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**Transmogrified Religious Systems and the
Phenomenon of Sex Trafficking among the Benin
People of Southern Nigeria**

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Abstract

This paper examines the changing roles of traditional religious institution in a renowned West African kingdom of Benin, in Nigeria and highlights how religious institutions have been transmogrified to support the pervasiveness of sex trafficking in the region. It relies on ethnographic data generated through key informant interviews, participant observation and focus group discussions. Secondary data provided additional insight into the phenomenon under interrogation. The study revealed that religious institutions in the region have continued to sustain patriarchal domination culminating in gender inequality, which is a major cause of sex trafficking in the region. It identifies that existing traditional and Christian religion tended to

give prominence and spiritual recognition to those who become rich even through chary avenues, thereby creating a prestige structure within the society, which many youths strive to attain. Moreover, prescribed religious sanctions against sexual taboos among women of this extraction have become weakened owing to the financial benefits inherent in transactional trade, thereby compromising religious admonitions of sexual purity associated with both traditional and Christian religion. The paper concluded that religious leaders are principal actors that need to be targeted in the efforts geared towards mitigating the phenomenon of sex trafficking in the region.

Introduction

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (2012), revealed a geometric upsurge in trafficking which is said to generate over 32 billion dollars annually ranking as the third most lucrative crime after drugs and firearms. About 2.5 million people are trafficked annually, with victims trafficked for sexual exploitation accounting for 79 per cent of the illicit trade. What makes trafficking lucrative according to the UN is that traffickers can make five to twenty times more money from a woman, than the case of drugs or arms trafficking. Earlier, in 2008, ILO estimates revealed that women and girls make up the overwhelming majority of those trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation (98%) (ILO, 2008). This underscores the gender dimension of sex trafficking. Consequently, human trafficking has been described as a global problem and a modern form of slavery, which threatens human existence and requires urgent global attention and intervention. Of these numbers, women and children are the key target groups because of their unequal socio economic status and their lack of awareness of their legal rights (Onyejekwe, 2005)

Nigeria is currently been described as a leading country in human trafficking with UNICEF classifying her as a leading country of origin (Skogeth, 2006). A 2011 report by Europol identified Nigeria as one of the top four “most threatening” countries in the world in terms of criminal groups involved in trafficking, and top two in the world with

China in its adept production of counterfeit or falsified documents to facilitate trafficking (Harrop, 2012). Human trafficking has unfortunately become socially acceptable way of life in this part of the country, especially among the women in the low economic stratum. The preferred destination of those involved in sex trafficking is include Europe and some African Countries like Mali, Benin Algeria and Libya.

A notable and distinguishing dimension of the Nigerian version of human trafficking is the active use of voodoo to charm potential and actual trafficked persons. This dimension of invoking the religious beliefs and practices constitute an important aspect of the socio-cultural aspects of human trafficking in Nigeria which has been largely ignored in literature, based on the methodological inadequacy through which the phenomenon has been examined. Hence, several attempts by Nigerian government to stem the tide of sex trafficking and international sex trade among those who have been previously deported have failed, as such persons have continued to disclose their willingness to go back to trafficking if a new opportunity arose. The need to interrogate the social structure in which the phenomenon of human trafficking has become perennial is therefore imperative in tracking the solution to what has become a pandemic in the region.

In a more derogatory manner, Benin City, a region in Southern Nigeria is now being dubbed as the sex capital of the nation (Onyeonoru, 2003). High rates of unemployment among the youth and rising level of poverty has been identified with as a crucial factor in explaining the root causes of international sex trading in Nigeria (Norli, 2006). Yet trafficking for the purpose of sex trade is significantly associated with the use of charms called *juju*, a component of the religious belief system. This paper therefore interrogates the role of religion, a critical aspect of the social structure, which has created a skewed form of prestige structure that has perpetuated gender discrimination within this society of the Benin people. The paper also revealed how religious beliefs among the

Benin people of Southern Nigeria have been co-opted in enlisting the region as the hub of sex trafficking in Nigeria.

