



Liberation Through Contextualization

African Women's Theology and the Trokosi System within the Ewe Culture of Ghana

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Abstract

This article delves into African women's theologies, specifically analyzing the intersection of cultural practices and religious beliefs as exemplified by the *Trokosi* system among some Ewe people of Ghana, exploring how the *Trokosi* system reflects broader theological issues regarding creation and humanity within an African context, framed through biblical revelation. Recognizing African women's theologies as a dynamic and critical movement, this research advocates for a re-evaluation of both established church practices and cultural norms that perpetuate gender inequality. It posits African feminist cultural hermeneutic as a fundamental process through which the gospel can elevate and transform negative cultural phenomena, advocating for the promotion of cultural values that positively influence society while critically rejecting harmful narratives. However, it recognizes the importance of preserving certain cultural narratives integral to African and women's identities, resisting the notion of wholesale abandonment of cultural heritage. Drawing from the works of notable African women theologians, the study highlights the significance of women's experiences in shaping their theological perspectives and emphasizes the necessity of a partnership between men and women within the broader human community. Ultimately, the article calls for a renewed commitment to gendering contextualization, fostering inculturation that promotes justice, equality, and communal flourishing.

Résumé

Cet article se penche sur les théologies des femmes africaines, en analysant plus particulièrement l'intersection entre pratiques culturelles et croyances religieuses, illustrée par le système des « trokosi » pratiqué par une partie du peuple Éwé au Ghana. Il explore la manière dont ce système reflète des questions théologiques plus larges concernant la

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création et l'humanité dans un contexte africain, et est cadré dans la perspective de la révélation biblique. Reconnaisant les théologies des femmes africaines comme un mouvement dynamique et critique, cette étude appelle à une réévaluation tant des pratiques ecclésiales établies que des normes culturelles qui perpétuent les inégalités entre les sexes. Il présente l'herméneutique culturelle féministe africaine comme un processus fondamental par lequel l'Évangile peut élever et transformer les phénomènes culturels négatifs, en plaidant pour la promotion de valeurs culturelles qui influencent positivement la société tout en rejetant de manière critique les récits nuisibles. Cependant, il reconnaît l'importance de préserver certains récits culturels indissociables des identités africaines et féminines, en s'opposant à l'idée d'un abandon total du patrimoine culturel. S'appuyant sur les travaux d'éminentes théologues africaines, l'étude met en lumière l'importance des expériences des femmes dans la construction de leurs perspectives théologiques et souligne la nécessité d'un partenariat entre hommes et femmes au sein de la communauté humaine au sens large. En fin de compte, l'article appelle à un engagement renouvelé en faveur d'une contextualisation genrée, afin de favoriser une inculturation qui promeuve la justice, l'égalité, et l'épanouissement de la communauté.

Resumo

Este artigo aborda as teologias das mulheres africanas, analisando, em particular, a interseção entre práticas culturais e crenças religiosas, ilustrada pelo sistema do *trokosi*, praticado por uma parte do povo Éwé no Gana. Explora a forma como este sistema reflete questões teológicas mais amplas relativas à criação e à humanidade num contexto africano, e é enquadrado na perspectiva da revelação bíblica. Reconhecendo as teologias das mulheres africanas como um movimento dinâmico e crítico, este estudo apela a uma reavaliação tanto das práticas eclesiais estabelecidas como das normas culturais que perpetuam as desigualdades de gênero. Apresenta a hermenêutica cultural feminista africana como um processo fundamental através do qual o Evangelho pode elevar e transformar fenômenos culturais negativos, defendendo a promoção de valores culturais que influenciam positivamente a sociedade, enquanto rejeita criticamente as narrativas prejudiciais. No entanto, reconhece a importância de preservar certas narrativas culturais indissociáveis das identidades africanas e femininas, opondo-se à ideia de um abandono total do patrimônio cultural. Baseando-se nos trabalhos de eminentes teólogas africanas, o estudo destaca a importância das experiências das mulheres na construção das suas perspectivas teológicas e sublinha a necessidade de uma parceria entre homens e mulheres no seio da comunidade humana em sentido lato. Em última análise, o artigo apela a um compromisso renovado a favor

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de uma contextualização de gênero, a fim de favorecer uma
inculturação que promova a justiça, a igualdade e o pleno
desenvolvimento da comunidade.

