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Trokosi: An Ethnic Cultural Practice, or A Violation of the Rights of Young Girls Among Certain Ethnic Groups in Ghana?

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Abstract

This paper explores the Trokosi system, a cultural practice in certain parts of Ghana where young virgin girls are enslaved to appease ethnic gods for crimes committed by their family members. It argues that this practice constitutes gender-based violence as it violates the rights and freedoms of these girls, who are trapped in perpetual servitude within the shrines. The paper examines the origins and motivations behind the Trokosi system, the clash between cultural and human rights, and provides recommendations for reform. It suggests implementing a peace education program using the educated indigenes to help abolish the practice.

Keywords: *Trokosi system, Gender-based violence, Peace education, Human rights, Women and girls, Cultural practice*

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1. Introduction

The Universal Declaration of Human rights was birthed in December 1948 to champion the course of human liberties. It was guaranteed to respect the basic rights of humans and see to the alleviation of any infringement on the lives of any human irrespective of gender, color, race, or sex. It sought to alleviate all torture and harm and any kind of tyranny that served as a threat to human life (Asomah, 2015; Atiemo, 2014; Talbot, 2018). In spite of the declaration, abuse of human rights continues to exist especially against children and women. The menace of physical abuse of children and women has become an issue of global concern. This for instance led advocates, including the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization who champion the rights of children to be on the surge for preventive measures to help curb the situation. In the quest to protect the rights of children in the world the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was enacted in 1989. However, the convention did not bring an end to acts of child violence. In outlining the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 which is premised on the principle of inclusiveness and not leaving anyone behind, the UN acknowledged the persistent nature of human rights violations against women and children and as a result outlined an objective that seeks to eliminate acts of violence especially against children and women by the year 2030. For instance, the Sustainable Development Goal 16.2 aims to "end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence and torture against children." In similar vein, goal five seeks to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls". The target two and three respectively seek to "eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation. Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female

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genital mutilation” (UN, 2015). Despite the powerful framework outlined above, human rights violations remain a canker. Therefore, certain practices that serve as a hindrance in attaining the stipulated goals by 2030 is worth tackling. The trokosi system depicts a typical gender-based issue which violates the rights and freedoms of some innocent young women which invariably would curtail the success of the SDG 5 by 2030. This paper aims at delving into the trokosi system in Ghana as a gender-based violence or issue. The paper focuses attention on the etiology, nature of the trokosi system and an emphasis in stating the problem. Also, the paper analyzes some existential issues emanating from the practice. As a way forward the paper brings to light some recommendations in the approach to ameliorating the issue. This is an analytical paper which dwells on the Inductive Thematic Analysis (ITA). This involves identifying and examining themes within the data (Guest *et al.*, 2013). Borrowing from Gedzi (2016) the term trokosi in this piece refers to the institution, the practice, and the victim of the practice.

2. The Problem/Justification

Violence against women and the girl child is quite rampant in Africa. There are some prevailing social and cultural conditions, including institutionalized practices in Africa, that make violent acts against women possible and misrecognized. Some African societies in the name of culture or religion perpetrates acts of violence against girls. For example, in 2015 in Nigeria, a 12-year-old girl, Oruru, was kidnapped and hidden in the palace of the powerful Emir of Kano. Months later when she was found, she was already pregnant having been serially raped by her abductor. Ese’s abductor who was prosecuted in 2020 for kidnapping and rape insisted (with the support of the emir) that his victim was his bride by Islamic injunction. While the media coverage of the incident raised questions about institutionalized forms of violence against women/girls in Nigeria including the practice of child bride, there was barely mention of the act as an atrocious crime against a girl child (Yenagoa, 2020). In Ghana, some cultural practices have normalized these acts of violence against the girl child. In Ghana, some cultural practices have normalized these acts of violence against the girl child. For instance, the trokosi system, which turns virgin girls into slaves of the gods to atone for crimes committed by their family members, infringes on the fundamental rights of the girls.

The trokosi system depicts a typical gender-based issue which violates the rights and freedoms of some innocent young women who are restricted to the shrine to propitiate for the wrongs of a relative. What makes the trokosi system or practice a gender-based violence is the fact that it is mostly women and the girl-child who are restricted to the shrine to appease for a crime committed by someone (Gedzi, 2016; Nukunya, 2003). As a result, the victim is denied formal education; introduced to early sex by the traditional priest who does not look after the children he bears with the woman; all “trokosis” strictly adhere to the footwear prohibition code of the shrine; made to work for the traditional priest, sometimes, until she dies; and when she passes away, the traditional priest asks for a replacement (Howusu, 2016; Ohrt, 2011; Gadri, 2010; Musa, 2011; Nukunya, 2003). All these point to the fact that victims of the trokosi system continue to serve under some form of suppression, servitude and humiliation which curtail or infringes upon the liberty of the victims. Hence, trokosi as a traditional religious system oppresses women and children in Ghana.

