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The Slave Girls of Ghana

Brian S. Woods

After we made our film *The Dying Rooms*, exposing fatal levels of neglect in China's state run orphanages, we were asked by Channel Four and HBO to turn our attention to the rest of the world, to investigate incidents of child abuse, neglect and exploitation wherever we might find it. Two years later, after visiting 22 countries, we had a depressing catalogue to reveal to the world. In every one of the four continents we visited we found examples of child servitude — children were being enslaved for their bodies or their labour. Usually the context was either sexual or economic, however in Ghana we came across a particularly unpleasant form of child slavery — girls forced to become the physical and sexual slaves of shrine priests to please the Gods.

About an hour East of Accra lies the Volta delta, a fertile plain criss-crossed by a few metalled roads, and speckled with Ewe villages that have changed little for several millennia. The predominant religion here is what colonial anthropologists described as Animist. From the imagined superiority of their Judaeo-Christian monotheism they looked down on the many Gods of the region and downgraded them to mere *fetishes*, defined as “an object believed amongst primitive people to have magical power.”

Among the Ewe people nothing happens without cause, they are fervent believers in Einstein's maxim that “God does not play dice.” If someone dies, it is for a reason. There is the superficial cause; malaria, drowning, or an attack by a wild animal — and there is the profound cause; the displeasure or vengeance of the Gods. A family who has experienced notable misfortune — deaths, illness or just a failing crop — may well seek out a soothsayer, a man or woman who can make contact with the spirit world, in order to divine *why* the family has so displeased the Gods.

Once the cause of the offence has been divined, the soothsayer will then communicate what offering the Gods will accept as compensation for the offence, to bring the matter to a conclusion.

According to the tribal elders we spoke to, for hundreds of years these offerings have comprised of one or more head of cattle, perhaps some rolls of calico, and usually a few crates of the local

homebrew, *apeteshe*. These would be presented to a particular priest (identified by the soothsayer) as a representative of the God in question on earth, and all would be well.

Then, around a hundred years ago according to the elders, an extraordinary and unfortunate change came about. A family was unable to raise the money to buy the prescribed cattle. Instead they offered the shrine priest one of their virgin daughters. This offer was gratefully accepted, and a new tradition was instantly born.

When we filmed in Ghana there were several thousand of these women and girls serving in shrines throughout the Volta delta. Called "Trokosi" in the Ewe language, they are, in theory, wives and servants to the Gods. In practice, their role ranges from being purely ceremonial, to being the priests' cooks, farmhands, cleaners, and mistresses. They are unable to leave the shrine without the priests' permission, unpaid, severely exploited, and controlled by violence and the threat of violence. They are without doubt, slaves, by any reasonable definition.

In one of the shrines we visited we were able, after some days, to speak to some of the Trokosis in private while they were working the fields owned by the shrine a couple of miles from the village. Christy was typical. A slight, pretty, twelve-year-old, her parents had brought her to the shrine, two years before. All she knew about her captivity was that her older sister had been a Trokosi before her, but the fetish had killed her, so Christy had been sent to replace her. As far as she knew she was serving a life sentence for a crime someone else had committed. "It's for ever," she told us. "Even when I die my family will have to bring somebody else, and when she dies they will bring another person."

We asked another girl, Atuishe, if she was happy in the shrine. "Happy? Oh no, I am a Trokosi, not a normal person. Others live free, but I am suffering in bondage here. If I could have got some poison I would have taken it long ago."

No one is quite sure how many Trokosis are enslaved in Ghana, partly because the conditions in which the girls live vary so much. In some of the shrines the priests regard the girls as their sexual property, and although they are only supposed to have sex with them after their third menstruation, we met several girls who had children by the priests when they were as young as 12.

One girl told us how the priest had come to her in the night when she was just 10. She knew what he wanted but kept refusing

to comply. Several nights later he raped her. Afterwards, as she lay on the ground crying, the other girls begged her to be quiet, they warned that if the priest was disturbed by her crying he would come back and not only beat her, but beat them as well.

