates the crops, she is forbidden to eat the produce. Moreover, she cannot have sex outside the shrine without first performing the necessary rites<sup>31</sup>. In general, it can be said that the life of the *trokosi* involves obedience to a series of command. It means she is not autonomous and cannot on her own initiate any undertaking whether social or economic. Narratives on treatment of the *trokosi* in literature capturing life in different *trokosi* shrines appear to be uniform in terms of treatment. A *trokosi* from a different shrine in Adidome, for example, sums up her experience as follows:

You are not a slave per say, but you are enslaved. Enslavement comes in many forms. A slave is chained, but the girls are allowed to move around and go to the market. It's only the restrictions and even when not chained, it is the fear attached. It is a mental bondage, a mental enslavement. ... You cannot think of running away because you know what the result will be. It is a mental enslavement not physical<sup>32</sup>.

A major aspect of the practice which has drawn the attention of human rights activists is that once the girls arrive at the shrine, they are not sent to school. But interviews with some ritual functionaries and the paramount chief of Afife have indicated that life in the shrine looks comparatively relaxed. According to the informants, unlike other places, a *trokosi* in the Afife shrine is allowed to go to school provided she expresses the interest; and that those who show interest in any trade are also permitted to learn it. The interviews further indicated that "girls are brought to the shrine not necessarily for punishment since their families might have received the punishment already". Thus, their presence at the shrine is only symbolic. An individual interview with a key informant, however, revealed that the only form of schooling that the girls go through is "apprenticing in oil preparation and weaving of bags."

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<sup>31</sup>Refer to G. K. Nkunya (2003): 248.

<sup>32</sup> Refer to M. Ohrt (2011): 35.

The fieldwork has also revealed that at times, refusal to have sexual intercourse with a priest/ritual functionary in the shrine may lead to punishment. In some shrines, priests go to the extent of raping the *trokosi* who refuses sex<sup>33</sup>. The priest thinks he has a sexual right over the girls since he represents the god, who “owns” the girls as “wives” or slaves. Rhonda Heitman also indicated how *trokosi* practitioners believe that the priest's genital organ has been dedicated to a god and so having sex with a priest is like copulating with the god. The sexual act is therefore seen as sacred<sup>34</sup>. Furthermore, the priest thinks he has the right to marry any *trokosi* he wants. A *trokosi* who has married a priest cannot leave the shrine even if she has finished serving her punitive number of years. The belief is that she is religiously or culturally attached to the priest and the shrine. As a wife, she and her children belong to her priest “husband”. As one ritual functionary at the Afife shrine puts it, “once a *trokosi*, one remains a *trokosi* forever”. Thus, this sexual abuse has always been the major concern of human rights activists. The situation is even more critical since many of the victims are minors.

This comment is made in relation to some attempts made by the Government of Ghana and in collaboration with some Non-Governmental Organizations that led to the liberation of some *trokosiwo* in other shrines but not those in Afife. According to some key informants, the Afife shrine always resists any attempt made by Government and human rights agencies to liberate the *trokosiwo*. Key informants explained that the spirit (*Nyigbla* god) behind the shrine would not permit them to undertake such an exercise. They fear that any attempt to stop the practice may bring disaster on them. Besides they would not like to stop the tradition which has been handed down to them. Interviews with some natives of the town made it clear that the people still revere and value the *trokosi* practice despite the pressure from the human rights activists and the fact that the practice has been outlawed by the Government of Ghana. While women/girl victims of the *trokosi* system wished the practice was stopped, majority of the inhabitants of Afife maintained that they would not give up their tradition for the sake of human rights. They also failed to admit that the *trokosi* practice contravenes women’s/girls’ and child human rights.

Interviews have also uncovered that the shrine does not only engage in the *trokosi* practice, but also supposedly treats

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<sup>33</sup> Refer to MarkWisdom footnote 17.

<sup>34</sup>Rhonda Heitman. “Trokosi System.” (2000).

medical conditions such as miscarriage, convulsion, epilepsy, bareness, blindness, impotence, infertility, mental disorder, among others. The shrine, according to the interviews, also treats what the informants called “spiritual marriages”. The *trokosi* institution is also allegedly responsible for maintenance of culture and serves as the “court of appeal” among the Southern Ewe. People also engage the services of the shrine to seek explanations for occurrences they do not seem to understand while others contact the shrine for protection against evil forces or enemies.