Keywords

liberation, *Trokosi* system, contextualization, gender equality,
inculturation, African women's theology, Ghana

Mots-clés

libération, système du *trokosi*, contextualisation, égalité entre les sexes,
inculturation, théologie des femmes africaines, Ghana

Palavras-chave

libertação, sistema do *trokosi*, contextualização, igualdade de gênero,
inculturação, teologia das mulheres africanas, Gana

Introduction

This study engages with the discourse of African women's theologies, focusing specifically on the cultural perceptions of women within the context of the *Trokosi* system practiced among certain Ewe communities in Ghana. *Trokosi* is a culturally rooted practice of gender-based servitude involving young girls in parts of the Volta Region of Ghana, perpetuated under the guise of atonement for family members' alleged crimes. *Trokosi*, meaning 'slave of the gods' in the Ewe language, is a traditional practice involving the involuntary servitude of virgin girls as atonement for relatives' sins. These girls, often prepubescent, are offered by their families to shrines to appease the gods' wrath and are subjected to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse by shrine officials.¹ This ritual predominantly affects young females, functioning under the guise of marriage to the gods.² This tradition perpetuates systemic gender inequality and social injustice. As a result, the study further seeks to critically analyze the intersection of indigenous religio-cultural practices and the role of women in these settings. Furthermore, the research delves into the theological implications of creation and humanity from an African perspective, contextualizing these themes within the framework of biblical revelation. Through this exploration, the work aims to contribute to a deeper

¹ D. Y. Dzansi and P. Biga, "Trokosi" - Slave of a Fetish: An Empirical Study," 2; G. K. Nukunya, *Tradition and Change in Ghana: An Introduction to Sociology*, 302–309.

² D. Y. Dzansi and P. Biga, "Trokosi" - Slave of a Fetish: An Empirical Study," 2; Victor Selorme Gedzi, Yunus Dumbé, and Gabriel Eshun, "Field of Power: A Religio-Cultural Analysis of Trokosi in Ghana," 125.

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understanding of the complexities surrounding gender, culture, and theology in the African milieu.

As a dynamic, evolving, and diverse movement, African women's theologies represents a vital strand of African Christian theology, grounded in ongoing introspection and contextualization that spans both historical and prospective dimensions.³ In recent years, there has been a growing call for theological perspectives that critically engage with the church and its established practices, fostering an environment in which the church can embody both prophetic witness and self-reflection. This emphasis on critical dialogue serves to illuminate the intersections of gender, culture, and faith, encouraging the church to confront its complexities and challenges while remaining responsive to the lived realities of women within African contexts.⁴

The objective of the gospel message should be to elevate, purify, and perfect cultural practices through the process of inculturation. Chibuko articulates that it is imperative that the gospel does not conform to negative cultural phenomena, but rather, these phenomena must be reframed in light of the gospel's transformative power.⁵ In this context, African women are increasingly voicing their concerns regarding theological issues that directly impact their lives. Their multifaceted critique targets both patriarchal African theology and the entrenched patriarchal structures within African culture.⁶ Within the framework of African women's theologies, Jesus is conceptualized as a Liberator who heralds a new era of favor — a transformative deliverance from subjugation, suffering, and human deprivation. This understanding positions the gospel as a catalyst for social and cultural renewal that honors the dignity of women and addresses the injustices they face.⁷ In their engagement with inculturation, African women theologians are actively pursuing the concept of gender inculturation.⁸ This process seeks to integrate women's cultural experiences and a commitment to their emancipation into the broader framework of inculturation. Gendering inculturation entails a strategic and sociocultural understanding of women as a distinct group, thereby

³ Tinyiko Maluleke, "Half A Century of African Christian Theologies," 85.

⁴ Maluleke, "Half A Century of African Christian Theologies," 89–91.

⁵ Dieudonné Ngona, "Inculturation as a Face of African Theology Today," 147; citing Patrick C. Chibuko, "Inculturation as a Method of Evangelization in the Light of the African Synod," *Journal of Inculturation Theology* 3, no.1 (1996): 34.

⁶ Maluleke, "Half A Century of African Christian Theologies," 105–106.

⁷ Laurenti Magesa, "Christ the Liberator and Africa Today," 47.

⁸ Loreen Maseno, "Gendering Inculturation in Africa: A Discussion of three African women theologians' entry into the inculturation scene," 226

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highlighting the importance of their unique perspectives and contributions within the theological discourse.⁹

African women's theologies underscore the essential unity of men and women within the human community, emphasizing the necessity of fostering healthy partnerships for achieving a fulfilled life. As articulated by Phiri and Nadar, women's lived experiences play a crucial role in shaping their theological perspectives; these experiences are profoundly influenced by the sociocultural contexts in which women operate. This focus highlights the community's cohesion as a collective of both male and female individuals. Furthermore, African women's theologies prioritize experience as a foundational element of their theological framework, acknowledging the significant impact of cultural, gender, ethnic, and class contexts on their understanding of God and faith.¹⁰ This approach also recognizes that theology is fundamentally rooted in culture, thereby calling for a holistic appreciation of the interplay between culture and theological development.