Meanwhile, Ghanaian laws prohibit discrimination against women and the girl-child. Some examples of these laws are the “equalization provision” within the 1992 Constitution, and a number of international human rights instruments that Ghana has ratified to protect the rights of women and children. For instance, Article 12 (2) of the 1992 Constitution decrees that, every person in Ghana, whatever his race, place of origin, political opinion, color, religion, creed, or gender shall be entitled to the fundamental human rights and freedoms of the individual contained in this Chapter but subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and for the public interest. Particularly, on the trokosi, Ghana has the Criminal Code (Amendment) Act, 1998 (the trokosi law) to protect victims of trokosi, yet the practice persists (Bastine, 2010). In this light, the efficacy of laws to protect the rights of women and the girl-child raises a lot of question in the public domain. Therefore, it becomes imperative to have a critical look at the trokosi system to shed more light and increase the conversation on the subject to attract practitioners and scholars of Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) to add their voice in developing approaches that could necessitate the amelioration of the issue to ensure the rights of the girl-child in Ghana is upheld.

3. Etiology of the Trokosi System in Ghana

Trokosi system according to Nukunya is an ancient practice which makes it difficult to know the exact time it begun (Nukunya, 2003). An estimation of it beginning in the 17th century has been outlined by indigenous or fetish priest of certain shrines in Ghana (Gedzi, 2016). Trokosi stems from a blend of two ewe words *tro* (a god) and *kosi* (a slave) which literally means slave of a god (Gedzi, 2016; Talbot, 2018; Martinez, 2011; Howusu, 2016; Ohrt, 2011; Gadri, 2010; Musa, 2011; Nukunya, 2003). According to Gedzi (2016), trokosi denotes a female child whose birth was orchestrated by the involvement or intervention of a god. Thus, a woman who was barren made a pledge to voluntarily give her daughter out

to serve the gods if they were able to help her conceive and give birth. This means that when the baby is born and she is a girl, she then becomes a slave to the god that helped her mother in the conception. In Ghana, this practice is said to be prevalent among the Ewes in the Volta region and Dangmes of Greater Accra region (Gedzi, 2016; Gadri, 2010; Asomah, 2015). According to the Commission of Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) in Ghana, basically there are five main districts in the Volta region namely Ketu, Akatsi, Keta, North Tongu and South Tongu where the practice is predominant (Gedzi, 2016).

Tracing the origin of the trokosi system, Amoah (1996) brings to light that the practice is believed to have originated from Benin (Dahomey), and that the Ewe people in these communities might have borrowed or taken it along on their migratory journey to Ghana. This view is supported by Keteni (2001) who explained that the Ewes lived with the people of Benin for a long time, where the Ewes were influenced by the culture of the people of Benin. The Ewe people live in coastal areas in southeastern Ghana and the southern areas of Togo and Benin.

Another narrative moves a step further to include Togo and South- Western Nigerian as the root of the practice. According to this narrative trokosi system might have begun from Togo, Benin and South-Western Nigeria as a ritual performed for going to war (Gadri, 2010). Records has it that in time past before warriors set path to war, they first consulted the gods who were believed to be the oracles of the land to ask for their blessings and protection. In their quest to seek for protection, they presented young virgin girls or women as a form of offering or sacrifice to solidify their victory and also give them safety return from the war (Gedzi, 2016, Dzansi and Biga, 2014; Gadri, 2010; Nukunya, 2003). In line with this, when the warriors emerged victorious in war and they were able to capture some young females, they offered them to the deities as a form of honor to these gods for granting them victory (Howusu, 2016).

Furthermore, some account for the origin of trokosi in the paying of deities for their services (Asomah, 2015). In the traditional Ghanaian societies, there were many people who consulted deities for various reasons and offered sacrifices in the form of animals or cash to appreciate the services rendered. Instances of services rendered or solved by the gods include still birth, barrenness, persistent miscarriages, as well as blocking frequent death of children (Nukunya, 2003). However, with the evolution of time people begun to offer their children, especially girls to the deities when they felt extremely pleased with the services received. At other times, people who wanted to engage in an activity very prominent to them or needed something urgent made pledges to sacrifice their daughters to the gods if all worked well for them (Asomah, 2015; Gedzi, 2016, Gadri, 2010; Nukunya, 2003).