Conversely, in another shrine, the priest, Togbe Obosumfor ("Priest" Obosumfor) was appalled when we told him how some of the other priests in the area treated their Trokosi. His attitude was that the offer of service made by a family when they brought their daughter was to the Gods, not to him. If a family came to his shrine offering their daughter, he ordered a feast to be prepared, and told them all to return in a week's time to celebrate. Togbe Obosumfor, his family and the girl and her family would eat and drink late into the night, singing and drumming to attract the attention of the Gods. As dawn broke he would perform a ritual in which the girl was accepted into the service of the Gods and became a Trokosi. Then, everyone, including the girl, would simply go home. As far as Togbe Obosumfor was concerned the girl would then serve the Gods in the spirit world (which is after all their domain) but would be able to continue a normal life in the material world. To this Togbe, any priest who sought to take advantage of the Trokosis serving his Gods were playing with fire. "They are mad," he told us. "The Gods will punish them."

As film-makers we were there primarily as observers, we wanted to record the practice, speak to the girls, the priests and the locals who condemned it, and bring to the world a balanced and fair report. Our plan was not to get involved.

Then we met Juliet, a frightened 14 year-old. Her mother had whisked Juliet away from her village to the capital, Accra, to try to prevent her in-laws sending Juliet to a shrine as a Trokosi. Now living in hiding with her mother's family, Juliet was a withdrawn and nervous teenager, she told us she had bad dreams every night about life as a priest's slave.

Ten years earlier, Juliet's father, Joshua, stole a tape recorder from his friend, Willie. Willie went to the local priest to demand justice and the priest told Joshua he must return the tape recorder, pay Willie compensation, and pay a fine to the shrine. Joshua ignored this ruling and in so doing went against the will of Gods.

Eight years later Joshua's father died, followed shortly by his mother. Two deaths in swift succession sent the family elders scurrying to the sooth-sayer. He confirmed their worst fears, the Gods

were angry with the family for ignoring the earlier judgement against Joshua, and were now taking their revenge. Unless the family paid not only the original fine, but also compensation to the shrine in the form of a Trokosi, the deaths would continue

We joined Joshua and his family on the way to the shrine to try to negotiate a reduction in the fine, and in particular to try to secure Juliet's freedom.

The shrine itself was a mud hut with a corrugated iron roof in the centre of village of twenty or so buildings about two hours cross country from the nearest metalled road. The outside of the shrine was brightly painted with caricatures of the reigning priest's most recent ancestors. The bottles of vodka we had brought as an offering smoothed permission for us to enter the shrine and to film, and after a couple of hours of formalities negotiations began in earnest.

"Negotiation" is an entirely inaccurate description of what actually took place. First Joshua, then in turn each and every one of the relatives who had accompanied him, threw themselves on the earth floor in front of the priest and begged for mercy. Fully prostrate, face pressed into the hard packed clay, they reached out and touched his feet and asked for the fifteen head of cattle to be reduced to five, the five crates of *apeteshe* to be reduced to one, the three rolls of calico to be forgotten, and so on.

We had arrived at the village mid-morning. Six hours later the small patch of sunlight that filtered into the shrine through the one opening near the roof was beginning to move up the opposite wall. Negotiations were drawing to a close, yet still Juliet's name had not been mentioned.

Finally we had to ask our interpreter the question directly.

"Why haven't they mentioned Juliet?"

"I don't know."

We felt the time had come to cross the line, and get involved.

"Can you ask them why Juliet's freedom has not been discussed?"

The exchange that followed provoked many raised eyebrows. The girl, we were told, was not up for negotiation, she had to come to the shrine, it was what the Gods wanted.

When we asked if the Gods would accept money or cattle in place of the girl, the priest and his acolytes decided they needed to retire for a private conference. When they returned the priest threw his cowrie shells on the floor and spent many minutes consid-

ering the pattern before finally announcing that the Gods had decreed that the Juliet's freedom could be bought for 5 million Cedis, about £1500.

This represented Joshua's entire earnings for about ten years, an impossible figure.