Oduyoye, as referenced by Phiri and Nadar, posits that feminist cultural hermeneutics serves as a vital tool for African women theologians in the analysis of biblical practices alongside the diverse cultural landscapes that constitute Africa. African women are actively developing cultural hermeneutics to appropriate their religio-cultural heritage as a resource for articulating an understanding of God's will and the essence of women's humanity. This initiative emphasizes that cultural hermeneutics advocates for critique from within the cultural context rather than imposing external perspectives. Consequently, African women theologians have utilized cultural hermeneutics to engage critically with various African cultural issues, including sexuality, and prevailing cultural norms such as *Trokosi*, thereby fostering a theological discourse that is both contextually relevant and transformative.¹¹

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, library-based approach complemented by the researcher's experiential engagement with Ewe culture, aiming to explore the intersection of African women's theologies, cultural perceptions of women, and the practice of *Trokosi*. Using a descriptive and analytical approach, the study examines gender discrimination and contextual theology to critique cultural practices affecting human dignity and social justice. Guided by a feminist framework, it seeks to document women's

⁹ Maseno, "Gendering Inculturation in Africa," 226.

¹⁰ See Isabel Apawu Phiri and Nadar, Sarojini, "African Women's Theologies," 90–91.

¹¹ See Phiri and Nadar, "African Women's Theologies," 94–95.

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experiences and advocate for their liberation and human flourishing. The research critically analyzes indigenous religio-cultural practices like *Trokosi* through African women's theological perspectives, emphasizing liberation, inculturation, and gender justice. It challenges traditions that cause unnecessary suffering, promoting theological engagement aimed at transformative societal change. By integrating feminist and cultural hermeneutics, the study interprets biblical and cultural narratives from within the African context, fostering dialogue that affirms women's dignity and advocates for social justice and cultural renewal.

Transforming Cultural Discourse and Societal Relationships through African Women's Theologies

African women's theologies are actively reshaping the cultural discourse by emphasizing the liberative dimensions of their cultural heritage while rejecting oppressive elements. Their evaluations are grounded in the principle of abundant life, advocating for flourishing relationships that encompass both genders. African women's theologies seek societal transformation by prioritizing life-enhancing connections and social cohesion. Positioned within the broader context of liberation theologies, they aim to awaken communities to the realities of systemic oppression and inspire collective change.¹²

Restoring Dignity and Equality in Communities

The primary objective of African women's theologies is to rediscover and uphold the dignity and respect inherent in humanity. The African women's theological framework identifies that many women are marginalized within male-dominated structures and systems, which effectively strip them of their dignity, respect, and full participation in both religious and societal spheres. With a consciousness oriented toward liberation, these women critically examine and challenge established power structures. They strive for the creation of renewed communities and relationships wherein men and women engage with one another in a spirit of mutual respect and dignity, thus realizing the liberating promise of God in their collective lives.¹³

Biblical Empowerment and Cultural Critique

African women's theologies engage deeply with the biblical text, frequently invoking Scripture in discussions that intersect with African cultures and religious practices, particularly given the notable parallels with

¹² See Phiri and Nadar, "African Women's Theologies," 95–96.

¹³ Esther Mombo, "Doing Theology from the Perspective of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," 93.

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Old Testament societies. In this context, African women theologians critique the oversimplified and naive defenses of traditional customs such as menstruation, polygamy, inheritance, and notions of purity that are prevalent within their communities, juxtaposing these practices against biblical texts.¹⁴ Consequently, they challenge the uncritical parallels that are commonly drawn between biblical culture and African cultural norms, particularly in relation to women's roles and status. A significant narrative in this discourse is the story of Jairus's daughter being raised from the dead, as recounted in the Gospel of Mark (5:21-42). This story serves as a powerful emblem for African women's aspirations for emancipation from oppression. Reflecting this theological engagement, the Talitha Qumi Centre in Legon, Ghana, stands as a vital institution within African women's theologies, named to honor the liberative message inherent in this biblical account and to promote the dignity and agency of women within both religious and cultural contexts.¹⁵

Christology: Liberation and Dignity for Women

African women's theologies adopt a nuanced understanding of Jesus Christ as the intimate friend and Savior of believers, in direct opposition to interpretations that associate Christ with the political, social, and cultural subjugation of women. African women theologians assert that Jesus desires to engage with them on a deeply personal level, recognizing and affirming their dignity as they are. They embrace Christ as the one who brings comfort to the lonely and provides healing for both physical and spiritual afflictions, asserting that his mission includes liberating them from all forms of oppression¹⁶ — including cultural practices as *Trokosi*.

Moreover, another prominent representation of Christ within African women's theologies is that of Jesus as the source of the Spirit and the empowering force of God, who imparts this power to his followers. This portrayal resonates particularly within African Independent Churches, where women and other marginalized groups constitute a considerable demographic of believers. Within this framework of "pneumatic christology," Christ is conceptualized as the voice of the voiceless and the strength of the powerless, providing an essential resource for women who traditionally face marginalization and silencing in societal contexts. In this light, Jesus is also perceived as a revolutionary prophet who confronts the status quo, advocating for the dismantling of social injustices and the marginalization of individuals. For Christ to hold significance in the liberation struggles of women, he must

¹⁴ Phiri and Nadar, "African Women's Theologies," 98.