Religion a Crucial Determinant of Social Values

Many researchers have continually underestimated the relevance of religion in the development of values and prestige structure which ultimately determines how people are esteemed, the nature and type of resources should be esteemed and those that should be abased in a society. Religion also plays a role of moral fabricator, giving impetus to social norms and values of any given society in human existence. Despite the fact that casual observers can easily conclude that Africa are extremely religious in inclinations and dispositions towards life and the way life is lived. God, the Supernatural being according to Mbiti (1969) explains man's origin and sustenance. Hence, the strong dominant notion of both supernatural and natural forces in every domain of life. For instance, when a man is faces several misfortune even when he seen engaging his maximum efforts but with very little commensurate outcomes, many Africans have a proclivity of attributing this scenario to an unseen supernatural occurrence that goes beyond the ephemeral. Hence, such a problem would require the intervention of supernatural forces to remedy the situation.

In Nigeria, traditional religious belief system is pre-colonial heritage especially among those in the Southern part of the Nation. Several gods and deities are worshipped across the various societies that constitute this region. Among the Benin people of Edo State where trafficking is rife, ancestral worship, an integral part of traditional religious belief system is very pervasive. Ancestors are described as the living dead or revered dead who are believed to be moral agents in the immediate families they have physically left behind thereby superintend and oversee families' ethical codes of behavior (Igboin, 2011). Hence, ancestors are considered as depository of traditions and cultural constructors of normative order. Through spirits which are ubiquitous in many traditional belief systems, morality is maintained and violators of social order punished (Megasa, 1993). The beliefs in spirits that punish adulterers created a social order that gave primacy

to virginity and the protection of female sexuality with several sexual taboos to forestall any violation by women. So within such social cultural context, adultery was highly feminized and women were usually culprits who were punished for committing adultery especially in traditional Benin society. Hence, Ebohon (1990) observed that the woman's sexuality was vitally protected as traditional belief system demanded.

Nigeria displays an interesting mix of traditional religion and Christian religious practice, both the conservative form and extreme Protestantism, which is describes what is today know as Pentecostalism. Benin City is the crucible of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Although, the Benin people had a historical antecedent of a protracted commercial intercourse with the Portuguese that resulted in the conversion of one of the Monarchs of Benin Kingdom to Catholicism and the subsequent visit of the crown prince to Portugal, yet the stronghold of traditional religious belief system continued to grow in harmony with Catholicism. Other variants of Christian orthodoxy permitted the operation of some traditional belief system and did not challenge the fundamental of the traditional belief system until the emergence of Pentecostalism.

Benin City, the location of trafficking hub is also the hub of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. The Late Archbishop Benson Idahosa, a very popular television evangelist, who is the fore -runner of Pentecostalism and the foremost preacher of the gospel of prosperity was of this extraction. The presence of this gospel challenged the status quo and gained popularity among the youths and many women, who enjoyed greater acceptance, had better opportunity to express their humanness and agency. Whether Christianity or traditional religious belief systems, values are created which further created a prestige structure that deified wealth, affluence and influence and esteemed "western" above the "indigenous" or "European made goods" than "Nigerian made" and consequently culturally legitimized avenues through which the western, affluence and wealth can be attained.

Methods

Study Area

The research was conducted in three (3) Local Government Areas (LGAs) *Oredo, Egor* and *Uhumwode* out of the seven (7) Local Government Areas which constitute Edo South Senatorial District, Edo State. Studies have shown that this region is most widely affected by the phenomena of trafficking and international prostitution (UNICRI/UNIDOC, 2003). The field work was done in 2009 between the months of within a period of three months (March-May).