Other edition of oral history also contend that the practice has its roots in Ghana and was serving as an institution that is used to bring up young girls in an upright or moral way to be able to fit well in the society, they found themselves. Therefore, the trokosi was intended to be a “virtuous girl or woman but not a symbol of a slave that she now is” (Gedzi, 2016). This means that the girl was supposed to undergo training to be a “woman of substance.” (Howusu, 2016). Those who argue in favor of living a moral life as the origin of trokosi can be linked to the assertion of education. Based on this (Glover, 1992) noted that education was very salient to the Ewes and as a result instituted some form of education at the clan level by using the shrines as the medium of instruction. Therefore, for education to be realized, children were sent to the shrines to be educated about the “basic ethics, good morals, virtue, philosophy (sofia), music, dance, poetry, childcare, and vocational skills” (Howusu, 2016). In the happiness of getting education to be fit into the social fabric of the community, parents sent their beloved children to the shrine. The problem here as argued by Howusu (2016) was the inability of the writers to pinpoint the sex of children that were sent to the shrines to be educated. At the inception of western education, the original purpose of the practice was contaminated serving as inimical to the traditional education because a preferential move by parents towards western education was heightened (Glover, 1992). One begins to wonder what was so peculiar about the western education to attract more parents looking in that direction (Howusu, 2016). Most Ghanaian traditional societies were interested in educating the boy at the expense of the girl-child so why the claim that trokosi was meant for education at its inception? The differences or distortion in information regarding the practice could mean that there is a secret yet to be unraveled (Nukunya, 2003). This notion resonates that the practice has over time undergone certain changes which has led to the original purpose and intent being misplaced and misappropriated (Gedzi, 2016).

Also, the proliferation of the trokosi practice is linked to religion (Akpabli-Honu, 2014). With the aim of protecting the self-esteem of slaves in Togo and Gold Coast (presently Ghana), religious shrines were built purposively along the coastline. This establishment made sure that slave masters were operating within the confines of traditional laws on slavery and instituted punishment for slave masters who resold slaves. Additionally, the shrines were meant to help change the bad behavior of people in the society. For instance, Akpabli-Honu in Howusu (2016) noted that when a man is supposed to be killed for committing an outrageous offence like murder, the shrine would serve as a refuge in saving his life after he had gone through some “rituals, education, ordeals and confinement in order to change his behavior”

(p.11). After staying in the shrine and undergoing all these rituals his life is spared, and he becomes free (Akpabli-Honu, 2014). With this we could say that the shrine has the ability to save lives of people who would have hitherto been condemned to death. The ancient religion of the Ewe people is rooted in the powers of the earth and its supernatural forces (Romanoff, 2010). Ultimately the Ewes believe in God, the Supreme Being, and also believe in spirits or smaller gods. To these gods, they have several shrines devoted to their worship. For instance, “Tro”, who is described as a war god, is one of those deities whom many girls are hosted in custody in the shrines allotted to them (Romanoff, 2010). The shrines are the most powerful religious institution in the Ewe communities. Typically, trokosi practices in all Eweland are apparently similar, and that the mode of services in the shrine for the trokosi is also similar.

From the differing accounts, it is seen that the practice that begun voluntarily by the people later became compulsory. So, as it stands there has been a disappearance of the voluntary aspect (Nukunya, 2003).

4. Nature of the Trokosi System in Modern Ghana

The trokosi has been described as a system, in that the practice has some kind of orderliness or organization because a number of laid down procedures are fixed for compliance or conformity (Asomah, 2015). This includes the shrine hierarchy; initiation rituals for the trokosi, the set of rules binding the offences and punishment at the shrine; sexual bureaucracy at the shrine, etc. The trokosi system involves a family pledging a young woman (kosi) who is a virgin to a shrine, in compensating for a wrong committed by a near or distant relative either in the present or past (Asomah, 2015; Gedzi, 2016; Gadri, 2010; Nukunya, 2003). Sometimes, a young woman is also presented to the deity as thanksgiving for blessings or answers to a petition sought from the deity. For instance, when some couples who have been barren for years seek intervention from the deities to enable them bear children; such desperate couples usually promise to offer an offspring to serve at the shrine if their prayers were heard and favorably answered. Such offspring normally became trokosi at a very tender age (Nukunya, 2003). The word “Kosi” is a name given to a girl-child whose birth comes from a divinity in such situations. As a result, the young woman is restricted and left at the mercy of the traditional priest (tronua) of the shrine. In this case, both the parents and the girls have no choice. It is contended that the girls would cry as much as they could, but they could never go back to their parents unless given permission by the traditional priest. Such permissions were seldomly granted by the priests since they wanted the trokosi to feel completely cut off from home (Asomah, 2015; Nukunya, 2003).