¹⁵ Phiri and Nadar, "African Women's Theologies," 98.

¹⁶ Teresa M. Hinga, "Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa," 190.

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be understood as a tangible and relatable figure, one who advocates for the oppressed and provides them with hope, resilience, and the empowerment to assert their voices. Consequently, African women are called to critically examine and reject interpretations of christology that perpetuate gender inequality, thereby enabling them to advocate effectively for their liberation and to affirm Christ as their true liberator.¹⁷

Furthermore, an integrated holistic view of life, rooted in the African cosmological perspective, is essential for the construction of an African christology that reflects the totality of existence. In this context, Christ is perceived as the sustainer of life, particularly for vulnerable populations. Thus, the poor, weak, oppressed, and marginalized are seen as the recipients of Jesus's compassionate motherhood, manifesting through his provision of sustenance, safety, and care. In their christological reflections, African women experience Christ as an empathetic companion who supports them in their experiences of pain, loneliness, and suffering, rendering this understanding central to their theological discourse.¹⁸

Misinterpretations: Religion and Culture's Role in Oppression

Women's oppression is attributed to philosophical arguments, superstitious cultural myths, and man-made traditions lacking empirical evidence and exhibiting a lack of critical thought. The foundation of these behaviors is the historical respect and veneration of religious and theological "truths" as infallible and unquestionable. However, since humans are mortal, they are prone to mistakes in reasoning and beliefs. This explains why the late Pope John Paul II (1920–2005) was forced to issue a historic apology to women for the centuries of offensive and oppressive treatment they endured at the hands of the Church due to incorrect interpretations of biblical gender-related constructive texts that were motivated by dogma, particularly the "submission clause"¹⁹ (Ephesians 5:22). In the same way that the Church has been prone to error and been guilty of using misinterpreted scriptures to support institutional and societal denials of women's rights, scholars and gender rights activists contend that certain African cultural practices, including *Trokosi*, perpetuate the oppression of women through exploitative customs and traditions rooted in traditional beliefs. Maduabuchi Dukor claims that male guardians of customs did not see fit to shield women from needless harm and gender-based oppression despite African theistic humanism's rich ontological

¹⁷ Hinga, "Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa," 191–192.

¹⁸ Maseno, "Gendering Inculturation in Africa," 230–231.

¹⁹ Ani Casimir, Matthew C. Chukwuelobe, and Collins Ugwu, "The Church and Gender Equality in Africa: Questioning Culture and the Theological Paradigm on Women Oppression," 166–167.

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and cosmological system of values that has a healthy balance of respect and recognition of the mutual equality of the two sexes.²⁰ One can effectively blame misinterpretation of biblical and African cosmological values as a significant factor in centuries-long oppression and maltreatment against women in Africa.²¹ It is worth noting that, the scriptural passages that are used to defend injustice and inequality are not divine decrees, but rather human interpretations of culture that fall short of theological laws and God's truths.²² This raises the question of why women predominantly bear the brunt of cultural exploitation.

Women continue to be clients in churches, just as they were in traditional society's shrines, thanks to a predominately male ideology. Women are still marginalized and oppressed because patriarchal ideology defines them as inferior. Male domination and female subservience in the church and society are the results of the ensuing unequal gender relations.²³ In African societies, traditional gender roles are often governed by a patriarchal system, with men as the dominant and women as secondary, aiming to complement the roles of men. Men are often not seen as complementing women, leading to a problematic one-sided notion of complementarity, where women are seen as existing for men rather than as human beings in their own rights.²⁴

Equity in Spirituality: Reinterpreting Gender Roles

Many Bible passages suppressing women are descriptive, not divine instructions. Therefore, reinterpreting them in line with Christ's life-giving good news is very essential. It is worth noting that the "submission" clause in Ephesians 5:21–33, which is often invoked to support a woman's submission and subordination to a man in marriage, should be interpreted as a reciprocal submission from both sexes to one another out of respect for Christ. The passage in Ephesians 5 highlights mutual submission as a reciprocal dynamic rooted in the Spirit, challenging traditional hierarchical interpretations of gender roles. Instead of dominance, the passage underscores shared willingness to serve and honor one another out of reverence for Christ. This biblical emphasis on cooperation and mutual care affirms the complementarity of male and female roles, emphasizing their equal dignity and distinct but harmonious functions within marriage and community life.²⁵ African cultural

²⁰ Casimir, Chukwuelobe, and Ugwu, "The Church and Gender Equality in Africa," 167.

²¹ Casimir, Chukwuelobe, and Ugwu, "The Church and Gender Equality in Africa," 167.

²² Casimir, Chukwuelobe, and Ugwu, "The Church and Gender Equality in Africa," 167.

²³ Philomena Njeri Mwaura, "Gender and Power In African Christianity," 412.

²⁴ Casimir, Chukwuelobe, and Ugwu, "The Church and Gender Equality in Africa," 170.