Sampling

Forty (40) households were purposively selected from each local government based on two criteria; ethnic origin and socio-economic status. A total of 120 household/ family based interviews were conducted in all. Household heads were targeted to provide information on their households. A total of 18 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) using vignette stories were conducted on three categories of people; adult women, adult men and youths. Each FDG category consisted of 6-12 participants. The vignettes stories were in two parts; (a) the story of trafficked victim that ended on a “happy note” and (b) the story of a trafficked victim that ended on a “tragic note.” In each local government, the three categories of participants were exposed to both the “happy” and the “tragic” stories. This added up to six (6) FGDs in each local government area. Five (5) key-informants, which included a male, and a female who are versed in Benin culture and the family institution, a representative of a Non Governmental Organization (NGO) who had done extensive work in trafficking among the Benin, an opinion leader and a government official were targeted. Information sourced through this technique provided insight to the cultural factors that precipitated trafficking and international prostitution among the Benin.

The snowball sampling technique was used to select female victims of trafficking for the purpose of international prostitution. Life histories were conducted on 15 victims to have in-depth information on their

family profiles. Data obtained from life histories provided insight to the family profiles of victims, hence complemented the data on in-depth understanding of Benin involvement in sex trafficking. Observation of two social events: a burial ceremony and a wedding ceremony were conducted. These complemented the key informant technique and aided understanding of the value structures of the Benin. In all, 120 household interviews, 5 key-informants interviews, 18 FGDs, and 15 life histories were held with deported trafficked women. Secondary data were obtained from relevant archival materials and relevant stories sourced from the internet and newspapers on religion and human trafficking in Nigeria.

Data Analysis

Recorded household interviews and focus group discussions conducted were transcribed. The researcher coded all transcribed interviews independently for reliability. Anthropic software was used to analyse the various qualitative data obtained through the various techniques. Content analysis, case report methods and Z-Y index tables helped present data on trends and issues on the changing family structure, and an assessment of the phenomena of trafficking and international prostitution among the Benin.

Findings

Ancestral Worship in Benin Family

Out of the a total number of 120 households interviewed in order to examine the predominance of ancestral worship in the Benin, 76 families (63.3%) claimed that ancestral worship is still an integral aspect of the Benin family life, while only 34 (20%) families stated that it was no longer practiced due to the following reasons: modernization, Christianity and economic costs of making sacrifices to the ancestors. This became important based on the research findings which have established the use of shrines as well as the involvement of *juju* in threatening victims of trafficking in order to coerce them not to disclose the identity of the traffickers (UNICRI, 2003 and Skogeth, 2006)

Reasons adduced for the predominance of ancestral worship in contemporary Benin was highlighted by some of the respondents of the household interviewed. One of them, a 65 years old male household head in Oredo had this to say:

Our ancestors? These are the dead great-grandfathers, who lived and died well. In those days when a man dies, the first son will put the corpse outside and then draw his father's corpse into the house. When the elders arrive, they will carve a stick, put it by the head of the corpse and invoke the spirit of the dead into that carved wooden stick. That will now be the ancestors which is called "ukhure" in Benin. So any family member who does anything wrong, the "ukhure" reacts negatively.

When asked whether the "ukhure" is still being worshipped today, he responded

Yes they are still worshipped .The way they are worshipped is through the eldest son He does that by putting his right leg on the ground and pouring small drink on it (libation). That is how each family connects with them.

The rule of primogeniture that privileges male children especially the eldest is reinforced by ancestral worship among the Benin people. Hence male child presence has its roots in religious belief systems of the Benin people as they play major roles in worshipping the ancestors.

With predominance of churches in Benin City, the capital of Edo state, Nigeria, the existence of ancestral worship can be erroneously perceived as a past social ritual. On the contrary, the existence of traditional belief evidenced in the 58 years old male household head in Oredo added passionately when asked if ancestor worship is still practiced;

Our ancestors? They are still very much worshipped today, I believe strongly in them. Whenever I eat food like pounded yam, I throw a small “cut” {piece} to them and when I drink I drop small on my right leg for our ancestors.

