

### **The Trokosi System**

‘Esther’ rises from her mat long before the sun sets out on its journey. She has a long day ahead of her and she cannot afford the luxury of sleeping in longer than she already does. She has to walk two miles to fetch water, sweep the compound and then go out to the field with her fellow trokosi to work herself to death in order to ‘produce a crop for the priest, her master’. She carries out all these tasks on an empty stomach, knowing that she would be punished if she attempted to eat some of the corn kernels she planted. She has gone without food for two days now. She remembers how her own mother passed by her yesterday without a hint of recognition. ‘Maybe her mother doesn’t want to see the tattered cloth around her waist, the ribs protruding from hunger or worse still, her belly beginning to swell with a child’. This is the story of ‘Esther’, the youngest trokosi at a shrine in the Volta region of Ghana (Harapnuik 1).

A trokosi is a young girl who has been enslaved under the trokosi system. Trokosi is a practice in south-eastern Ghana where young virgin girls, typically from eight to fifteen years of age, are sent to fetish shrines to live and atone for the crimes of their family members, mostly men (Vormawor 2007). The Volta, Eastern, and Greater Accra Regions are the three regions in Ghana where the trokosi system is practiced most. Many communities in these regions have shrines where the trokosi slaves are sent to spend the rest of their lives. The map in Appendix I shows the particular communities in these regions where the system is practiced. The origins of this practice cannot be traced to a specific date, but it is believed that the practice began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century during the migration of the Ewe ethnic group from the Niger River Delta region (Robson 1).

The characteristics of this practice include the confinement of victims. “Under most circumstances, a priest will keep a *trokosi* slave for more than ten years, but he may hold her for her entire life depending in part upon the severity of the crime her relative committed” (Aird 2). As such a slave is confined to the environs of the shrine and cannot leave until the priest decides to release her. Even after her release, the priest may demand her return because she is a ‘lifelong slave of the gods.’ The family members of slaves who die in captivity must replace the slave with another virgin girl. Serious offences such as homicide require a family to send generation after generation of virgin girls to the shrine as punishment. Children born to the *trokosi* slaves also become slaves to the gods and are known as *trokosiviwo*. When the priest dies, his successor inherits all the slaves in the shrine as well as their children. Thus the *trokosi* system becomes a tradition which is embedded in the culture of the people.

Another activity that characterizes the *trokosi* system is rape and defilement of the victims. The *trokosi* are also referred to as ‘wives of the gods’, signifying the sexual functions the slaves have to play (“Slave Children in Africa” 1). Usually after their first menstruation, as in Esther’s case, the priest begins to have sex with the slaves. The priest rapes the slaves whenever he wishes. Victims of this practice are also deprived of their education and health care. The priest does not cater for the needs of the slaves or the children they bear as a result of the sexual relations he has with them. Patience Akope, a former slave who spent 21 years at a shrine and has a 15-year-old child with the priest, states that “the priest did not allow me to visit the clinic for prenatal care or go to the hospital, throughout the pregnancy, I had to fend for myself” (qtd. in Ben-Ari 2). *Trokosi* practicing societies believe that accepting a *trokosi* slave back into the society will bring bad luck and misfortunes upon them. As a result, they stigmatise the victims and reject them. Thus even when the slaves

manage to escape from the shrine, they are not accepted by their family members but are sent back to the shrine to suffer worse ordeals for their daring acts of escape.

The trokosi is practiced for various reasons. During the period of migration of the Ewe ethnic group, wars were rampant and warriors would pledge women to their religious shrines in exchange for victory in battle. This practice evolved into what has now become the trokosi. 'Tro' in Ewe means deity and 'kosi' means female slave. After settling into their present communities, people began to indulge in socially unacceptable acts. They committed offences such as murder, rape, theft and adultery. There was a need to put in place measures to administer justice and maintain law and order. As a result, the trokosi practice became entrenched in the religious and cultural practices of the people to serve the above purposes. As time went on, families began experiencing misfortunes. These misfortunes were attributed to the wrath of the gods due to offences committed by members the family. In order to appease the gods and stop these misfortunes, a young virgin girl was sent to the shrine to be a trokosi or 'slave of the gods' as was the case in Esther's situation. As it is a form of slavery, the practice of the trokosi system is an infringement of the rights of the victims and should not be encouraged.

