LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES (LLIDS)

ISSN 2457-0044

www.ellids.com

Ghana's Trokosi Case: Contestations between Cultural Relativism and Universalism

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http://ellids.com/archives/2020/10/4.1-Agyemang.pdf

Abstract | The study herein sheds light on Trokosi, a traditional practice in Ghana and its surrounding countries in West Africa, which is widely believed to violate the rights of girls by condemning them to a life of servitude in fetish shrines to "atone for the sins of their family members" (International Needs UK 1). Though the practice and its impact are considered very important in addressing the rights of girls and women, they are under-researched. This paper presents key issues associated with the practice of Trokosi and analyzes the cultural relativism and universality debates, which posit that culture is fluid and ever evolving. It concludes that culture has the potential to adapt to new values and norms, including practices that safeguard the human rights of girls and women.

Keywords | Trokosi, Fetish Shrines, Ghana, Tradition, Education, Freedom, Religion, NGOs, Human Rights, Empowerment, Servitude, Slavery

> According to Dartey-Kumordzie, (Scholar of Ewe Philosophy and Religion), the ancestors of the Ewe people believed that society could only function well if it operates on a good moral foundation. To the ancestors, the creator of the universe is both male and female, but the female is the main creator of life. This creative function is embodied in a woman and her womb is the center of life. According to this line of reasoning, the woman was the most important factor in state building… To empower women to realize their special potential, special institutions of knowledge-the troxovi [trokosi] institutions-were created. (Ameh 61)

Trokosi, which means wife or slave to the gods (Equality Now 1) is a customary practice that still lurks in the shadows of Ghana. In this practice, girls as young as six years old are condemned to a life in a fetish shrine to "atone for the sins of their family members" (International Needs UK 1). Addressing the practice of Trokosi is complex because it is rooted in cultural norms and reinforced by the power of "the gods," who are presumed to have great powers and are greatly revered and feared. The priests, both males as well as females, selected or ascended through birth, are said to be the custodians and spokespersons of the gods. They may be considered as powerful as the gods themselves (Trokosi Dictionary 1).

The church and the state's attempts to challenge the power that the local priests wield in political and social life have often resulted in conflicts between customary/traditional institutions and the church and the state. Reactions to the Trokosi practice started as a "Christian crusade" which, according to Ameh, were met with hostility (Ameh 51). According to many cultural relativists, for centuries, Christianity, which many believe to be a relic of European slavery and colonialism, has "excluded, suppressed and demonized" African traditional or spiritual religions (De Witte 303). This tension emerged in public debates with the rising presence of the charismatic Pentecostal movement in Ghana. With their growing representation and influence in public spaces and decision making, traditionalists have also positioned themselves in the public arena as a counter-voice to what many believe is not only the Christian movement but a global agenda (303). Interventions by the government have failed to eradicate this practice, partially due to weak governance accountability measures, the fear and unwillingness to get involved in spiritual matters, and most notably, the enigmatic nature of the practice. International and local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have responded to this practice with rescue missions, education, and reintegration strategies, but these efforts are widely believed to have fallen short because of the challenges in implementing universalist value systems in non-Western or socio-cultural contexts. This paper argues that the overcoming of these obstacles requires a change in the way we understand the

universality of human rights and the fluidity of culture. To do so, it presents key issues on the practice and analyzes cultural relativism and universality debates, and posits that culture is fluid and ever evolving. It has the potential to adapt to new values and norms, including practices that safeguard the rights of girls.

According to Global Policy Forum, "Universalism refers to the notion that human rights are universal and should apply to every human being. Cultural Relativists object, and argue that human rights are culturally dependent, and that no moral principles can be made to apply to all cultures" (1). In the case of Africa, the tension between these two ideologies and approaches is rooted in a problematic history of imperialism, colonialism, and European enslavement which stripped Africans of their socio-cultural, political, and economic power. For hundreds of years, Western colonizers not only subjected communities to violence but forcefully imposed their institutions of knowing and being over local customs and traditions (Kaya and Seleti 33). It is needless to say that although these are historical accounts, the consequences have had systemic and detrimental effects on the African continent: poverty, separation of families, and pillaging of natural resources are but a few lasting impacts. It is no wonder then that the fear of rising neo-imperialism and western imaginaries through the ushering of contemporary Western development and its perceived ideals of universal human rights are often met with skepticism, anxiety, and fear in Africa (Nyoni cited in Islamet al. 11).