A 47 years old female member of a family that was interviewed in Oredo highlighted the role of the ancestors in regulating marital relationships in the Benin family, hence she posited:

The ukhure is kept and preserved in a way that no one touches it. They are still very much worshipped especially if the family brings in a new woman as wife. The whole family will gather and they will count something for the woman as forbidden things concerning the ancestor in that home. The ancestor in that home is called “elimwinowa

In Uhumwode, a male octogenarian and household head argued that ancestral worship was not a thing of the past among the Benin, but that it is still relevant in contemporary times. He stated this contrary to views that ancestral worship was an obsolete practice that was no longer observed. He argued thus:

In a typical Benin family, the ancestors cannot be ruled out. This is because everyone has ancestral lineage and it leads to ancestral worship. My family and I still recognize and observe ancestral worship today.

Reasons for Ancestral Worship among the Benin

The reasons proposed by these respondents for the continuity in the worships of ancestors in the family include the following:

- i) Protective purpose.

- ii) Divine intervention in the family: It is believed that the *ukhure* can divinely intervene in the affairs of the family members.
- iii) Another reason canvassed by most women is that the *ukhure* was the basis of admission of women into a home. She was brought to the family shrine to swear to give allegiance to the family.
- iv) Ancestor worship is considered as a form of regulatory mechanism put in place to protect the wellbeing of the members of the family, especially the males of a particular family.

On the other hand there were opinions by some other household heads who argued that the ancestral worship as described above was still in existence but was currently practiced by few. Many of them stated that the reasons why it had become unpopular was due to the influence of Christianity on Benin culture, civilization, state of ignorance about how the worship is done as well as current financial costs of performing sacrificial rites associated with ancestral worship. For instance, a 45 years old male household head in Oredo lamented the apparent decline in ancestor worship which he attributed to economic reasons:

The ancestral spirits are still very important. But today, people now refuse to worship ancestral idols because it costs a lot.

Another male household head, 49, in Uhumwode explained that he was oblivious of the fact that there was a decline in ancestor worship since he was a Christian. This was in spite of the fact that Uhumwode is a rural area, but evidently characterized with a relatively high number of Christians. Hence, the household head remarked, "Although a family must have a lineage we don't have any link with ancestral worship since this is a Christian home."

This view was supported by another adherent of the Christian faith in Oredo, a 39 years old male household head. He disclosed: “I was born into a Christian home. I don’t have any idea about whether or not ancestral worship is still practiced.”

The previous excerpts confirm the existence of a new generation of believers among the Benin who do not accord respect or even identify with ancestral worship.. While some of the traditional beliefs structures are still conspicuously in place in the ancient city, what appears to have changed is the way people respond to the presence of these ancestral shrines which are more often located in the family houses. In other words, people’s attitude towards them and the values that were attached to them are undergoing significant changes.

Previously, ancestors were known to curtail ignoble acts or social vices by their negative reaction to any perpetrator of any unwholesome behaviour committed by members of a family. Their judgments were instant and their decisions were held in great esteem and considered sacred. Yet, literature abounds about how trafficked women are brought before their family or community shrines to take oaths of secrecy especially to promise not to divulge information about the traffickers and the terms of operations. Over 90% of trafficking has been done with the aid of juju according to (NAPTIP, 2008)

Traditional Religion and Patriarchal Endorsement

Within the traditional belief framework, women were the ones at the receiving end as the prevailing traditional religion consistently supported the subordination and discrimination of women by providing series of sexual restrictions under which she was expected to abide by. Some of the interviewed respondents captured the scenario succinctly:

A married woman must be faithful to her husband; once she was suspected (to be unfaithful) she must swear to the gods if she must remain in that husband’s house. If it was a man, nothing was done

since men were quite at liberty. If a man talked to a married woman about sex, she must immediately spit out and also confess to her husband what she was told otherwise her own children would be affected. That is, they will bear the consequence.

Male household head in Oredo (45)

A man does not have problems at all. It is the woman that suffers a lot of constraints in the family and society. When the female is on her period, she was not allowed to do certain things in the home especially if the father or husband was a traditional man.

Female member of the household head in Egor (56)

If a woman had an evil intention to kill her husband or harm any member of the family, the “ehinwinowa” will react negatively against the woman.

