



## **Ghana - Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 16 July 2009**

### **Information on male children being offered to fetish priests (Trokosi) to atone for sins/crimes of their mother.**

Information on male children being offered to fetish priests (Trokosi) in Ghana was limited amongst the sources available to the RDC. More general information on the Trokosi practise in Ghana could be found as follows:

Section 2c of the *United States Department of State 2008 Country Report on Human Rights Practices*, under the heading 'Freedom of Religion', states:

"Trokosi, a practice indigenous to the southern Volta region, involves pledging family members, most commonly female teenagers, to a period of service from a few months to three years at a local shrine to atone for another family member's sins. Trokosis helped with the upkeep of these shrines and poured libations during prayers. Government agencies, such as the Governmental Commission on Human Rights and Justice (CHRAJ), and some NGOs have at times actively campaigned against Trokosi, although local officials portrayed it as a traditional practice that was not abusive. Supporters of traditional African religions, such as the Afrikania Renaissance Mission regarded these campaigns against Trokosi as religious persecution." (United States Department of State (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor) (25 February 2009) - *2008 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Ghana*)

Paragraphs 1-3 of section 3.8 of the January 2009 *United Kingdom Home Office Operational Guidance Note for Ghana*, under the heading 'Trokosi system and idol worship', states:

#### 3.8 Trokosi system and idol worship

3.8.1 Some applicants may make an asylum and/or human rights claim based on them having been victims of, or otherwise involved in, the Trokosi system (a practice involving a period of enforced domestic servitude lasting up to three years). More generally, female applicants may also allege that tribal leaders or fetish priests of their ethnic group will subject them to idol worship.

3.8.2 *Treatment.* Trokosi, a practice indigenous to the southern Volta region, involves pledging family members, most commonly teenagers but sometimes children under the age of ten, to extended service at a shrine to atone for another family member's sins. Trokosis (the pledged family member) help with the upkeep of these shrines and pour libations during prayers. Trokosis sometimes

live near shrines, often with extended family members, during their period of service, which lasts from a few months to three years.<sup>16</sup>

3.8.3 Government agencies, such as the CHRAJ, have at times actively campaigned against Trokosi, although local officials portray it as a traditional practice that is not abusive. Some NGOs maintain that Trokosis are subject to sexual exploitation and forced labour, while supporters of traditional African religions, such as the Afrikania Renaissance Mission, have said these NGOs misrepresent their beliefs and regard their campaigns against Trokosi as religious persecution." (United Kingdom: Home Office (28 January 2009) - *Operational Guidance Note: Ghana*, p.5-6)

A July 2008 *All Africa* news article states:

At a National Dissemination Workshop on the Study of Trokosi Practice in Ghana on Wednesday Mercy, a liberated Trokosi narrated the story of how at a tender age of eight, her parents condemned her to a Trokosi camp to atone for the sins of her aunt.

On several occasions when she tried to escape, she was unsuccessful; in part because when she returned home her parents escorted her back her to the shrine.

With no one to turn for help, even in the era of democracy, when there ought to have been avenues for redress, Mercy began her condemned life as a Trokosi, where she woke at dawn and cleaned the shrine and worked on the farm. Worse, the priest sexually abused her, leaving her with four children to fend for. "The Trokosi system is not good," she told the gathering. "My generation and the generation before mine missed out in education." (*All Africa* (25 July 2008) – *Ghana: Let's Unite Against Trokosi*)

Paragraphs 42-43 of section III.B of a February 2008 report from the *United Nations Human Rights Council*, under the heading 'Ritual servitude and sexual abuse', states:

"Some communities in the southern Volta Region and certain districts of the Greater Accra Region still practise an outlawed custom, which involves ritual servitude and sexual exploitation of girls. The custom requires a family to offer a virgin daughter as a *trokosi* to a traditional fetish shrine to ward off the punishment of the gods for crimes or moral wrongdoings committed by a family member. The misdeeds for which atonement is sought may often date back generations. One former *trokosi*, for instance, told me that her family gave her to a fetish shrine when she was 8 years old, because her great-grandfather had failed to repay a debt and subsequently family members had started to die from seemingly mysterious causes. A girl designated to become a *trokosi* is usually committed at a very young age (6 to 10 years old) to the shrine, where an initiation ritual betrothing the girl to the gods is performed. The ritual establishes a relationship of spiritual bondage between the girl and the shrine. From the

moment of her betrothal, the *trokosi* must wear special insignia indicating her status and outsiders are prohibited from having any sexual contact with the girl. If a man sleeps with a *trokosi*, his family is believed to have incurred the wrath of the gods, therefore, must also offer a virgin daughter to the shrine. Meanwhile, the girl with whom the man had sexual relations is ritually 'purified' and remains a *trokosi* at the shrine." (United Nations Human Rights Council (21 February 2008) - *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences, Yakin Ertürk –Addendum: mission to Ghana*, p.14)

Paragraphs 44-46 of this report state:

"In addition to performing ritual duties and domestic chores at the shrine, a *trokosi* is usually also expected to work long hours on farmland belonging to the shrine. She does not receive anything in return for her labour and her family is required to provide her with food and all other necessities. Once a *trokosi* reaches puberty, the shrine's fetish priest (*tronua*) is entitled to sleep with the girl to consummate the marriage between her and the gods. Groomed from a very young age into accepting their servitude at the shrine, the girls are not in a position to refuse. Daughters born from such sexual relations also have certain obligations to the shrine. After serving several years at the shrine, a *trokosi* may be released from servitude if her family pays for a special ceremony, but she will retain a relationship with the shrine and continue to perform certain rituals there. Released *trokosi* are allowed to marry, but are often unable to find a husband. If a *trokosi* dies, her family is expected to replace her with another girl and the cycle of ritual servitude and exploitation recommences." (ibid, p15)