The continual practice of the trokosi system has a severe impact on the victims. They go through a lot of trauma which is undeserved as they have not committed any crime nor do they deserve to be treated in such manner. The rejection and abandonment by their family members cause a lot of instability in the minds of the victims which leads to psychological trauma. This, coupled with and the horrible ordeals they go through at the shrines, cause emotional shocks which also have psychological effects on the young girls. The stigmatization they suffer at the hands society also adds to the trauma they go through. The trauma trokosi victims suffer is

translated into a loss of self-esteem and self-worth. The victims look down on themselves and feel that they are not worthy to have dreams or aspirations. They do not even know where their next meal will come from, how then can they dream about their future?

Illiteracy is another effect of the trokosi system. *International Needs, Ghana*, a non-governmental organization, estimates that there are over 5,000 trokosi slaves in Ghana. This is a vast increase from the numbers of at least 2,500 and about 3,000 reported by Kwaku Sakyi-Addo (2000) and Humphrey Hawksley (2001) respectively, for BBC News. None of these slaves have access to education because, “the priest prohibits all fetish slaves from attending school and denies them health care” (Aird 2). They are denied their rights to education as stipulated in the Convention of the Rights of the Child (Article 28). Children under the trokosi system are also victims of child labour. “Priests often force slaves to work for more than 12 hours a day, often in the hot sun, and do not compensate them for their work” (Aird 2). This form of slavery is the most terrible form of child labour as children are separated from their families and withdrawn from school, forced to work on fields from dawn to dusk without food and any form of medical care (“Slave Children in Africa” 3).

The existence of certain legal instruments makes the practice of the trokosi system unlawful. The Convention of the Rights of the Child as already mentioned stipulates that all children have the right to education. The 1992 Constitution of Ghana also has certain provisions which demand the abolition of the trokosi system since it violates these provisions. Article 16 (Clause 1) says “No person shall be held in slavery or servitude”. Clause 2 of the same article says “No person shall be required to perform forced labour”. Article 26 (Clause 2) also stipulates that, “All customary practices which dehumanize or are injurious to the physical and mental

well-being of a person are prohibited. Article 28 (Clause 4) reads, “No child shall be deprived by any other person of medical treatment, education or any other social or economic benefit by reason only of religious or other beliefs”. On June 12, 1998, the government of Ghana outlawed the trokosi practice by passing a law that banned all forms of ritualized forced labour and made it an offence punishable by a minimum of three years in jail (Harapnuik 1).

It is unfortunate to note that despite the fact that all these legal instruments are in place, the trokosi system still goes on today and ‘no arrests have been made since the 1998 law was passed’ (Ben-Ari 2). Although laws have failed to stop the trokosi practice, some non-governmental organizations have succeeded in securing the liberty of some trokosi slaves. At the end of December 2006, *Every Child Ministries* had successfully organized the liberation of 100 slaves and 4000 children of these slaves (“Slave Children in Africa” 3). *International Needs, Ghana* has also negotiated for the release of over 3500 trokosi slaves since its establishment in 1987 (Harapnuik 2).

Vincent Azumah, project manager of *International Needs, Ghana* when interviewed by Kwaku Sakyi-Addo of BBC admitted that although trokosi is illegal, it has social and religious aspects. As such, sacrifices had to be made when negotiations were ongoing with the priests for the release of the slaves.



Fig 2 Director of International Needs, Ghana with shrine priests and some shrine elders.  
Source: *International Needs, Ghana*.

Mary and Lance Clark of Huntington University also came to Ghana to film a documentary about the trokosi slaves featuring Nicole C. Mullin. This documentary was aimed at raising awareness of the plight of trokosi slaves in Ghana (Dowden 1).

These non-governmental organizations help liberated slaves to rebuild their lives by organizing training programmes for the former slaves to equip them with skills for survival. *International Needs, Ghana* has various packages for the liberated slaves such as vocational skills training, the modular project, formal education for children of liberated trokosis and trokosi girls, micro-credit scheme and resettlement. Many trokosis have successfully completed the modular and vocational programmes and have been given equipment to make a living on their own.