²⁵ Joshua Robert Barron, "Mutual Submission, Mutual Respect: Reciprocal *Enkanyit* in Ephesians 5 in the Maasai Context," 13–15.

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values encourage collaboration rather than confrontational behavior. However, patriarchal authority's misinterpretation of women's respect has led to gender gaps and distortions in African cosmology and ontology. Within the cultural patriarchy of power, gender injustice and inequality have taken the form of privileges and power structures in Africa.²⁶ Wifely 'submission' should be understood as a Spirit-led relational posture rooted in Christian love that takes place in the context of *mutual submisison* between husband and wife, not as justification for silence amid violence or abuse. The passage's ethical core demands prioritizing safety, truth, accountability, and justice over any interpretation that condones harmful control.²⁷ Owusu-Gyamfi asserts that a good understanding of Akan religion and culture demonstrates that women are equally capable of achieving spirituality as men, and in certain instances, even more so than men. He maintains that the degree to which a person is predisposed to the *sunsum* (the spirit) determines their level of spirituality among the Akan, which is not limited to any particular gender. *Sunsum* is a gift from God and gender is not determined by a person's *sunsum*; it lacks a gender identity in the Akan culture. Men act as conduits for transmission *sunsum* because, according to scientific observations, during sexual activity, women release the ovum while men release the sperm. Therefore, *sunsum* is not male; it is a spirit. By this logic, it's critical that Christian communities strive for a gender-neutral shared understanding of spirituality.²⁸

A Critical Examination of the Cultural System among the Ewe People of the Volta Region of Ghana: Implications for Women's Rights

A cursory look at the *Trokosi* cultural system among some Ewe people of the Volta Region of Ghana as a case study of religious and cultural practices with negative implications for women. *Trokosi* is a religio-cultural practice which serves as reparation or redemption for crime. It is a system where virgins are sent to the shrine to atone for the crime/offence of a family members as a way of appeasing the wrath of the gods. The system is rooted in the Ewe traditional concept of *vordede da* (removal of sin or atonement), which involves the shedding of blood or sacrifice as an atonement for an offence. Among the communities that observe this practice, it is believed that severe sins provoke divine retribution, often manifesting as calamities affecting family members. To atone, the family may be instructed by shrine priests to offer a virgin to the deity, initiating her into the *Trokosi* system. The *Trokosi*

²⁶ Casimir, Chukwuelobe, and Ugwu, "The Church and Gender Equality in Africa," 172.

²⁷ Theodore U. Dickson et al., "Re-Reading 'Submit' in Ephesians 5:21-24: A Biblical-Theological and Afrocentric Exegetical Study of Hypotassō," 10-11.

²⁸ See Clifford Owusu-Gyamfi, "Cultural Exegesis of Female Spirituality among the Akan People of Ghana," 128-131.

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serves at the shrine, often becoming a sexual partner to the priest, and remains in this servitude for years or lifelong. In extreme cases, successive replacements may be required even after the *Trokosi*'s death, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation.²⁹ This practice negatively impacts women's human rights, perpetuating gender inequality and abuse, and the autonomy and well-being of women within these communities.

The *Trokosi* System and Crime/Sin

In Ewe culture, acts such as theft or murder require atonement through ritual cleansing involving the sacrificial shedding of animal blood. The offender typically provides the sacrificial animal, and a priest or representative performs the sacrifice to expiate the offense, thereby restoring spiritual harmony and communal integrity. Conversely, the *Trokosi* system differs in its ritual practice; it involves dedicating a virgin girl to a deity's shrine as a form of atonement for crimes committed by her kin. Here, "virgin" generally denotes a female who has not engaged in penile-vaginal intercourse. In many African societies, female virginity symbolizes respect and honor, prompting ceremonies that celebrate adolescent girls who remain abstinent prior to marriage. This system underscores complex cultural notions of purity, atonement, and social virtue.³⁰ The sacrificial virgin is usually referred to as *Trokosi*. The term *Trokosi* is derived from two Ewe words: *tro* (a god/gods) and *kosi* (servant or slave). *Trokosi* literally means slave or servant of the gods. In some contexts it is interpreted to mean 'wife of the gods'. The word implies that the girl child who may usually not be above the age of puberty becomes a slave/servant of the gods.³¹ These girls are effectively enslaved under the guise of preventing communal disasters allegedly resulting from the offenses committed by their family members.³² In customary practice, victims of offenses seek justice by consulting a shrine believed to possess the power to reveal the offender's identity. Consequently, the accused's family may endure loss of family member through death until they are compelled to offer a female relative, typically a young virgin girl — as a servant (*kosi*) to the deity. This girl resides within the shrine and serves the deity for a duration determined by the priest, serving as atonement for the alleged offense.³³ The priest arbitrates the atonement period, which may be perpetual or fixed; some demand lifelong atonement for offenses, while others assign specific durations depending on

²⁹ Dzansi and Biga, "Trokosi' — Slave of a Fetish," 3.