Paragraphs 47-49 of this report refer to the response of the Ghanaian authorities to the practice of Trokosi as follows:

"In 1998, the Government passed a law against ritual servitude (among other things), criminalizing the practice of *trokosi*, although there have been no prosecutions under the law. Government officials were under the impression that the practice had since almost vanished. Information obtained from other sources indicates that the practice continues to thrive. Reportedly, there are at least 23 shrines in the Volta Region and 3 in the Greater Accra Region which still accept *trokosi*. In many districts, the local authorities are reluctant to enforce the law against ritual servitude, fearing a popular backlash. Some also seem to fear adverse spiritual consequences for themselves. While a number of national authorities, including the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice and the Ministry for Women and Children's Affairs have taken a strong stance against the practice of *trokosi*, there are many other elected politicians who fail to publicly denounce it in order not to alienate key constituencies. Certain intellectuals defend *trokosi* as an indigenous religious tradition that provides girls with a form of apprenticeship. None of the former *trokosi*, with whom I have spoken, shared this view. One 17-year-old girl, the daughter of a *trokosi* and a fetish priest who had herself served in a shrine, asked me why only girls and not boys had to suffer to atone for the misdeeds of their families." (ibid, pp15-16)

Paragraph 50 refers to the work of the NGO International Needs Ghana (ING), stating:

“International Needs Ghana (ING) and other non-governmental organizations have led efforts to liberate *trokosi* and put an end to the practice. According to ING’s own estimates 3,500 girls have so far been liberated and 50 shrines have stopped accepting *trokosi*. ING seeks to liberate *trokosi* with the cooperation and consent of affected communities. Communities willing to cooperate are provided with much needed development infrastructure such as schools and boreholes. Fetish priests and shrine owners are encouraged to accept livestock or monetary donations, instead of girls, from families seeking to appease the gods. Once liberation is agreed, a ritual will be performed to break the spiritual bondage tying the *trokosi* to the shrine. Liberated *trokosi* are provided with the skills to reintegrate into ordinary life at the ING Vocational Training Centre, which is also open to other girls and women from affected communities.” (ibid, p.16)

Section III of the *United States Department of State 2007 Report on International Religious Freedom for Ghana* under the heading ‘Societal Abuses and Discrimination’, states:

“Practitioners of certain indigenous religious customs also faced discrimination. *Trokosi*, a religious practice indigenous to the southern Volta region, involves pledging family members, most commonly female teenagers but sometimes children under the age of 10, to extended service at a shrine to atone for another family member's sins. *Trokosis* (the pledged family members) help with the upkeep of these shrines and pour libations during prayers for extended periods of service, lasting from a few months to 3 years. Labor and human rights activists have decried the practice but also indicated that the number of *Trokosis* was declining considerably, with perhaps no more than 50 children serving at *Trokosi* shrines throughout the Volta Region.

According to human rights groups, the decline is due to other belief systems attracting *Trokosi* adherents and a decline in the number of fetish priests. Supporters of traditional African religious groups, such as the Afrikania Renaissance Mission, accused human rights NGOs of misrepresenting *Trokosi* beliefs and regarded government and NGO campaigns against *Trokosi* as religious persecution. Government agencies, such as the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), had at times actively campaigned against it.” (United States Department of State (14 September 2007) - *2007 Report on International Religious Freedom – Ghana*)

An October 2006 article in *The Independent (UK)* newspaper states:

“Until he was 13 years old, Vananua, the shrine priest of Kebanu village, a small rural community in south-eastern Ghana, was, he says, just an ordinary child.

He got up early every day, helping his brothers fetch water before going to school at 7.30am. But, one night, he had a visitation. Mama Vananua, a god worshipped by the inhabitants of Kebanu, entered his body. She informed him he would take

on her spirit and lead his village as the next "trokosi" priest. From then on, her name would be his name.

Trokosi is a traditional practice of slavery still seen as normal in parts of Ghana, Togo and Benin. Girls as young as two are offered to a fetish shrine priest as a way of appeasing the gods for a relative's transgression, past or present. The word trokosi comes from the Ewe words "tro", meaning deity, and "kosi" meaning female slave. The tradition, which has been part of the Ewe culture for centuries, requires a girl to spend the rest of her life as a "wife of the gods". (Independent, The (26 October 2006) – *The chosen ones: Slavery in the name of god*)

The article goes on to say:

Trokosi originates from the same belief system as voodoo. From the 1500s on, the Ewe were driven from the Niger River delta westwards. During this violent period their war-gods took on great importance and the fetish priests were more important than the chiefs. Before entering combat, warriors would visit religious shrines where they offered women to the war gods in exchange for victory and a safe homecoming. Today, trokosi priests are the most revered figures in many rural areas. Families believe that if they refuse to give a girl to the fetish shrine, it will bring bad luck to the community, ranging from poverty, disease and death." (ibid)

A December 2001 *Africa Recovery* article states:

"According to the customary practice in Ghana's Volta region, which has lasted some 300 years, if someone commits a serious crime or social infraction, traditional leaders order that a young girl from that family be sent to the shrine as a form of atonement. She is expected to serve the priest for three to five years, after which the family might redeem her. The practice, however, has commonly resulted in exploitation and sexual abuse of the young girls. Ms. Dora Galley, now 22 years old and one of the women who learned hairdressing skills at the vocational centre, spent seven years in a shrine. She says she was compelled by the priest to work on the shrine's farm from morning until evening without any payment or food." (Africa Renewal (December 2001) *Liberating girls from 'trokosi'* Ben-Ari, Nirit)

## References:

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(Accessed 16 July 2009)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

### **Sources Consulted:**

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