Over the years, many Africans have been confronted with the unfortunate realization that for the greater good of their countries, they must reconcile abuses of the past with needs for the present and visions for the future. Although the formal articulation of the universality of human rights have origins in "Western" societies, it is important to note that many of the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights can be found in ancient cultures and traditional systems around the world that predate the development of this Western acclaim (Global Policy Forum 1). Though culture and traditions are central to the identities of Africans, it does not mean that African traditions and culture are fossilized or lack the ability to evolve (Nnaemeka 377). Many African societies have a long history and culture of negotiation and compromise, thus, underscoring the dynamism of culture (378).

The practice of Trokosi is a landscape on which this battle of narratives between cultural relativists and universalists is being fought in Ghana. Legitimate concerns about the backlash of the promotion of human rights in response to this practice present a compelling need to scrutinize such approaches and demand that proponents of human rights engage more meaningfully with the communities they seek to serve. With respect to the practice of Trokosi, such approaches have been seemingly blanketed and short sighted, leaving girls and women in compromising and disempowering positions. While traditionalist approaches, which seek to preserve the practice of Trokosi, subjugates women and girls, human rights approaches, which seek to eradicate this practice, are failing to meet the needs of those affected by it.

In order to collect relevant information for the study on Trokosi, as practiced in Ghana, two approaches were adopted. The first approach, meant to obtain a general or a broad view on the topic, involved discussions with groups deemed to be familiar with the topic, either through the communities where the practices occur or at policy levels where responses and interventions are planned. These informal discussions took place in Ghana

with persons associated with local and international NGOs, churches, local governments, etc. To gain more insights into the practice of Trokosi, the second approach focused on a few purposively selected individuals[1] from the Volta, Greater Accra, and Ashanti regions who have had firsthand experience with the practice or are knowledgeable about it. Among the most compelling interviews were, Afua, a 77-year-old woman, who claims that she was married to the gods in a practice similar to Trokosi; Yaw, a 38-year-old man who has strong faith in the power of the gods; Edem, a 30-year-old woman who is in law enforcement; and Kafui, a representative from International Needs Ghana (ING), an organization that has liberated thousands of girls from shrines through their 'Trokosi Modernisation Program.' For the latter individuals, their personal testimonies were written down, and key statements from the interviews are recalled in sections of this paper. Their extensive and in-depth interviews were considered as "case studies" and have been used to provide deeper understandings on the practice and contestation between universalism and cultural relativism.

The practice of Trokosi in Ghana started in the early 18th century and is still prevalent today despite the national laws that have been enshrined in the constitution, and the international conventions and instruments that have been signed to abolish this act and other acts of gender violence and servitude in Ghana (Arid 1). According to an article in the Independent UK, "The chosen ones: Slavery in the name of god,"

> Trokosi originates from the same belief system as voodoo. From the 1500s on, the Ewe were driven from the Niger River delta westwards. During this violent period their war-gods took on great importance and the fetish priests were more important than the chiefs, or traditional rulers. Before entering combat, warriors would visit religious shrines where they offered women to the war gods in exchange for victory and a safe homecoming. (Cited in Ireland Refugee Documentation Center Report-IRDCR 1)

The word Trokosi also known as '*Troxovi'* and '*Woryokwe*' "to the *Danbge* people literally means slave or wife to the gods" (Equality Now 1). "In traditional religion, *'Tro'* in the *Ewe* language refers to a spiritual force that transforms or acts for anyone who observes the proper rites and ceremonies of a cult and keeps within its rules. *'Kosi'* means slave. In the same manner, '*Won*' in *Adanbge or Ga* language means cult and '*Yokwe*' means slave" (Ababio 4). There are three forms of Trokosi: '*Dorfelviwo*': "those who were offered by their families to serve in the shrine as a sign of appreciation of the help of the gods in their conception and birth, '*Fiasidis*': who are given by their families, inducted by the deities, or voluntarily chose to serve in shrines" (Ameh cited in Kalunta-Crumpton and Agozino 25). Ameh also states that "these two forms of Trokosi, most notable amongst the *Anlo Ewes* are respected in the community and by the priests" (25). The third form of Trokosi, commonly referred to as simply Trokosi, is the main focus of this paper and is most prevalent with the "Tongu-Ewes and Dangmes" (25), which are located along the south eastern region of Ghana. This form involves family members sending young virgin girls in their families to fetish priests for the atonement of their families' crimes committed in the past (26).