³⁰ See Emmanuel Sarpong Owusu, "The Superstition That Enslaves Virgin Girls in Ghana: An Exploration of the Origins, Evolution, and Practice of Trokosi," 3.

³¹ Gedzi, Dumbe, and Eshun, "Field of Power," 125.

³² Owusu, "The Superstition That Enslaves Virgin Girls in Ghana," 2.

³³ Mawuli Nyador, "Christian Engagement with Ewe Culture in Ghana: A Dialogue," 172

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the nature of the crime.³⁴ After her service ends, the *Trokosi* is reintegrated into her family but typically participates in annual cleansing festivals. Post-liberation, societal discrimination persists due to shrine associations, and having children often exacerbates social marginalization and hinders full societal integration.³⁵

Dzansi and Biga, agreeing with Nukunya, characterize shrine life as arduous, marked by numerous taboos, restrictions, and directives. *Trokosi* individuals serve the priest without compensation, are restricted from leaving the shrine, and may only engage in sexual relations with the priest. Punishments, including denial of food and whipping, are imposed for offenses such as refusing sex, quarreling, unauthorized errands, absconding, or consuming farm produce without permission, reflecting the oppressive conditions and enforced confinement inherent in their service.³⁶ Dzansi, citing International Needs Ghana (2007), emphasizes that the *Trokosi* system infringes on fundamental human rights, manifesting in gender discrimination predominantly against women, physical and sexual abuse, forced sexual relations with priests, child neglect, and restrictions on education, thereby restricting religious freedom.³⁷ This practice subjects unwilling young girls to servitude for others' sins, undermining their self-worth and self-esteem, often resulting in suicidal ideation. It perpetuates marginalization and dehumanization, portraying young virgins as slaves dedicated to divine entities, reflecting severe human rights violations.³⁸

Gedzi et al. note that the *Trokosi* institution is seen as a religio-cultural method of crime prevention³⁹ and explain that this practice seems to imply that because culture and religion are inherited conceptions of reality, they could be used as a weapon to exploit the weaker person if they are not properly understood.⁴⁰ Crimes that are considered repugnant by gods and subject to payment with a virgin girl include theft, adultery, murder, and having sex with a *Trokosi*.⁴¹ However, according to Gedzi et al., adherents of *Trokosi* are led to

³⁴ See Owusu, "The Superstition That Enslaves Virgin Girls in Ghana," 13.

³⁵ Nyador, "Christian Engagement with Ewe Culture in Ghana," 172.

³⁶ Dzansi and Biga, "Trokosi' — Slave of a Fetish," 3.

³⁷ Dzansi and Biga, "Trokosi' — Slave of a Fetish," 3; citing "International Needs Ghana (2007)."

³⁸ Dzansi and Biga, "Trokosi' — Slave of a Fetish," 3–4.

³⁹ Gedzi, Dumbe, and Eshun, "Field of Power," 123; citing Chris Abotchie, *Social Control in Traditional Southern Eweland of Ghana: Relevance for Modern Crime Prevention* (Accra: University of Ghana Press, 1997), 123.

⁴⁰ Gedzi, Dumbe, and Eshun, "Field of Power," 123.

⁴¹ Gedzi, Dumbe, and Eshun, "Field of Power," 123; citing Abayie B. Boaten, "The *Trokosi* System in Ghana: Discrimination Against Women and Children," chapter 5 in *African*

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believe that having sex with a priest is akin to copulating with the gods themselves because the priest's genital organ has been dedicated to the deity. Thus, it is believed that sex with the priest is sacred as the *Trokosi* are in the shrine under the guise of serving the gods. This demonstrates how religious belief can be manipulated to justify the deeds and inactions of religious officials. As to why only girls are kept in the shrine as *Trokosi*, a priest indicated that "boys have the tendency to be stubborn and rebellious."⁴²

It is worth noting that the girls are neither kidnapped nor abducted; rather, they are guilt-trapped by their family who believe that such a sacrifice is necessary to atone and avert further misfortune.⁴³ Gedzi et al. assert that the *Trokosi* system violates the fundamental human rights of women and girls, perpetuated by deeply rooted traditional, religious, and cultural beliefs. Historically, men have held dominant roles within the system, including that of the priest, reinforcing the intersection of religion and patriarchy as mechanisms of female subjugation. It can be argued that if religious constructs did not instill the belief that their circumstances were divinely ordained, women and girls might be less inclined to accept their enslaving conditions. Consequently, entrenched power dynamics within cultural and religious frameworks serve as primary drivers of the systemic enslavement and subjugation of females in the *Trokosi* system.⁴⁴

Religio-Cultural Dimension of *Trokosi* and Power Dynamics

Given that *Trokosi* is an attempt by humans to explain the divine, it is possible for the concept to be interpreted incorrectly in order to achieve a number of goals.⁴⁵ The fundamental idea driving this practice is the idea that women are weaker than men. Therefore, male hegemony is created by taking advantage of this weakness. The religio-cultural ideology that views women's contributions in any way as inferior to those of men is responsible for this manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women in society. This perception appears to explain why parents or families would rather have their daughters serve as religious slaves in a shrine in order to atone for the crime of a family member who presumably is a male. In this way,

Women and Children: Crisis and Responses, ed. Apollo Rwomire, 91–104 (Westport, Connecticut, USA: Praeger, 2001).