Male household head in Oredo (50+)

Based on the Benin traditional value structure upon which the family structure was a superstructure, the form of patriarchy that existed in the Benin society can be described as classical patriarchy as espoused by Hirschson (1984) and corroborated by Pateman (1996). However, this form of patriarchy had its roots in the traditional religious system that created a structure of gender superiority and inferiority in favour of males.

Christianity and Value Change among the Benin People

Profiles of those who were previously deported revealed that 90% percent of them are from new generation churches who have actually prayed and believe that God will grant them success in their sojourn as cross border sex traders.

Furthermore, evidences from the FGD held with different category of women revealed that many women who have resulted to trafficking of

young women and those who are themselves involved in cross border sex trade are members of many young Pentecostal churches who are also scouting for membership and need the financial assistance to gain stability. A case of a Deaconess in one of the Pentecostal churches who was consistently confronted her daughter openly for refusing to seduce the Pastor's son who had who had just returned from Holland with hard earned foreign currency.

Discussion

There are changes in ways traditional religious belief systems are responding to the phenomenon sex trafficking that has become endemic in the region against the backdrop of its hitherto conservative posture in relation to female sexuality. Since, religious institutions have been known to be at the vanguard promoting healthy social behaviour which are consistent to the well-being of the society, yet there appears to have been a transmogrification in the roles. This is largely attributable to two basic reasons- the financial benefits derivable from sex trafficking and international cross border sex trade to the extent that sanctions meted out are no longer commensurate with the violation of culturally acceptable norm. Secondly, the inherent nature of dominant religion to control women's sexuality by devising other avenues by oath taking and swearing to family shrines endorses patriarchal domination. Hence, the same institution which hitherto claimed to have been protective of the sexuality of the female gender though various sexual taboos among women of this extraction, engage the same avenues of traditional belief system to put them under oaths of bondages to traffickers.

This again is used to reinforce a patriarchal domination of women's sexuality, thereby accentuating the gender hierarchical structure of inequality within the Benin social structure (Osezua, 2012). This has continued to sustain women's vulnerability to sex traffickers and have culminated in a subtle rebellion where women have become actively aware that the only way out of the mesh of subordination is to engage in the lucrative sex trade that has the potentials of obtaining the hard

earned foreign currency which will change their socio-economic status.

Hence one of the FGD participants disclosed that despite the fact extramarital affairs was considered if engaged in by a woman, much less sex-trafficking, the FGD participant laughed with the other participants, she further disclosed that a goat was currently sufficient to appease the gods when such offence was omitted.

Moreover, it was reprehensible or a taboo for any respected Benin woman to marry a white man. This value system has been so affected with the advent of trafficking and international prostitution that even the churches and other religious institutions have had to compromise their position as those who set normative standards in the community in order to benefit from the largesse obtainable from so-called “successful” trafficked victims. This is evident in the story above, as the traditional or customary sanctions meted against those who are violators of the sexual regulation within the family are no longer commensurate with the offence, hence these sanctions are longer deterrents from violating sexual taboos.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that reports about trafficking in Nigeria have continued to highlight the religious dimensions traffickers engage in holding their victims captives, and demographic profiling which suggest the religiosity of previous and potential trafficked victims, yet no research has directly focused on how to engage the religious institutions and key actors strategically in the need for proper reorientation.

The role religion plays in the development of positive social values, which serve as bedrock to the emergence of healthy society, are well documented in western literature. Yet, despite the fact that Nigerians have been described as an extremely religious nation, there is a dire need to integrate the dominant religious groups in the nation with specific target at the very hub of sex –trafficking activities. Many of these religious organizations should be registered under the laws of

Nigeria and their activities that are considered inimical to the fundamental human rights of Nigerians must be prosecuted.

One of the biggest businesses in Nigeria today is the use of religion to make merchandise of a vast number of people, there is a dire need to ensure that there are regulatory agencies that oversee the activities of these bodies and ensure that they function within the ambits of the laws that have enacted them. In this way, most religious organizations will become responsive to the positive roles it should play in the building of a health, sustainable and gender sensitive society, instead of becoming the people's opium.

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