[1]Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of interviewed subjects.

In this practice, girls are committed to the Trokosi institution at a very young age. "From ages 6 to 10 is when they begin their lives in the shrine and where an initiation ritual betrothing the girl to the gods is performed" (Eurtuk cited in IRDCR 3). The report states that fetish priests are entitled to consummate the marriage between the girl and the gods once she reaches puberty (3). According to Bastine, girls condemned to the shrine are at high risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), given that priests are known to have numerous sexual partners (83). Once girls come to the shrine, they are socialized to not refuse sexual advances from the priests. Ertuk's research further suggests that the daughters, who are born of the relations between the priest and the girls, also have "obligations" and responsibilities in the shrine (Eurtuk cited in IRDCR 3). Afua, a female farmer/petty trader, the 77-year-old interview subject, stated that the boys born within the shrine are raised to serve as protectors of the girls when crowds gather at the shrines to seek the gods (Interview 2012: Wife to the gods).[2] "[C]hildren of Trokosi are denied parental and emotional support, adequate nutrition and a healthy environment. Servitude restricts their access to social services such as formal education, and medical care (ante-natal, post-natal attention and immunization of their children)" (Yakin Ertuk cited in Bastine 83).

The 30-year-old female law enforcement officer, Edem, believes that Trokosi is a grave human rights violation and her account during the interview is consistent with the portrayal of Trokosi above. She stated that,

> Trokosi is a form of slavery. The families will commit a crime and agree to send a virgin but the shrine chooses the girl; often the prettiest one, and then they are forced to work. They go to the farm and work and will not get paid. They say it is the wife of the gods but really it is the wife of the priests. They marry the girls at very young ages and sleep with them. Some of them even have babies by them. These priests can have up to 60-80 wives all living together. (Interview 2012: Law Enforcement)[3]

To truly understand this practice and its impact on societal relations, one must recognize the perceived power of the gods. Interview subject, Yaw, the man with faith in the gods described how he understands and fears the practice of Trokosi:

> If somebody does something that is not fine, for example, stealing or fornication, like taking another man's wife, somebody can go to the shrine to report you. If the person that does something wrong does not confess, they will die in two or three hours' time. If you confess, they may not take you. After that person dies, another person in the family will die and the next person will fall ill. So when somebody falls ill, the family will take them [to the shrine]. The priest will let the family know that there is somebody in the family who has died but did not pass through the right channel to die. So the priest will offer to reverse the curse. The priest will tell the family that they need a small girl who is a virgin. (Interview 2012: Faith in the gods)[4]

[2]The interview was conducted in person on 29 July 2012 in Kumasi, Ashanti Region. The original language of the interview was Akan which was later translated in English by AK Davies.
[3]The interview was conducted in person on 8 July 2012 in Woe, Volta Region, Keta district.
[4]Interview with Yaw, a male driver, was held on 29 July 2012 in Tema, Greater Accra Region in person.

Yaw laments that the power of the gods is not to be underestimated because they can bring death upon your family: "If you refuse to give away your girl, the girl will die, the whole family will die. So you must send the girl because she will be alive and it will just be like she is living with another family" (Interview 2012: Faith in the gods). When asked if he would send his own daughter to the shrine if requested by the priests, he stated that he would do so without reservation. He further claimed that even though he is a Christian, he knows the gods are real because of the biblical references to other spirits and forces.

In an All Africa interview with Mercy, a liberated Trokosi, a clear characterization of the severity of this practice is articulated:

> At a tender age of eight, her parents condemned her to a Trokosi camp to atone for the sins of her aunt. On several occasions when she tried to escape, she was unsuccessful; in part because when she returned home her parents escorted her back to the shrine… Mercy began her condemned life as a Trokosi, where she woke at dawn and cleaned the shrine and worked on the farm. Worse, the priest sexually abused her, leaving her with four children to fend for. "The Trokosi system is not good," she told the gathering. "My generation and the generation before mine missed out in education." (All Africa 1)

Bastine's research indicates that this arrangement is systemic because even in cases where the Trokosi can leave after a five-year service to the shrine, the families of the Trokosi are often not in a position to fulfil the rituals and obligations demanded from the shrine. Consequently, the "girl may be confined to the shrine for life" (83).