Asked why an entire family instead of the culprit is punished; and subsequent taking away of an innocent girl to atone for a sin she has not committed, a priest of the shrine explained that “if the culprit was killed, he/she would not be there to confess the sin”. Thus, as indicated, a calamity is visited on some family members, and this compels the culprit to confess the wrong he has done. On the question why it appears that only girls are kept in the Afife shrine as *trokosiwo*, the priest indicated that “boys have the tendency to be stubborn and rebellious” and would at times beat up shrine priests and other ritual functionaries.

## **Discussion**

### **Religion / Culture and Law as Sustaining Power of *Trokosi***

Recent studies have identified religion/culture as a major field of power that systematically constraints actions by controlling people’s minds and “definitions of the world”<sup>35</sup>. Undergirding the *trokosi* institution and practice fundamentally is the issue of gender and culture/religion as fields of power. Gender, the state of being male or female that is essentially used to depict social and cultural rather than biological differences, is a universal power constructed by human cultures. Its main principle is stressing the weakness and inferiority of women over that of their men counterparts; and how this weakness is utilized to produce male hegemony. This “manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women in society” is carried out through religio-cultural ideology that considers women’s contributions in any form as inferior to those of their male counterparts<sup>36</sup>. For the example, among the

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<sup>35</sup>Gila Stopler.) “A Rank Usurpation of Power” - The Role of Patriarchal Religion and Culture in the Subordination of Women. *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy*. Vol. 15: 365, (2008).

<sup>36</sup>Refer to Gila Stopler (2008): 366.

Anlo of which Afife, the study unit is a subset, the proverb that “A palm tree in a woman’s farm does not bear fruits” is one of those religio-cultural ideologies. It means that women are not supposed to be economically viable. This ideology explains why parents or families prefer sending their girls to religious servitude in the shrine. In this sense, while men are socially protected to develop and carry out their potentials, women are seen as dispensable and are fulfilled only through association with men. In a patrilineal culture where men are meant to immortalize the lineage, it is not surprising that they are socially insured and protected to realize immortality. Thus, in addition, the analysis implicates religio-cultural connivance and machinations to satisfy male expectations. This, as indicated, appears to be one of the original reasons for the institution of *trokosi* where girls are supposedly kept to be “cultivated” into socially acceptable women in the *trokosi* practicing communities to fit men’s values and desires. This bias while it tends to add value to maleness, devalues femaleness.

In devaluing women in the study unit, social structuring is used as a tool to exclude girls or women from the contact with, and participation in the highest realm of power represented by the *Nyigbla* cult<sup>37</sup>. For example, the *Nyigbla* priest at the Afife *trokosi* shrine who communes with the god, is invariably a male. So also, the chief priest of the god who resides in the main shrine at Alakple, a powerful traditional town among the Anlo. Secondly, cultural ideologies, as indicated, and symbolic devices such as impurity (believed to be caused by women’s natural monthly flow of blood) are also used. In the study unit, these three factors interact or overlap to complicate and perpetuate women’s devaluation in the traditional society<sup>38</sup>. In the context of the *trokosi* practice, the devaluation bars women from being priestesses/ritual functionaries to the *trokosi* god, the power behind the *trokosi* system that keeps girls and for that matter, women as slaves. It is clear how over the passage of time, boys because of their allegedly “stubborn” and “rebellious” character and ability to beat up shrine priests and other ritual functionaries forced the all-male hierarchy to revise who the victim of a deity’s slave should be. Girls and women, on the other hand, ironically, keep the *trokosi* system alive through docility and toleration by servicing the enslaving institution through daily chores and other productive and

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<sup>37</sup>Sherry B. Ortner. *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture*. (Beacon Press, 1996).

<sup>38</sup> Refer to Footnote 43.

reproductive activities in the shrine. Some may attribute women's tendency to provide more support for enslaving traditional institutions like the *trokosi* to women's low educational and economic status compared with those of their men counterparts<sup>39</sup>. But while this correlation of educational and economic status, to some extent, appears plausible, it does not justify why more men in the Afife locality who apparently are more educated and financially capable, seem to provide more support to the religio-cultural institution that discriminates against girls and women. The lack of women representation in the hierarchical structure of the *trokosi* institution, which serves as a mechanism for social control, is an indication of imbalance in the power relations between the sexes.

Gerda Lerner<sup>40</sup> has analysed how throughout history patriarchy manifests in various forms and modes and how its structure and function shift and change as it adapts to pressure and demands of women. Relating Lerner's analysis to the *trokosi* system in Afife, the fieldwork has shown that the system is comparatively relaxed when viewed against other *trokosi* shrines. It means, contextually, the Afife *trokosi* system appears to have adapted to pressure. Ironically, it was not the pressure of women but that of men (boys who beat up shrine priests and other ritual functionaries) that brought about a redefinition of the sex accepted as the *trokosi* victim. Effecting of change seems easy for men, because as indicated, they form the hierarchy of the *trokosi* institution.