Fig 3 modular project graduate receiving equipments

Source: *International Needs, Ghana*



Fig 4 graduate of the modular project receiving baking items

Source: *International Needs, Ghana.*

The non-governmental organizations involved in the fight against trokosi are doing a great job and need to be commended and supported. If children, who are the future, are being enslaved and denied education, what does the future hold for us? The government must support these organizations to free more trokosi slaves and give them a better future.

APPENDIX I

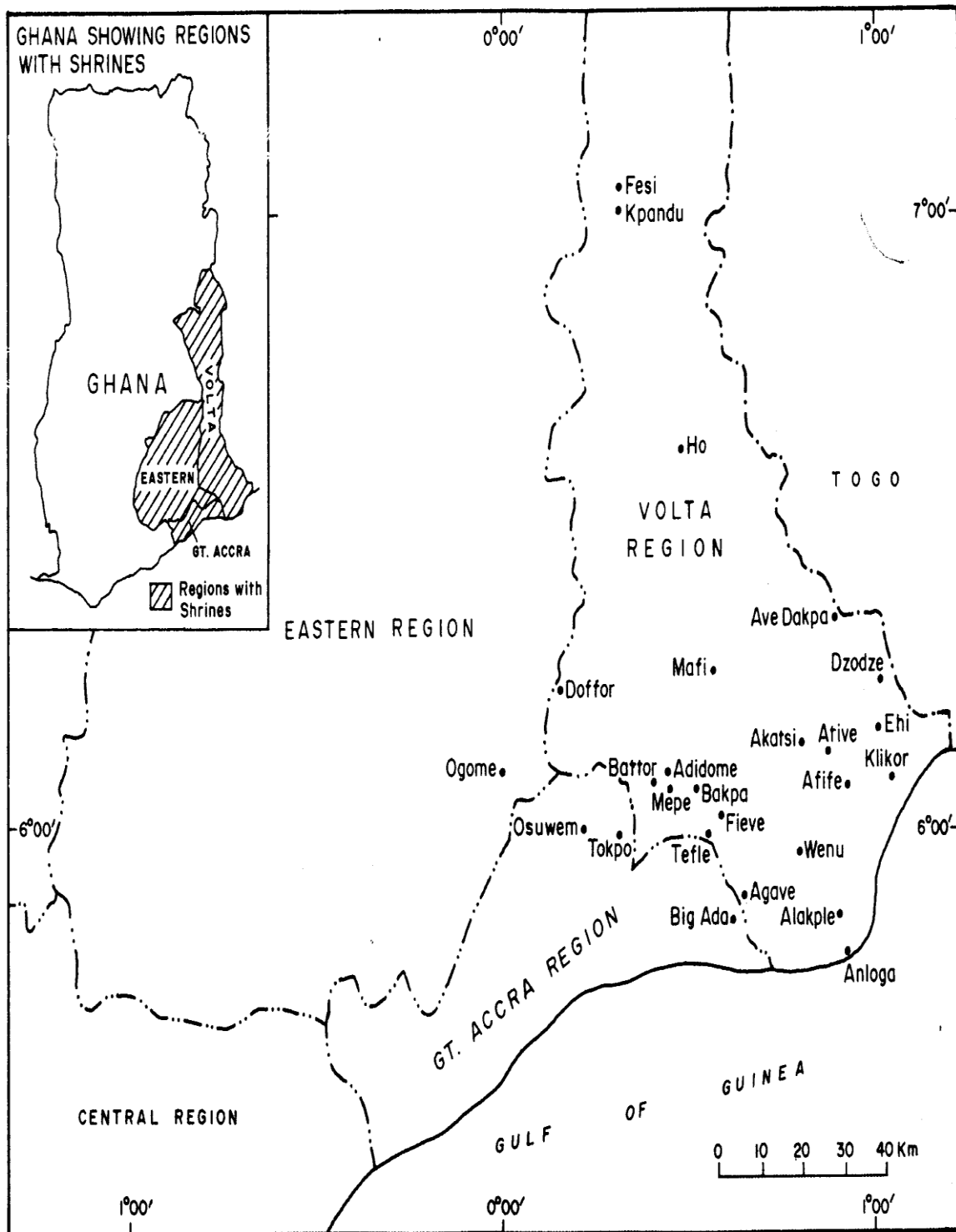


Fig. 1 A MAP OF GHANA SHOWING TROKOSI COMMUNITIES

Source: *International Needs, Ghana.*

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