Many scholars contend that trokosi system is a form of bondage undergone by innocent virgin girls in the name of paying for an offence committed by someone (Mensah and Godwyll, 2010; Gadri 2010; Dzansi and Biga, 2014; Asomah, 2015; Gedzi, 2016; Nukunya, 2003; Howusu, 2016). In the current practice of trokosi, a virgin girl is sent to the shrine as propitiation for an offence committed by a family member or a close relative. This means that the girl is sacrificed in place of the person who committed the crime. Those who engage in such practice believe that when a virgin is not giving out to serve the gods after a member of their family has committed an outrageous sin, calamities would befall them. When a sin or crime such as murder, incest, stealing, and adultery is committed by a family member, it is reported to the fetish priest who is the head of the shrine as a way of calling him to intercede on their behalf so that no harm would befall them. In so doing the priest request a virgin girl to be brought to serve the gods as an atonement for the sins committed (Gadri, 2010). It is possible sometimes that the family is not privy to the offence committed till calamities like abrupt death, accident, or something catastrophic strikes a member. Crimes that warrant a replacement after the death of the trokosi to continue the atonement are known to be major crimes such as murder, adultery, theft, and sexual intercourse with a trokosi (Gedzi, 2016).

The different scholars reveal that the virgin girl is voluntarily giving by the family and she is not kidnapped or snatched. However, it is a must because failure to give her up has resultant consequences. This makes the statement of voluntarily release very problematic. Some scholars highlight that it is not in the interest of some parents to give their daughters out to serve as a trokosi, but they are rather compelled by the threats of death and calamities such as economic hardships that would come upon their family and all their generations yet unborn (Gillard, 2010). The Commission of Human Rights and Administrative Justice of Ghana has noted that, in some families, generations of girls have been used to atone for the offence committed long ago that even the families themselves have forgotten the sort of offence or the exact person who committed that offence of which they are being sacrificed (Gedzi, 2016). The practice makes the girl a victim of sexual abuse by the priest as they are believed to be the wife of the god (Nukunya 2003).

A clearer illustration of the trokosi practice was espoused by Aird when he noted that Abla Kotor was sent to the shrine in Tefle by her family at the age of six to pay for her father’s sin of raping her own niece. It is succinctly captured below by Asomah (2015):

Abla must now live and work for the local ... priests ... where she faces mental, physical, and sexual abuse, in hopes that by so doing, the gods will not bring vengeance upon the Kortar's family as retribution for the father's crime ... Denied access to education, prohibited from leaving, banished from family home ... Abla is just one of thousands of girls and women enslaved in this manner (p. 138).

The example of Abla noted above is a summation of the totality of the practice in Ghana. The girl sent to the shrine becomes the wife of the gods for life. As a result, she is enslaved till death and even in most cases a replacement is required when she dies to continue the atonement. There is also the possibility of the *trokosi* serving for a few years depending on the magnitude of the crime committed by the family member. She is however bound to the gods or the shrine even if she finishes serving and will need to come back to the shrine for certain rituals in the course of time and during festivals (Gedzi, 2016).

Before a *trokosi* is sent to the shrine a number of rituals are prepared to usher her into her new state of being (Nukunya, 2003; Gedzi, 2016).

First and foremost, Nukunya (2003) asserted that the rituals begin from the house of the virgin girl chosen as the *trokosi* by drinking a concoction prepared by the priest. The intended purpose of this is to make her loyal and devoted to the shrine without running away. This seems to me like a charm to make someone bond to them without even realizing any kind of oppression so that they could do anything they want to them. It implies that they are likely to have a forgotten memory once such concoction is administered. It will calm you into accepting the situation you find yourself as the norm of the society. Again, it is acknowledged that there is a pouring of libation to the gods to avert and suspend any form of calamity that should have befallen the family of the victim. The *trokosi* is then dressed in traditional outfit and made to carry chair and other belongings from her home to the shrine. Some of the things she takes along include, cloths, cooking pans, buckets, combs, sleeping mats and any other thing that would be essential for her upkeep in the shrine. From this I see that if she does not already have the required items, it also becomes a financial burden for the family to acquire some for her use. This means that a family that is poor will have a hard time in providing for these items. She is kept in a room in the shrine when she gets there for five days. Afterwards she is then brought out and thought how to perform household chores like washing, cooking, sweeping and the likes (Gadri, 2010, Nukunya, 2003).

Moreover, other scholars also reveal a striking aspect of the ritual. According to Mark (1994), the *trokosi* is sent naked into a room or hut where an evil spirit is supposedly invoked to have an intercourse with her regardless of her age. After this incident, the traditional priest then takes her as wife. Here, calabash gourds are given to the *trokosi*. These gourds are filled with forces which remain with the *trokosi* throughout her life (Mark, 1994), Mark reiterates that this ritual is done to ensure that the *trokosi* is not allowed to visit home until they are granted leave by the traditional priest or until they are liberated. When the traditional priest gets to know that the *trokosi* is dead, he quickly asks for a replacement.