The traditions associated with Trokosi are dynamic and play critical roles in the everyday lives of people and survival of societies from generation to generation (Nieto 130). In some parts of Ghana, and the African context in general, the existence of a supreme God is not questioned, but God must be approached only through lesser "gods" (Trokosi Dictionary 1). Afua, the 77-year-old interview subject, was a toddler when her mother started taking her to the shrine. She recalls,

> Growing up in the village at that time, there was no Christianity. There were only small gods. This was the only way we knew how to go through God. I am the eighth born. But my mother told me that the two before me died. One at four years old and the other at one week old. So when my mother lost the two kids, she went to the gods to tell her story and ask for help. So I am the one that was born. The priest told her that gods revealed to him that I was to be the wife of the gods. (Interview 2012: Wife to the gods)

Afua lived with her family at home but by the age of six, she was going to the shrine by herself every Friday to fetch water in service to the shrine (Interview 2012: Wife to the gods).

Article 26(2) of the Ghana constitution prohibits "customary practices which dehumanize or are injurious to the physical and mental wellbeing of all persons" (Ghana Constitution 1). Therefore, "[I]n 1998, the Government passed a law against ritual servitude (among other things), criminalizing the practice of Trokosi" (Ertuk cited in IRDCR 3). The Ghana Women's Manifesto was produced by an international NGO, ABANTU for Development in 2004. This manifesto was created to articulate the

demands of women concerning their social, cultural, political, and economic wellbeing. It explicitly addresses Trokosi, as well as other cultural practices that stand in the way of women accessing their rights and capabilities (Manifesto 46). The manifesto considers this practice as an "abuse" to Ghanaian culture and demands that ritual servitude be abolished (47). Most cited amongst the works related to this practice are the contributions by International Needs Ghana (ING), which "[…] garnered support from international media and NGOs in its campaign to end Trokosi (Interview 2012: ING representative).[5] Similarly, the Ghana Committee on Human and Peoples Rights, the Ghanaian Association for Women's Welfare, The Ghana National Commission on Children, and the Ghana International Federation of Women Lawyers all issued reports to condemn this practice as a human rights violation (Yates 1). Greene's analysis of the Trokosi system during the 90's conveys the practice as "a modern form of slavery" (960). Arid also deals with the conceptualization of Trokosi as a form of slavery in her work, highlighting Ghana's signatory status with the Slavery Convention and the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery (1). Ghana has been the first of many African countries to ratify regional and international instruments, which are to enforce the protection of the rights of women and children such as the "UN Beijing Platform, Convention of the Rights of the Child, African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and CEDAW" (Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, Government of Ghana Official Portal 1).

In spite of these interventions, there seems to be ongoing resistance by traditionalists. Those urging for the preservation of culture and tradition are not disconnected marginal groups secluded to remote corners of the country; they are leaders and people who have influence in the decision-making process in communities and at varying levels within societies (Shcwimmer 1). The Ghana constitution states that citizens have "the right to freedom of religion and cultural practice" (1). Priests are, therefore, covered by this 'right' and receive support from highly connected networks, such as the Afrikania Renaissance Mission, who argue that the practice of Trokosi is a "West African religious tradition that needs to be protected" (IRDCR 1). "High Priest of the *Afrikania* Mission, Osofo Azasu claimed that Trokosi is part of the African religious practice and so the attempt by the NGOs with support from Western countries was a means to destroy the enhancement of African spirituality" (IRDCR 1). According to Ghana News Association (GNA), traditionalists claim that under the Trokosi system, girls are undergoing a different form of education (1). They claim that Trokosi is much like taking on "apprenticeship" positions in the shrine (IDRCR 1). Bastine's research further states that according to the *Afrikania*,

> The Trokosi system (a) controls crime by training and teaching young women how to be good role models in their families and communities; (b) it is an honour bestowed on the girls, and should be considered as such… [Additionally, the shrines] serve as (a) hospitals, (b) healing centers, (c) pharmacies, (d) courts of last resort and justice, (e) places of worship and devotion, (f) sanctuaries for refugees, (g) schools, (h) conservatories of culture morality, and (i) lodges of esoteric knowledge. (Bastine 85)

[5]The telephonic interview with the project manager of ING was held on 1 August 2012 in Tema, Greater Accra Region.