⁴² Gedzi, Dumbe, and Eshun, "Field of Power," 130.

⁴³ Gedzi, Dumbe, and Eshun, "Field of Power," 125.

⁴⁴ See Gedzi, Dumbe, and Eshun, "Field of Power," 123–124; citing Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "'Home Life,' c. 1875," Document 10 in *The Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony Reader: Correspondence, Writings and Speeches*, revised edition, ed. Ellen Carol Dubois, 131–138 (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 136

⁴⁵ Gedzi, Dumbe, and Eshun, "Field of Power," 130.

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women are viewed as expendable and find fulfillment only through relationships with men, whereas men are socially protected to grow and realize their potential. This bias tends to both elevate maleness and devalue femaleness. This devaluation prevents women from serving as priestesses or other ritual functionaries to the *Trokosi* god, the force behind the *Trokosi* system and practice. However, by serving the institution that enslaves them through daily chores and other productive and reproductive activities at the shrine, girls and women paradoxically maintain the *Trokosi* system through submissiveness and toleration.⁴⁶ Fear keeps the *Trokosi* institution alive. Consequently, this inspires stories about what the gods have done and can do to people who disobey their commands. There are tales of *Trokosi* girls who fled from shrines to their parents' houses, only to be turned back for fear of the wrath of the gods.⁴⁷

Implications for Theological and Doctrinal Development (Equality)

Biblical verses that affirm gender equity and African cultural values are comparable. Thus, the fundamental cause of the religio-cultural distortion of cultural and religious values is therefore the role of patriarchy and traditional authority that is driven by power.⁴⁸ African women theologians believe the women's struggles are largely influenced by religion and, therefore, they attempt to find solutions using religion, particularly by means of reinterpretation of scriptures and cultural values with religious undertones. Women believe that in the family, in society, and in the church, they are hidden, made invisible, imprisoned, exploited, neglected, and undervalued. Social structures are at the core of the predicament facing African women. The root of female subjugation is patriarchy. It describes women as lesser than men hence under the control of male authority. The female is subsumed by male force, which also establishes the roles that women should, and should, not play.⁴⁹ Therefore, the need to review the social structures to reflect the needs of women and social equality.

Creation, Gender Equity, and African Women's Theologies

As complementary and interdependent entities made in God's image and likeness, male and female are essential to the survival of humanity. That being said, God made both males and females in order for them to reflect God's

⁴⁶ See Gedzi, Dumbe, and Eshun, "Field of Power," 133.

⁴⁷ Gedzi, Dumbe, and Eshun, "Field of Power," 134.

⁴⁸ Casimir, Chukwuelobe, and Ugwu, "The Church and Gender Equality in Africa," 171.

⁴⁹ Ogbu Kalu, *Power, Poverty, and Prayer: The Challenges of Poverty and Pluralism in African Christianity, 1960-1996*, 8-10.

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image throughout creation. Jesus Christ himself advocated for gender equality and emphasized that humans were created in both male and female genders from the beginning⁵⁰ (ref. Matt 19: 3–10 and Gen 1: 27–30).

It is critical to discuss equal opportunities for men and women in the socioeconomic, cultural, political, and religious spheres of human relationships and activities. The biblical basis for gender equality, according to Casimir et al., is the fact that men and women are created equally in God's image:⁵¹

Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen 1:26–27, ESV)

Interpretations of this translation of Genesis 1:26 as indicating that God designated man to rule over woman presume a predetermined hierarchical role, reinforcing female subservience. However, this interpretation overlooks the semantic scope of the noun (man), which can denote 'humanity' rather than a specifically masculine 'man.' This study proposes an alternative reading that correctly interprets *man* as 'humanity,'⁵² thereby challenging traditional gendered implications and emphasizing a more inclusive understanding of the text. The biblical idea of "woman" as a helpmate for "man" comes from interpreting the second creation story badly:

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." . . . And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. (Gen 2:18, 21–22, ESV)

The rib, which originally served as a symbol of unity, eventually turned into an instrument of oppression. The realization of gender equality in the church and in society will continue to be hampered as long as this idea of the "helper" is misunderstood. The idea is not just a "helper" but "helper fit for him" or "suitable for him".⁵³ The woman's creation from Adam's side signifies equality

⁵⁰ Casimir, Chukwuelobe, and Ugwu, "The Church and Gender Equality in Africa," 172; citing Rose Uchem, *Gender Equity from a Christian Perspective* (Enugu, Nigeria: SNAAP Press, 2005).