As part of the initiation process, both male and female elders of the shrine take the *trokosi* to the riverside, and there, bathe her with some herbal concoctions, to help fortify her body against evil forces. Morkli (1995) explains that the hair on the head, in the armpits and around the genitals are all shaved off, and the *trokosi* is only covered with a loincloth. After the ceremony, the *trokosi* is officially informed that she has henceforth become a true wife of the deity. Here, the *trokosi* is strongly warned not to resist sexual intercourse with the deity or the traditional priest, else her family members would die (Morkli, 1995). This warning in the shrine generates sufficient fear in the *trokosi* and makes her become submissive to authority (Nukunya, 2003). Different accounts about the life of the *trokosi* reveal that they undergo all kinds of humiliation and abuse in the form of sexual abuse, child labour, corporal punishment for offences like refusing to run errands, going to the market without permission, running away to parents, eating produce of the farm without permission, refusing to have sex with the priest etc. The realities of the tough conditions of the *trokosi* are captured below by Nukunya (2003) in Dzansi and Biga (2014):

Life in the shrine is a hard one that is full of taboos, restrictions, and injunctions. Apart from the domestic chores, she has to perform, the *Trokosi* works for the priest without any form of remuneration, could not leave the shrine even for the farm without permission, while sex, except with the priest, is a complete taboo (p. 3).

From the above it can be said that the *trokosi* lives a life that is based on strict adherence to rules and cannot do anything at her own will. There seem to be a uniformity in the ways they are treated in the various research. Gedzi (2016) found out from the experiences of one ex-*trokosi* that the girls are enslaved and not necessarily slaves because they have the freedom to go to the market or move around. However, they remain in bondage mentally to the extent that even when the opportunity comes for them to be liberated, their mind functions abnormally. It will not even cross your mind to run away due to the mental enslavement (Ohrt, 2011).

To the priest, this practice aims at controlling anti-norm behaviors such as rape, abortion, murder, covetousness, among others. However, this practice in turn or ironically infringes on the freedom of affected persons due to the visible signs of suppression, exploitation, and abject poverty. According to Amoah (1996), only girls were made to serve as trokosi because of their submissiveness, in rare cases boys were also offered, as reported in the Volo shrine when the affected family could not find a virgin girl (p.12). Others argue that the belief that the deity is a male and his representative the priest also a male and requires wives or females to give birth to many children to serve him in the shrine, accounts for the selection of a girl. Amoah echoes that at some point in the course of history, the Ewe community became dissatisfied with the irresponsible behaviors of the traditional priests, who had sex with all the trokosi in the shrine but refused to cater for their needs and that of their children. These people do not have the courage to order their daughters or relatives out of the shrine due the fear of unpleasant repercussions. Notwithstanding, this issue has received some attention in contemporary Ghana, particularly in the print and electronic media. To help salvage the situation, many people have expressed concern that the practice should be given attention and drastic solution to the menace associated with the practice, following severe criticism from the general public.

5. The Underlying Motivation/Reasons for the Persistent Nature of the Practice

Research has shown that despite the existence of human rights laws and also the criminalization of the trokosi in Ghana, the practice is still prevalent in certain communities due to the following reasons.

5.1. Culture and Religion

Cultures articulate a people's principles and ethics, spirituality, and durability and connection with their history, wisdom, practices, knowledge, and values (Augsburger, 1992). Culture incorporates within one's self the teachings of individuals and groups one has experienced, read and heard about as individuals belong to many cultures with each becoming pertinent depending on particular circumstances, timing, and context (Pederson and Ivey, 1994). Culture depicts "naturalized truths" for a cultural group and encrypts one observing one's milieu that aids one's generally known insights of experiences and personal abilities in social life (Senehi, 2019). People are part of many cultures and there are many variations and commonalities across cultures (Avruch, 2015). Culture is a worldview, a belief system, and a pattern of thinking and acting that is seen as normal to make life predictable that has cognitive and emotional components that constrains what is permitted to be expressed publicly (Stewart and Bennett, 2011; Nader, 2012). Culture is transmitted through agents of socialization and symbols so that a locally shared common sense guides a person's behavior because it has cognitive and emotional content (Stewart and Bennett, 2011). Religion on the other hand has been seen as a cultural system (Geertz, 2013). The various form of identities be it ethnic, national, linguistic, gender, racial, etc., the religious identity has of course been a significant one, in most societies of the world. Because it is founded on beliefs in supernatural forces (God, or gods), and because they are usually founded on relatively strict rules that govern the community of believer's daily behaviors as well as the type of relations they can entertain with non-believers (Rothbart and Cherubin, 2010). Religion remains a powerful source of individual and group social identity according to Agbiboa (2014). The entire facets of the community be it human relationships, economic and political life are all shaped or influenced by religious values which helps them to give interpretations to their experiences. The rationale for a religious-based conflict is premised on the issue of evil and goodness. Thus, their violent actions serve as a response to the threats of the other designated as criminal.