The fieldwork identified also that the Government of Ghana in collaboration with some Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) put pressure on the stakeholders of all *trokosi* shrines to release all *trokosi* girls. The pressure led to the release of 672 out of 4,740 *trokosi* girls in 1997 by other shrines. A smaller number was released in 2003. But shrine authorities in Afife resisted the pressure. Since 2003 no *trokosi* has been released. The anti-*trokosi* campaign also led to an amendment of Ghana's criminal code in 1998. The amended law has criminalized the *trokosi* practice. But, since the law came into force, no one has been arrested for prosecution<sup>41</sup>. In any case, shrines secretly continue to admit more virgins. Field informants indicated that even though the pressure

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<sup>39</sup> Refer to V. S. Gedzi, footnote 5.

<sup>40</sup>Lerner Gerda. *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy*. (Women and History, Number 2). (New York: Oxford University, 1993).

<sup>41</sup> Refer to M. Ohrt, footnote 8.

from Government and NGOs has not impacted much, authorities in Afife shrine, at least, relaxed the way girls and women are treated. Some other informants, however, see this relaxation in the treatment of girls and women as a façade to preserve the religio-cultural regime.

Women informants indicated that the *trokosi* institution is maintained through fear inspiring narratives about what the *Nyigbla* god has done and is capable of doing to those who disobey its orders. Stories are told about how some *trokosi* girls managed to run away from shrines to their parents' homes only to be sent back, because of the fear that the *Nyigbla* god may strike at the parents. In her historical studies, Reva Siegel<sup>42</sup> shows how "status regimes" like *trokosi* evolve over time in order to preserve social stratification. Social stratification is founded "through the social structure – namely, institutions and practices, and through social meaning" – such as stories or narratives, proverbs, myths, metaphors, songs and reasons. According to Siegel, what is perhaps most visible in a historical perspective is the heterogeneity of institutions, practices, stories, and reasons that sustain the unequal social position of different groups over time. The elements of social structure and social meaning that sustain stratification, according to Siegel, vary by group and within groups, and that they evolve over time as their legitimacy is contested. Siegel's analysis of social stratification and how it is produced, reproduced, contested, and transformed is very similar to the traditional concept of hegemony that condones the process of social and cultural domination and subordination as illustrated in the *trokosi* practice among the Afife people. The social meaning that has become part of the social conscience and which sustains the *trokosi* institution is the social insistence that death and tragedy await those who refuse compliance with the religious edict that demands surrender of girls to the *trokosi* god. This is why, in the context of this study, one may argue that religion appears to be the most effective tool for the subordination of women<sup>43</sup>. According to Ellen Carol Dubois, a woman or a girl would not have accepted readily her challenging condition like that of *trokosi* if religion had not taught her to comply, because it is God's or god's will that she should suffer<sup>44</sup>. Thus, in the context of this study, it would appear

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<sup>42</sup>Reva Siegel. "The Rule of Love: Wife Beating as Prerogative and Privacy". 105 Yale L.J., (1996).

<sup>43</sup>Ellen Carol Dubois (ed.). *The Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony Reader: Correspondence, Writings and Speeches*. Northeastern, (1992).

<sup>44</sup> Refer to Footnote 42.

that women and girls accept and internalize their situation as *trokosiwo* since it is conceived as god-given.

Linked to the reasons why the *trokosi* institution and practice continue to be sustained, is its apparent overt endorsement by local and international human rights laws on the freedom to practice any religion; and cultural and associational rights. The 1992 Constitution of Ghana, for example, provides rights to citizens to belong to any religion, culture or association<sup>45</sup>. Legally, one may argue that both women and men, by the constitutional provision *de jure* have rights to freely choose any religion or belong to any association. Moreover, both women and men, in principle, have equal rights to culture. However, how these rights are understood and applied, especially in traditional societies like Afife, turns *de facto* to perpetuate gender hierarchy and deprives girls/women of equality and freedom rather than ensure their freedom of religion and culture or guarantee them equal respect<sup>46</sup>. For example, virgins are forcefully uprooted from their homes and families through threat and intimidation to enter and serve in the *trokosi* religion. Thus, at the base of the threat and intimidation and eventual uprooting of the girl from her home and security, is the politics of power between the *trokosi* institution, comprising the man-made culture with its subset, religion, on one hand and the vulnerable family, which has to relinquish its girl (in some situations the only child) on the other. What seems to complicate the issue at stake is the fact that the global world, including the Ghanaian society, in which this atrocity of girls' enslavement is perpetuated view culture and religion with a liberal lens that disregards "institutions, practices, discourses, and norms of a religion or culture as a socio-political "epicentre of power."