Traditionalists deny that violence or abuse is practiced in the Trokosi system and claim that the build up around this practice is a propaganda to undermine cultural values. Azasu stated, "The NGOs who went to North America and Europe to portray that there was slavery in Ghana and needed funds to liberate them, were doing that for their own selfish benefits" (GNA 1). Others have expressed how this practice has been misinterpreted and misrepresented by the media and by local NGOs that are trying to capitalize from this (Amenyo 1). There are claims listed within a court case hearing and legislative report that raise speculation that local NGOs paid people to pretend that they were rescued Trokosi girls so as to attract international attention and funding. The legislative hearing alleged, "Six previous investigations since 2001[…] suggest that ING recruited 2,200 women, many of whom were not genuine Trokosis, to participate in mock liberations. Participants were offered $28 each and told they could attend ING's vocational training schools in exchange for their "liberation"" (Yates 1). Kafui, the representative from ING stated that he was aware of these allegations and that they have not affected the organization's ability to carry out their work (Interview 2012: ING representative).

The contestation between cultural relativism and human rights is fraught with many complexities. According to Ameh, this is "one of the major dilemmas and tensions surrounding the application of international human rights norms in other cultures" (Ameh cited in Kalunta-Crumpton and Agozino 26). The underlying notion underpinning the arguments held by cultural relativists or traditionalists is that they "be allowed to determine what is dehumanising within the context of their culture, and not within the context of alien universal human rights rules" (Abaobi 4). While traditionalists interpret this imposition as a form of cultural imperialism, Sen offers a counter argument that decries values of freedom and liberty as Western constructs or imperialism. Understanding the contentious nature of the application of human rights in non-Western societies, he states, "The notion of human rights builds on the idea of a shared humanity. These rights are not derived from citizenship of any country, or membership of any nation, but taken as entitlements of every human being. The concept of universal human rights is, in this sense, a uniting idea" (Sen 1). Ameh poses the question about whether or not non-Western countries possess the infrastructure to adopt international human right norms in their daily lives; specifically he questions whether these norms can be realized in countries where Trokosi is practiced, given its traditional and religious underpinnings, which are central to the identities of many Africans and Ghanaians, in particular (Ameh cited in Kalunta-Crumpton and Agozino 29).

Empowerment is a concept that both universalists and traditionalists claim to believe in and reinforce in their approaches to the eradication and preservation of the Trokosi practice. While both lay claim to this concept as integral to their respective value systems, one must question which interpretation of empowerment best serves women and girls in the end. The World Bank (WB) defines empowerment as "life of dignity in accordance with one's values, capable of fighting for one's rights, independence […] being free, awakening, and capability" (WB 10). It is important to evaluate this idea of empowerment because it has both conceptual and practical applications within socio-cultural contexts. The common response to Trokosi upheld by universalists can be described as a rescue-educate-and-reintegrate model: the idea that once Trokosi are liberated, educated, and reintegrated into society, they can be empowered to exercise their

rights. However, this is seldom a straightforward realization. Haddad posits that empowerment is not transactional and it cannot be bestowed. Empowerment must be seen as a process or journey and not a destination (Haddad 1). This corroborates the notion that empowerment can be unique to individuals and is therefore "subjective and realized in different ways" (1).

Understanding how traditionalists and local communities perceive empowerment vis-à-vis the Trokosi practice sheds light on the subjective nature of what it means to be empowered. Traditionalists posit that a life in or connected to the shrine is in fact, empowering to women, girls, and their communities. Bastine's work, mentioned above, describes the widely accepted belief that Trokosis are bestowed with "honour" in the shrine. His research asserts that the shrines are perceived by traditionalists and community members as pillars of the community (Bastine 82). Greene also highlights this stance, stating that "[o]thers entered spiritual service voluntarily, or, if minors, with the consent of their parents, because of the prestige of the god and the perceived benefits associated with shrine affiliation" (Greene 960). The interview held with Afua affirms this notion of prestige. She reflects on her sense of esteem and power, while connected to the shrine:

> The shrine was in the village where I come from so I was seen as special. The gods were very protective over me. When people came to worship, the gods would be praising me and speaking about my beauty-saying look at her eyes, look at her neck…she is so pretty. So if the men in the shrine were to look at me, the gods wouldn't attend to them because they are looking at his wife. (Interview 2012: Wife to the gods)