We then had to face the fact that without doubt our presence in the shrine had massively inflated the price of Juliet's freedom. The priest and the rest of the villagers reasoned that if we were that interested in this girl's freedom then we could pay for it. We had walked into a trap of our own making. On the surface it seemed we had only two choices, walk away and leave Juliet to the priest, or pay up and thereby encourage the trade in flesh we were trying to expose.

We felt as stupid as we undoubtedly were. We knew the danger of getting involved because we had heard several unconfirmed tales of German and American charity workers arriving at shrines with their pockets metaphorically bulging with donations gathered in US and Western European churches to "free sex slaves in Africa." According to the local chiefs, word of these charities spread fast, and the numbers of Trokosi at any one shrine became increasingly exaggerated. When a charity worker finally arrived at a shrine the girls from several local villages would be drafted in, and the worker would be told that every one of these hundred or so girls were Trokosis. After lengthy negotiations several thousand dollars would be handed over, and the girls would be "freed". The charity worker would go home satisfied that s/he had liberated the down-trodden, and the priest's community would distribute the profits. However the real Trokosis held by the priest would remain enslaved.

We were unable to confirm whether or not these stories were true, however we were able to speak to priests vehemently opposed to these liberations. One priest, Togbe Gidisu, threatened to put a curse on any "liberator" setting foot on the island on which his shrine stood. He told us all his Trokosis were very happy, and none of them wanted to leave, however he wouldn't let us hear this from the girls themselves; they were, he said, too busy to talk to us. When we raised the question of cattle for girls, he was very clear, "Cows cannot fetch water to drink, cows cannot cook for me, take my children to school. A cow cannot help me on my farm. A cow

cannot help President Rawlings run the country. So why should I leave my present wives and replace them with cows?"

Following the broadcast of our film, and another expose produced shortly after ours by ABC's 60 Minutes programme in the USA, the Ghanaian government did finally bow to international pressure and passed a law in September 1998 making it illegal to send a child away from home for a religious ritual. However as the Ghanaian Ambassador to the UN was quick to point out, passing a law is relatively easy, the real challenge is to implement it. In the Volta delta, where Christians and Muslims alike are likely to fear the fetish at least as much as they fear their God, few policemen will act directly against the priests. Instead the village elders and local chiefs are being recruited to try and persuade priests to give up their girls in exchange for cattle.

The hope is that by conducting the negotiations within the community the prices agreed will stay within reasonable bounds and not be hyperinflated by the presence of white people.

It was an approach like this, which we adopted to try to secure Juliet's freedom. The Internationally funded, but locally based charity, International Needs has liberated over 1800 girls in the past five years. Funded by Christian groups around the world, International Needs in Ghana is run by the charismatic and larger than life character, the Reverend Walter Pimpong. It was to Walter Pimpong that we turned for help when we became enmeshed in the attempt to save Juliet from slavery.

Rev. Pimpong immediately approached the Human Rights Commissioner, and at the same time reopened negotiations with the priest. Juliet's freedom was eventually guaranteed in exchange for just three cows.

Despite the successes of International Needs, and the existence of a law against Trokosi, Walter Pimpong estimates that there are still up to 3000 girls living in bondage in the Volta delta. The liberations continue (the most recent was in November) but the emphasis now is on gentle persuasion, using the priests who have already liberated their Trokosis to persuade the priests still holding girls that the game is up.

In the meantime, as I write this, and as you read this, there are several thousand girls who know nothing about the attempts to free them, and live in fear from day to day. Their lives are perhaps not that different in some ways from the lives of millions of other

women in the developing world; they get up before dawn to collect water, make a fire and cook breakfast, go to the fields and gently persuade life out of unforgiving earth, sweep compounds clean, watch their male masters get drunk, and go to bed at night wondering whether or not they will be “visited” in the wee small hours. These girls, however, are the property of the priest because of the crime (real or imagined) of another.

Nearly two hundred years after the abolition of slavery, there are slaves living in Ghana, the country that was at the centre of the British slave trade. Plus ça change.

To know more about International Needs’ campaign to free Trokosi contact them at:

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