The philosophy that inspires the contents of both local and international laws is liberalism. As a political or social philosophy, liberalism has a "skewed understanding of the desired scope and content of toleration, religious liberty, and cultural and associational rights" <sup>47</sup>. As a result, it lacks an adequate theory of power. This influence, on one hand, and the skewed understanding of "the desired scope and content of toleration, religious liberty,

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<sup>45</sup>Ghana's Constitution of 1992 with Amendments through 1996. In its chapter 5, the Constitution espouses the Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms of persons. Refer to articles 21, 26, 27 and 28 that deal with cultural and religious rights; and women and children Rights. Available at: <http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/gha129754.pdf>

<sup>46</sup>Refer to Gila Stopler (2008): 368 ff.

<sup>47</sup> Refer to Gila Soplér (2008): 366.



and cultural and associational rights” on the part of liberalism, on the other, appear to incapacitate the ability of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana to ensure that the exercise of power and authority by religious and cultural institutions such as the *trokosi* over individuals like the girls or women are justified and that the latter’s rights are also safeguarded. According to Gila Stopler,

... the inadequacy of the liberal theory of power stems from its individualistic structure and inability to consider groups as a crucial mediator between the individual and the state. An analysis that recognizes groups both as a crucial site of power and a crucial reservoir of power that can be utilized by members both within and outside the group entails a different understanding of existing power relations and their effects on individuals. The focus on the state as the major or even sole threat to individual rights is particularly evident in the theories of political liberalism, wherein the commitment to maintaining freedom from the state in the private sphere of community far exceeds the commitment to protect the individual from private oppression<sup>48</sup>.

Thus, issues such as religious freedom, freedom of association and the right to a culture have made the efforts of Governments of Ghana and human rights activists ineffective to eradicate the institution of *trokosi* that sustains women’s and girls’ subordination in Afife and other parts of the country. Proper analysis of the power of culture and its primary constituent, religion, may result in a very different understanding of the desired scope and content of toleration, religious liberty, and cultural and associational rights than what the liberal and social philosophy has imposed on the legal thought of Ghana.

The analysis has demonstrated how law can covertly be a “status-enforcing mechanism” even though it may not necessarily appear to be so, superficially. It is plausible to argue that precisely because hegemony constitutes the self, it is likely hard to identify

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<sup>48</sup> Refer to Gila Stopler (2008): 368.

and resist the law when it is used to perpetuate it. At the same time, it is important to question the assertion that the law is neutral. It means continuous vigilance over several possible ways in which allegedly neutral laws can serve as a tool or support for religious or cultural institutions or practices that perpetuate domination and subordination of girls and women.

Michel Foucault<sup>49</sup> revolutionized the understanding of the concept of power from its restricted juridical and sovereign notions. The language of power, which used to be solely restricted to the law, is now expanded to cover the entire social universe, including, as indicated, areas such as magic, culture and religion as power fields. Power such as culture, together with its major constituent, religion uses discourses to define itself and also to justify what it does<sup>50</sup>. Among the Afife people in Ghana, cultural discourses in the form of proverbs and metaphors stipulate a whole way of life between the sexes. Again, the discourse that “the palm tree in a woman’s farm does not bear fruits” or that “even though the female sheep gives birth to the ram, it is the latter that protects the former,” invokes economic and political power relations between men and women. It means women are not supposed to be economically productive or politically outstanding since males must provide, defend and protect them. Many women interviewed within the fieldwork location see nothing wrong with this cultural arrangement since they think their husbands look after them well. Only a minority questioned the social structure. It therefore sounds plausible to argue that an enslaving power of culture or religion may be very difficult to detect since it may operate on the guise of freedom<sup>51</sup>. More so, it latently guides human conduct and suggests possible outcomes because the person upon whom it is exercised sees herself as a free person and therefore her actions are also seen as free acts. “In this respect, religion and culture are quintessential sites of power because they are highly determinative of individual actions and are regarded as positively informing rather than obstructing free choice”<sup>52</sup>.

Furthermore, contemporary anthropology has identified culture as “grounded in unequal relations and is differently related

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<sup>49</sup>Michel Foucault. “Truth and Power.” In Colin Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, (trans. by Colin Gordon et al.) (1980).