The trokosi system has been seen by the practitioners as an ancient cultural and religious practice that was passed on to them by their ancestors. The African Traditional Religion (ATR) must therefore be upheld. Therefore, for their society to function effectively, it has to continue, and its continuation is in line with article 21 (1) of the Ghanaian Constitution which guarantees the general fundamental freedoms including freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice (Ohrt, 2011). Adherents of the trokosi practice contend that it is their culture and as such any resistance to the practice is tantamount to resisting African culture. This entrenchment of the trokosi as the culture of the people has become a hindrance to the criminal act code that criminalizes the practice. Every citizen has the right to freedom of religious and cultural practices. The existence of constitutional rights to religious freedom in the 1992 constitution of Ghana as well as in other international human rights laws, accounts for its entrenched position. This is because they justify the practice with the same constitution that is prohibiting their practice. Most at times allies of the trokosi religious practice refer to Article 17(2) of the 1992 Ghanaian Constitution as overriding the Criminal Code. Under Article 17(2), "discrimination on the grounds of religion" is prohibited. This enactment in the constitution gives the supporters the privilege to argue that any law that makes engagement in practices believed to appease their god's illegal, are a violation of fundamental religious rights. Implied in this is the notion that a confrontation of trokosi practice is an attack on freedom of religion and worship and, for that matter, is unconstitutional. The advocates of trokosi contend that

as a religious and cultural ritual, the practice tends to curb social vices; that the system has built-in mechanisms for identifying secret culprits; that the trokosi are trained to be hardworking and honest; that the system helps shape societal behavior (Keteni, 2001).

5.2. Fear

The most common attribution to the persistent nature of the trokosi practice is fear (Musa, 2011). All including government authorities fear the powers of the fetish priest. It is believed that the fetish priest could invoke the powers of the gods to kill or bring calamities on anyone who stand to oppose the practice. The fear of the calamities which can be inflicted upon the family who refuses to give in to the demands of the priest and shrine, discourages people from violating or disobeying the priest (Musa, 2011; Gedzi, 2016). This fear of being killed by the priest is also a reason that prevents people from reporting the violations to law enforcement agencies. Besides people living in the communities where such acts are practiced revere the fetish priest as the one who is able to protect them from all harms and so it would be prudent to shut up so that they do not invite any problems on themselves and their families. The law enforcement officials are also afraid to go into the shrines to rescue the victims. There is also the notion that even if the law enforcement bodies are not afraid, they are unwilling to enforce the law. This argument stems from the fact that in spite of how the violations of the practice has been widespread with the country criminalizing it, no one has been prosecuted for such violations (Musa, 2011). To clearly explain this (Musa, 2011) captured a statement made by the head of the International Needs Network Ghana, one of the leading advocates for the abolishing of the practice. He noted:

It is one thing making a law, it is another thing implementing the law. People have not been educated about the law and the practice. The practice is in very remote areas. The law enforcement agencies are not resourced so that they can go to these villages. They are also afraid to go into the shrines. And if you want to go into the shrine they put you to an ordeal . . . Sometimes people are afraid to give out information about the practice. If you discuss details about the practice and your experiences the gods will be angry. You will die. Your parents will die. (p. 8).

The victims of the trokosi practice are indoctrinated to the point that even when they are liberated, they are bound psychologically to be tied to the shrine and so they view their lives as something that cannot be escaped. A trokosi may not be pleased with the life she lives in the shrine but for the sake of her family, she feels obliged to serve in order protect them from any calamity that might be inflicted by the gods (Gedzi, 2016; Nukunya, 2003).

6. Discussion and Analysis of Existential Issues in the Trokosi System

Article 1 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights states that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights 2011). Furthermore, under the Conventions on the Rights of the child, children should have access to education (article 28) the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (article 24) and should not be exposed to any type of sexual abuse (article 19). Under the Trokosi system, all such articles are found to be violated. Such violations are discussed below.

6.1. Human Rights Abuse

There are many things that make life unpleasant for the victims of the trokosi system that needs to be addressed (Djah, 2014). As a result, this age-old practice has sparked controversy nationally and internationally since the girl-child/women lack freedoms. Ultimately, this criminal justice system does not punish the offender but rather, an innocent virgin girl who has absolutely no knowledge of the crime. The following delves into some existential issues in the trokosi system:

First, is the issue of sexual harassment. Here, I concur with the opponents of the practice that the practice is a typical violation of the rights of women because they are coerced into sex with the priest and forced to stay at the shrine against their will. It is noted that all successive traditional priests that come and go during the lifespan of the trokosi, are free to have sex with her (Morkli, 1995). For Morkli, even if a trokosi happens to marry after being liberated from the shrine, once a new priest is installed, she must stay with him for ninety (90) days, as a temporal wife or concubine, if she is not too aged or sickly. This issue of sexual abuse warrants attention.