Empowerment as a concept then assumes that there are different values regarding what is considered powerful or meaningful in people's lives (Haddad 1). Based on this concept of value and empowerment, society can perceive the Trokosi as empowered while they live in the shrines because of their connections to the spirits. However, when they are reintegrated into society, they can be perceived as disempowered since they are no longer associated with the protection and status of the shrines. Bastine's research describes how girls and women become stigmatized and struggle to keep jobs, stay in school, and/or get married after reintegration. Trokosi are often isolated and discriminated against because people fear that they have not served their full time in the shrines, as intended by the gods. They believe that would be displeasing the gods and that any association with reintegrated Trokosi will result in punishment by the gods (Bastine 86). Interview subject, Edem, corroborated this trend stating that in her experience she has seen communities totally isolate the reintegrated Trokosi (Interview 2012: Law Enforcement). If local communities equate isolation and discrimination (the unintended consequences but hard reality of implanting human rights in this context) with Western notions of "empowerment," they are likely to reject the merits of universalist principles in support of human rights.

Even though Ghana is signatory to several international human right instruments, which reinforce norms and values around the protection, freedom, and rights of women, the notion of human rights, much like empowerment is often subject to scrutiny for its transactional tendencies within socio-cultural contexts. In order for universalists to sell the idea of rights and freedoms within this context, freedom must not be seen as an issue

of physical liberation but it must be internalized (Soloveychik 1). Soloveychik differentiates the ideas of 'freedom from' and 'freedom for' by clarifying that 'freedom from' characterizes freedom from servitude or bondage (similar to how universalist approaches liberate Trokosi from shrines), whereas 'freedom for' deals with internal freedom as a process of self-realization (1). Some realizations that Soloveychik defines are "freedom from fear, stereotypical thinking, prejudice […]" (1). It is essential that rights and freedoms are internalized by former Trokosi as relevant and accessible within them. Freedom, in the form of physical liberation, can be given to someone as the 'freedom from' theory conveys. However, consciousness and peace, for example, are internal manifestations, which must be realized and cannot be bestowed (1).

A challenge that universalists face in implementing human rights in socio-cultural contexts is that traditional practices like Trokosi do not exist in a vacuum but are upheld by the community (Ameh cited in Kalunta-Crumpton and Agozino 29). The oppressed may realize their rights and freedoms, but society may refuse to treat them accordingly. Rescued Trokosi often return to shrines because they feel less restrained there than in a society where they are isolated and mistreated (Arid 1). Interview with Edem points out that girls that have been subjected to psychological trauma can be emotionally bound to their lives in the shrines. They are often times attached to the familiarity of the environment, including the violence and deprivation that had become routine (Interview 2012: Law Enforcement). Ababio highlights another issue which may reflect the high recidivism rates for liberated Trokosi, "Organisations liberated Trokosi women and forgot about their children. The women were given their freedom whilst their children remained in the shrines. Since they could not bear the loss of their children and had no rights to them, they quickly went back to the shrines" (23). This logic is similar to the cycle of imprisonment that ex-offenders face after being freed from prison who deliberately return because of hardships or lack of access to resources in the 'real world' (Moak et al. 5) or because of social or familial ties on the 'inside.' This concept of recidivism is defined as psychiatric and "the chronic tendency toward repetition of criminal or antisocial behavior patterns" (dictionary.com). A study on the causes of recidivism states that, "the harder it is for someone who has lived a life a delinquency, the easier it is for them to give up and go back to what comes easy," which often is a life of crime (Moak et al. 5). Edem believes this to be the case with Trokosi. She states that what comes easier is a life within the shrine (Interview 2012: Law Enforcement).

It is important to briefly note that, according to Bastine's research, as part of rescue strategies, NGOs such as ING implemented the following, "Alternative remedies, such as acceptance of material things like alcohol and money in lieu of vestal girls for restitution. Following this, a community–wide agreement is signed to free [Trokosis] from a shrine. Next, the shrine is compensated for its future economic loses, for giving up its workers (Trokosis)" (Ben-Ari cited in Bastine 86). Although this may seem like an easy victory for universalists, it is short sighted in that it opens up avenues for priests to continue to manipulate and exploit poor families. They, in turn, are rewarded with the promise of labor, sex, and now additional compensation for returning girls. More problematic is reducing the worth of girls to the price of alcohol or other material things. This alternative remedy further objectifies girls and devalues them, which has repercussions for the way they are then reintegrated into the society.