<sup>50</sup>S. Phelan. “Foucault and Feminism.” *American Journal of Political Science*, 34, 2(May 1990).

<sup>51</sup> Refer to Phelan (1990): 425.

<sup>52</sup>Refer to Ohrt (2011): 34.

to people and groups in different social positions”<sup>53</sup>. This may explain why girls and women, instead of boys and men, are kept in the Afife *trokosi* shrine. Even though the *trokosi* practice is believed to be divinely inspired, it finds it difficult to keep *boys* and therefore men who are said to be characteristically “rebellious”. This field finding does not, however, obliterate the fact that males generally speaking in the field location are adherents of the *Nyigbla* religion in Afife and therefore believe in the supposedly divine origin of the *trokosi* institution. This realization of the radicalism on the part of boys on one hand, and docility of girls on the other, led, as indicated, to the modification of the tradition, a redefinition of the demand and seizure of victims for the Afife *trokosi* shrine. This is why the notion that culture is “shared” by members of a particular society should have been prequalified by the question: “by whom?” and “in what ways?” and “under what conditions?” Additionally, even though there is full acknowledgement of “material and political constraints such as force” on people on a given society, many anthropologists have consented that “culture and religion systematically constrain action by controlling people’s “definitions of the world,” limiting or restricting “their conceptual tools,” and “emotional repertoires”<sup>54</sup>. In the Afife *trokosi* shrine as other places, this constraint and control is ritually enforced through the use of social meaning. It is equally true (as in the case of redefinition of what kind of sex is suitable as a *trokosi* victim) that the powerful could also influence a reshaping of culture and religion as well as how the world should be defined. From the study, it has become clear that the *Nyigbla* religion together with its affiliate culture is a major tool in the oppression of girls and therefore women not only in the fieldwork location but also other areas where the *trokosi* is practiced in Ghana.

According to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony<sup>55</sup>, as indicated, religion is the most effective tool for the subordination of women, because it has succeeded in its conviction that women’s position as well as condition in life has been preordained by God or gods. Unlike Biblical religions that store these religious ideas in literature, traditional religions, including variants like *Nyigbla* religion store such ideas in rituals, proverbs, stories, narratives, metaphors, myths or social meaning. Stanton

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<sup>53</sup> Refer to Gila Stopler (2008): 369.

<sup>54</sup>Sherry B. Ortner (1996) as cited in Stopler (2008): 369.

<sup>55</sup>Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. *Correspondence, Writings, Speeches* (1981): 136.

and Anthony lamented women's internalization of these religious ideas and argue that so long as girls and women accept this position there is no prospect that they would ever be emancipated. Thus, it becomes clear that religion uses its main tool of drawing up "terrains of meaning and feeling that are central to the securing of consent and/or the incitement to rebellion" when and where it is necessary for it to achieve its goal<sup>56</sup>. In the case of the *trokosi* institution, the strategy of using force or coercion is unnecessary for compliance since fear makes parents or relatives themselves bring their girls to serve at the shrines. It means that in the context of this analysis, the situation cannot be changed without women and girls themselves arousing religious opposition. This idea is important if women/girls want to achieve a "far-reaching and momentous" reform that can transform their lives. The idea of reform does not warrant bargaining or toleration since this has serious implications that may not lead to their desired goal.

## Conclusion

The study examined *trokosi*, the keeping of virgins in traditional religious shrines in Ghana, using a shrine in Afife as a case study. The study tried to find out whether religion/culture and law play any role in sustaining the religious institution in spite of efforts by Government and human rights activists to eliminate it. The study used qualitative approach that involved in-depth interviews with key informants, ordinary locals, and observation. The primary data was supplemented by relevant secondary data. The research identified that *trokosi* as an institution persists because of its use of religio-cultural techniques such as social structuring and meaning. Other findings include the overt endorsement of the religious institution by local and international human rights laws; government's inability to enforce criminal laws; government officials' and *trokosi* practitioners' fear of reprisal from the traditional god behind the institution; and indigenes' adamancy to preserve *trokosi* as a religious and cultural heritage even if it infringes on fundamental human rights of women/girls. In the final analysis, the study is significant because it highlights the religio-cultural institution and practice and the power that sustains it and suggests ways of eliminating it. It is also important because it

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<sup>56</sup>Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley and Sherry B. Ortner (eds.). *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, (1994).

contributes to existing discourses on religious and cultural institutions and practices both locally and internationally.