Also, one issue worthy of attention is the punishment at the Shrine. Gobah (2001) brings to light that punishment was a normal experience of the trokosi in the shrine. Some of these punishments are denial of food; beating with whip made from the dried penis of a horse; fines in the form of drinks and/or cash, etc. The offences that attracted punishment at the shrine according to Morkli (1995) included the following: denial of sex; quarrelling with others; insulting others;

leaving the shrine without permission; running away to parents or relatives; disrespect to shrine authority; inability to go to farm; running late from errands; waking up late; entering a prohibited room, etc. Morkli reiterates that an offence was determined entirely by the traditional priest or the shrine elders. Normally, the trokosi is not given a hearing before the verdict was pronounced. Here, the behavior of the shrine authority is seen as autocratic, as there might be genuine reasons behind some of the failures of the trokosi.

Moreover, it is important to consider the health and sanitation issues at the shrine. According to Morkli (1995), inmates of the shrines, like any other human beings, do fall sick at times. But when they did, the inmates of the shrines were not permitted to attend hospital or receive treatment from a western scientific medicine. Also, the inmates were prevented from partaking in national health programmes such as immunizations. Instead, the inmates of the shrines were made to take herbal preparations in liquid or powder. Morkli acknowledges that, when the illness persisted, the trokosi was given a talisman to wear around the neck or waist to drive away evil forces that might be the cause of the illness. If, after all these attempts, the illness persisted, the sick was either asked to confess their sins or an oracle was consulted to determine what sacrifices might be made to justify a pardon. For Morkli (1995), all forms of mortality were attributed to an unconfessed sin on the part of the sufferer. Here, the shrine authorities have it that the righteous was always protected and granted the best of everything by the Supreme Being.

Regarding the issue of sanitation, Morkli (1995), explains that the apparent signs of poverty that permeated the very fabric of life in the shrine was demonstrated in the way the trokosi handled their drinking water, food, clothing, and toiletries. Here, water was stored in a big pot without a lid-cover. This was used by everybody with a common calabash on it. Moreover, several trokosi might have access to only one bucket for bathing and washing of clothes. They might also share a towel or sponge in some cases.

Finally, they are not allowed to school. If the girls had been schooling before they were sent to the shrine, then such schooling was terminated for good as it was a taboo for a trokosi to have a formal education (Azu, 1996; Nukunya, 2003). The right to education especially of the girl-child is something that needs to be adhered in order to enhance development that is all encompassing and sustainable.

6.2. Stigmatization

The liberated trokosi always are always stigmatized in their communities and amongst their families. No one wants to come close to them or have something to do with them since they are considered to be bonded to the gods (Amos and Mahu, 2013). In investigating the theme of stigma and social reintegration of Trokosi women who have been liberated in the North Tongu region of Ghana specifically Mafi traditional area, Amos and Mahu (2013) found out that Trokosi women who were liberated are frequently exposed to discrimination which has an adverse effect on their self-esteem. The authors employed a simple random sampling technique to select one hundred slaves of Trokosi who were between the ages of 10 and 41 from International Needs Vocational Training Centre to participate in the study. In studying the relationship between the forms of stigmatization namely, physical isolation, loss of identity, verbal stigma, and loss of access to resources and self-esteem and reintegration, they found out that there was no significant relationship between age and type of stigma experienced. This means that the discrimination and stigmatization that Trokosi women go through is not a matter of age. Irrespective of the persons age, they bear the repercussions equally and they are all looked down upon in the society.

The authors noted however that there was a significant statistical correlation between self-esteem and physical isolation, that is rejection and non-participation in family activities. This means that people who go through stigmatization have lower self-esteem as compared to those who have not (Gedzi, 2016). They contend that the lower self-esteem might be a result of their experience from sexual abuse from the fetish priest coupled with other forms of maltreatment. They also revealed that the way society sees them in relation to the shrine enforces a discrimination that reinforce the low self-esteem in the Trokosi women. The study through the findings calls on a multidimensional approach to help eradicate the issue of stigmatization perpetrated against these Trokosi women. Counselling for the liberated women is being advocated for to share more informative problem-solving techniques that would be able to treat and socialize them well into the community. Taking them back to school where they would have a continuous interaction with non-Trokosi children could lead to a reduction of the stigma subsequently (Amos and Mahu, 2013).