⁵¹ Casimir, Chukwuelobe, and Ugwu, "The Church and Gender Equality in Africa," 170; citing Uchem, *Gender Equity from a Christian Perspective*, 48–49.

⁵² The Hebrew term *adam* properly means 'human person' or 'humanity'. Thus the NLT helpfully translates *adam* in this passage as "human beings" and the NET as "humankind."

⁵³ While the concept of a "suitable helper" denotes complementarity without implying inferiority, the common interpretation of "helper" in contemporary contexts often suggests subservience. Scripture, however, consistently refers to God as *helper* (e.g., Psalm 33:20; 115:9–11; Exodus 18:4), indicating that to be a helper embodies a divine attribute.

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and shared being, not inferiority. Scripture emphasizes mutual dependence and relationship, with differentiation serving to address loneliness and foster completeness, love, companionship, and joy in human life.⁵⁴ The logical fallacies of translating symbol and allegory, which should communicate the equal sense of two companions meant to support each other in order to sustain God's creation on earth, lead to either male or female superiority.⁵⁵ Men's superiority and the power monopoly that allows them to perpetuate injustice and inequality must be challenged by both men and women in order to end gender inequality.⁵⁶ Religious and cultural equity allows women to experience the liberating power of Christ and reflect the originality of God's intentions for humanity. The African women theologians' agenda does, however, have three objectives. First, it encourages women to first pursue their right to serve in the church and in society. In response to oppressive acts, the second objective seeks a different kind of discourse that free women from their subjugation, and the third fosters a spirituality that fuels act of transformation and strives for justice and human liberation.⁵⁷

Significance of the Trends to Global Theology

Africa has an obligation to address the growing gender inequality in Africa and around the world by applying this reconstructed gender philosophy under Africa women's theologies. Thereby, repositioning Church and culture to redraw their gender doctrines, drawing on the errors and mistakes of the past that disadvantage the female sex. This deprivation denies them of fully exercising their God-given talents and abilities, as well as depriving creation and humanity of reaping the benefits from their divine potentials. Consequently, theistic humanism, which creates new fundamental values that uphold women's equality in African gender consciousness and acknowledge their worth, honor, dignity, and capacity for self-determination, is the answer.⁵⁸

There is a need to critically look at religious teaching and values in a way that reflects their true meaning rather than a lopsided translation that

Consequently, men and women share the same divine qualities, affirming equality in divine nature. On the proper interpretation of the term *ēzer* ('helper') and the phrase *ēzer k'negdō* ('suitable helper' or 'corresponding helper') in the Creation account in Genesis, see Michael L. Rosenzweig, "A Helper Equal to Him."

⁵⁴ John Samuel Pabee, "In His Own Image . . . Male and Female He Created Them," 14–15.

⁵⁵ See Casimir, Chukwuelobe, and Ugwu, "The Church and Gender Equality in Africa," 170–171.

⁵⁶ See Casimir, Chukwuelobe, and Ugwu, "The Church and Gender Equality in Africa," 172.

⁵⁷ Kalu, *Power, Poverty, and Prayer*, 11.

⁵⁸ See Casimir, Chukwuelobe, and Ugwu, "The Church and Gender Equality in Africa," 169.

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disadvantages one particular sex. What is good for one sex is equally good for the other. Therefore, equity and fairness should be the hallmarks of religious-cultural practices everywhere, including in Africa. Humanity can only thrive if all of God's gifts are harnessed. Every individual, irrespective of sex, must be allowed to develop and manifest their full potential. By so doing, there is variety and complementarity of ability and potential for human enhancement. At creation, God saw the need for complementary abilities and roles; therefore, God decided to create men and women as companions for each other so that they could complement each other and thus reach their full potential.

Conclusion

The correct translation and reconstruction of the theological and cultural errors present in various African religions and societies should be the first step toward the genuine empowerment of women in Africa, including marginalized groups such as *Trokosi*. Particularly, Christian interpretations of biblical verses historically invoked to justify the mistreatment of women and practices like *Trokosi* must be reevaluated through a new hermeneutical lens. A paradigm shift toward viewing the Bible as a theistically whole and beneficial message for all, men and women alike, should be guided by emerging gender theology. This approach aims to foster a contemporary African gender theology that advocates for feminine justice and equality, recognizing women and men as God's created companions working together to improve Africa and the wider world. To realize Africa's cultural and theological potential, men and women must unite their resources and energies based on equality and mutual respect. Women's vital role in African and global societies underscores the importance of understanding their spirituality within nation-building, the church, and societal development. Recognizing that culture is dynamic and subject to change, careful contextual analysis of cultural beliefs such as those underpinning practices like *Trokosi*, can help mitigate negative attitudes and promote positive transformation over time. The Church must further deepen its mission work by employing biblical theology as a liberating force for marginalized groups, such as the *Trokosi*. This approach seeks to empower individuals to realize their God-given potentials, fostering human flourishing and societal transformation.

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