Interview subject, Afua recounts her experience of leaving the shrine at age 15, when her husband proposed to her: "When my husband came to ask my father for his daughter's hand, he said no because she is married to the gods. So he had to go to the priests and pay and give rams, salt, chickens, bronze and traditional underwear. He also had to give things to my father. My husband did all of the necessary things so we could marry […]" (Interview 2012: Wife to the gods). She continues to describe how even after her liberation from the shrine, she was chastised by the gods:

> I started going to the Christian church and the gods became angry. They said if I don't stop going that they would kill me. Everyone was afraid for me. They even begged my mother to stop me from going so that I will not die but I continued to go. The gods cursed me and said that I would not be able to get pregnant so when I got pregnant, the gods were very angry and embarrassed. They said that I would die during childbirth. So when it was time for me to deliver, I had many problems. I was in labor for three days. People were very afraid for me because they thought that I would die. I went to different hospitals and finally a traditional midwife agreed to deliver my baby. (Interview 2012: Wife to the gods)

Afua's experience further illustrates how giving the priests material things in exchange for the freedom of girls may result in their physical liberation but does not result in internal freedom. Even after her service to the shrine concluded, she was cursed and threatened by the gods and had to deal with the fear and stigma that it entailed. Afua's experience conveys that human rights can often complicate matters for victims of this practice.

Traditionalists would explain these shortcomings by positing that human rights foster individualism, which is detrimental to the unity that human rights claim to offer. Rather, they would emphasize the need to prioritize the protection of the interests of the community over that of the individual. Thus, with respect to the Trokosi practice, it is believed that the "sacrifice" of a girl to the gods is beneficial to the wellbeing and preservation of the moral order of the whole community (Ameh cited in Kalunta-Crumpton and Agozino 29). What universalists deem a sacrifice, the traditionalists claim is a form of duty and honor (29). While Edem, the law enforcement officer, interpreted this as an "unfair sacrifice," Yaw, the man with faith in the gods, believes it to be a matter of duty. Even among research participants from the same area, there is a lack of consensus. However, Ameh raises an important observation that undercuts the traditionalist claims of community wellbeing. He states that communal values in the African context seem to disproportionately affect females (29). Underscoring this trend, the Ghana Women's Manifesto states that "although culture belongs to the whole society, women are often held to a higher standard of culture compliance than men" (Manifesto 42). In addition to Trokosi, other examples of this phenomenon include: "bride price, marriage rites, inheritance practices, widow rights, circumcision and witch villages […]" (Ameh cited in Kalunta-Crumpton and Agozino 29).

Central to the universalists value system is the notion that women and girls must be protected from harmful practices. Therefore, universalists, specifically feminist community building proponents, seek to eradicate traditional practices that cause harm to women by advancing what they describe as "appropriate cultural values" (Ababio 90). However, in looking at the disadvantages for women in Ghanaian society, it is necessary

to question the idea of well-being and appropriateness within their cultural context. Advancing certain appropriate cultural values over others is complex and becomes an easy target for criticism by those who hope to defend this practice. Definitions of "appropriate" and whose values should be considered then become major points of dispute between those defending human rights and those defending traditional practices and customary rights.

Romanoff takes a culturist perspective in her analysis dealing with this issue of subjectivity and cultural relativity. She claims in her accounts with Trokosis that "the Fiasidis of Klikor [a type of Trokosi] are not slaves to the shrine as the abolitionist claim, they are the Queens of the community […] However, what I have seen in Klikor, if it is representative of all, then it [Trokosi] is the practice of humanity in its purist form." She concludes her essay by stating that "the real controversy over the anti-Trokosi campaign is about the imposition of one culture upon another […]" (Cited in Ameh 55). The argument underlying this 'controversy' of the imposition of one culture over the other is rooted in the belief that culture cannot be renegotiated, blended, or evolved. This ultimately suggests that there is a right and wrong way to practice culture and that there is no medium in the discussion of culture outside of its polarities. But this is a very narrow way of looking at culture because it assumes that culture is static, when in reality culture is very fluid (Nieto 130). Though traditions like Trokosi are rigid due to their historical longevity, cultures are ever changing and evolving (130).