6.3. Cultural Rights Versus Human Rights

It is realized from the arguments that there is a contention between cultural rights and human rights as all seem to be enshrined in the constitution. The debate reveals that universal human right does not always work in some cultural context. Asomah (2015) argued that universal human rights would theoretically take priority over the claim for cultural

rights. Implementation of human rights legislation that clash with other cultural principles and traditions may be more ambiguous. He contends that irrespective of international conventions and frameworks aimed at ensuring human rights, acts of violence are still perpetrated against children and women especially on the basis of culture. Thus, cultural practices function to legitimize violence either directly or indirectly through institutionalized systemic structure of society amidst the presence of human rights. The ongoing practice of Trokosi in the name of cultural relativism and freedom of religion is in contravention with the fundamental rights of the victims as outlined in the 1992 constitution of Ghana and other charters that recognizes universal human rights. Asomah (2015) argues that the need to celebrate diversities in culture or acknowledge cultural pluralism and respect diverse cultures sounds right but it should not be used as a yardstick to oppose the human rights charters which states have ratified to protect human dignity and wellbeing in the society. This is supported by other scholars such as Gedzi, Howusu, Nukunya, etc. who argue that the dynamic nature of culture should pave way for certain new transformation to be introduced. Thus, if an existing culture does not infringe on the rights of the people, it could be preserved but in the case of the Trokosi where it is abusing fundamental rights, it needs to be scrapped.

7. Recommendations and Conclusion

As an emerging Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) scholar, I see this problem to be an issue of society being in conflict with itself. This is because the society that is meant to protect its people and adhere to their rights is the same perpetrating acts of violence against them. I therefore advocate a strong peace education in the affected communities. Peace education seeks to promote peaceful cultures and address violence (Kester, 2012). The concept entails achieving reconciliation and coexisting harmoniously with opponents, as well as developing the ability to see situations from the viewpoint of an adversary (Salomon, 2004). Education is a potent instrument for instigating societal and personal transformation, crucial for peacefully resolving difficulties and problems (Askerov and Askerov, 2010). Peace education, especially when viewed through a gender lens, is essential in combating gender-based violence (Reardon, 2001). Peace education programs have been shown to be more effective in promoting gender equality and fostering a culture of peace, particularly among female students (Yablon, 2009). Johan Galtung's conflict resolution theory highlights the impact of patriarchy on sustaining violence and can serve as a useful resource in peace education (Dodi, 2019). Educators in high-violence situations can have a significant impact by integrating a critical analysis of their community's dynamics into peace education programs (van Dijk *et al.*, 2020). In Ghana, though there are some organizations championing education in the communities, but the problem is, they are outsiders and so in my view they are seen as a threat to culture and traditions. The education I am proposing must be championed by the local people themselves. Thus, the local people must own the process in the voice of MacGinty (2010). This could be done by the government identifying people who are educated in those communities who understand the repercussions of human right abuse and the essence of the girl-child education to be in charge of educating their own people about the need to abolish this practice. Since the educators are insiders and understand their culture, the practitioners would feel safe and listen to the good news and will gradually do away with it. To be able to take possession, control and participate fully in the education process, there should be a bottom-up approach which engages the locals who are involved in the trokosi practice right from identifying the root cause of the practice, the needed interventions, and its implementations, monitoring and evaluation (MacGinty, 2010). Identification of all stakeholders or educators from those communities which will provide a fair system for people's participation would enhance the ownership (Thiessen, 2011). The local people are part of this culture in which this practice prevails and as such would know how to properly take into consideration the different dynamics at play. This education would serve as a source of liberation from the bondage or habit of violence and inequity perpetrated against the girl-child. Forcing the practitioners to abandon their culture without enough education emanating from their own people to deconstruct their way of thinking towards the dynamism of culture would not work.

In conclusion, I discussed the trokosi system as practiced in some parts of Ghana as a gender-based violence as it violates the rights and freedoms of some innocent young women and girls who are restricted to the shrine to propitiate for the wrongs of a relative. What makes the trokosi system or practice a gender-based violence is the fact that it is mostly women and the girl-child who are restricted to the shrine to appease for a crime committed by someone. The study revealed that these girls are subjected to humiliation and violence ranging from sexual abuse, corporal punishment, termination of education, among others. In spite of the criminalization of the trokosi in the criminal code act, its practice continues to be persistent based on the practitioner's belief in cultural relativity and the freedom of religion as enshrined in the 1992 Ghanaian constitution of Ghana. From the studies it can be concluded that there are some prevailing social and cultural conditions including institutionalized practices in Ghana, that makes violent acts against women possible and misrecognized in certain ways. If nothing is done, the practice would invariably curtail the success of the sustainable development goal five of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, eliminating all forms of

violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation. Eliminating all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation. I therefore advocate a strong peace education in the affected communities which is championed by the local people themselves. Thus, the local people must own the process. This could be done by identifying people who are educated in those communities and understand the repercussions of human right abuse and the essence of the girl-child education to be in charge of educating their own people about the need to abolish this practice.

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