Though it is important to look at the contestation behind these varying approaches, one cannot oversimplify the relationships and associations within cultures (Sen 1). Sen believes that when responding to the universalist and relativist debate, "the main point to note is that both Western and non-Western traditions have much variety within themselves" (1). To look at this practice within the context of universal human rights as an imposition of one culture over the other is a failure to regard the agency of Ghanaians. The idea of agency and fluidity within culture is even evident in the diverse forms in which people choose to practice Trokosi and similar practices that adopt the same traditions, but are referred to by different names. This demonstrates that there is more than one way to practice culture. Sen makes a very important point about the complexities which arise as a result of human rights versus cultural relativism. He states,

> The need to acknowledge diversity applies not only between nations and cultures, but also within each nation and culture. In the anxiety to take adequate note of international diversity and cultural divergences, and the so-called differences between "Western civilizations," "Asian values," "African culture," and so on, there is often a dramatic neglect of heterogeneity within each country and culture. "Nations" and "cultures" are not particularity good units to understand and analyze intellectual and political differences. Lines of division in commitments and skepticism do not run along international boundaries—they criss-cross at many different levels. The rhetoric of cultures, with each "culture" seen in largely homogenized terms, can confound us politically as well as intellectually. (1)

It is needless to say that further research must be done on the practice of Trokosi and other such practices which violate basic human rights. Beyond investigating the human right violations perpetuated by these practices, what must be acknowledged and further analyzed are the complexities and deeply rooted ties to traditions which are

dynamic and play an integral part in people's lives. It is important to stand up for human rights, and against gender violence. However, it is also necessary to consider how and on what grounds people relate to and give meaning to these practices; what kind of values, beliefs, political and social systems are operative in this context; and why such practices have lasted for so long even in an era of democracy. It is not enough to be a signatory to human rights conventions and to adopt the language of human rights into the constitution. Human rights norms and values must be realized by the people and serve their needs and interests.

In this battle of narratives, the practice of Trokosi highlights the shortcomings of human rights and universalist approaches when applied to every day circumstances of women and girls connected to this practice. Human rights, freedom, and empowerment are words that get thrown about but should not be taken for granted. When fully realized and adapted to local contexts in ways that communities deem humanizing, only then can universalist principles achieve free, equal, and safe societies for women, girls, and their families. Therefore, proponents of human rights cannot afford to be reckless, passive, or take shortcuts in administering these values and norms, especially in local contexts where communities struggle to see their benefits in the first place and are naturally inclined towards longstanding institutions like Trokosi.

Proponents of human rights and universalist value systems must seek to understand the rationale for traditionalist systems like Trokosi and develop strategies that meet the needs which the practice of Trokosi fails to deliver. As Ghana's history with this practice conveys, it is not enough to problematize this practice and call it a human rights violation. Universalists must work with people on the ground to create new narratives around universalist principles that are reflective of the values of the people-narratives in a way that does not contradict with their belief systems or put them at risk/ keep them in fear. Nnaemeka states that, "you must have a positive alternative, a vision of a better future that can motivate people to sacrifice their time and energy toward its realization" (Nnaemeka 364). In this process, communities, universalists, and traditionalists must find mutual interest. What the study of Trokosi has made clear is that once the values and needs are aligned, the mechanisms for reinforcing and safeguarding those values are flexible and can be negotiated. African feminist scholarship and Indigenous Knowledge Systems frameworks are useful in understanding what is meaningful to Africans in their context and should therefore be valuable to universalists in their pursuits to promote fundamental freedoms and rights in socio-cultural contexts.

At the root of this challenge is a need to submit that in the case of Trokosi, both cultural relativists and universalists fail women and girls. However, cultures, traditions, and value systems can change, adapt, and be renegotiated as African cultures have managed to do throughout history. Societies must not be bound by traditions. Rather, traditions should be used to cultivate and reinforce free and prosperous societies. The Ghana Women's Manifesto states,

> Gender inequalities cannot be justified in the name of Ghanaian culture. Culture is a dynamic force for good when it changes in response to the concerns and values of the times. We believe that Ghanaian culture is strong and resilient to withstand the questioning and abolition of harmful practices. (46)

When it comes to the application of human rights norms in African societies, as part of cultural negotiation and compromise, African governments and local NGOs must continue to use a critical lens to determine what works in their cultural contexts and leverage universalist ideas and approaches to meet the needs and interests of the people. On the other hand, universalists must thoroughly examine the complexities and nuances of cultures and traditions with which they seek to engage so as to safeguard mutual interest. To further this cause, they must make a case for human rights values and solicit genuine buy-in from local communities. The fluidity and diversity of and within culture gives hope that we can reimagine a society that both embraces elements of customary traditions as well as a society that values women through the protection of their rights. The evolving nature of culture ensures that Ghanaians can simultaneously embrace norms and customs that address current day problems and reinforce their values.

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