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Title:

Understanding the power of Juju: The cultural practice used as an exploitative tactic in sex trafficking.

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### Abstract

Human trafficking is an epidemic affecting millions of individuals globally, who are literally sold for forced labor and/or sexual exploitation. Traffickers use what are called “push/pull factors” to help in the recruitment process of new victims. Push factors involve an area that is stricken by poverty, oppression, lack of human rights, gender discrimination, and political instability and conflict (Hodge, 2014). Pull factors, conversely, rely on the high demand for workers, individuals with perceptions of better opportunities in other countries, and the possibility of attaining a higher standard of living (Hodge, 2014). These factors are at the core of how individuals become victims of being trafficked. Beyond these factors, however, is another layer of control that traffickers have been exploiting on victims from Western Africa: the use of voodoo/juju.

Voodoo/JuJu is a component of African Traditional Religion, practiced in several countries in Africa, and particularly in Nigeria. It has been documented that victims from Nigeria and related countries undergo a series of rituals in which the trafficker is able to gain a degree of control over them virtually unimaginable. Once these rituals are completed, the victims are not only unlikely to report the circumstances to police or explain the nature of their trip to others, they perceive themselves indebted to their trafficker (Kara, 2017).

This paper then explores these practices used by traffickers on individuals from Western Africa, and specifically Nigeria, and how they contribute to the extreme psychological coercion experienced by the victims. The paper will further elaborate on the extent of this cultural/spiritual form of control, the byproduct of these ritual practices, and potential ways to overcome this power of coercion. Employing first-hand testimonies from a study conducted on 40 victims of human trafficking, the following will shed light onto a reality largely unknown; namely, the role of religious coercion within the context of human trafficking.

*Keywords:* human trafficking, slavery, sexual exploitation, Voodoo, Juju, coercion, rituals, victims, Nigeria

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In July 2018, new reports estimated over 40.3 million individuals as victims of modern day slavery worldwide (Global Slavery Index, 2018). Human trafficking is the third most profitable crime in the world, following drugs and firearms. High demand increasingly fuels supply, and the victim population continues to grow globally (Kara, 2017). Trafficking human beings is then a vast and complex industry, the varied nature of it as seen in the United Nations definition of trafficking as:

“recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs” (Hodge, 2014, p.112).

It is important to remember this definition of human trafficking as it encompasses all forms of modern day slavery. Sexual exploitation is further defined as, “any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust for sexual purposes, including but not limited to profiting monetarily, socially, or politically” (Gerassi, 2015, p. 592). Private and economic forced labor includes domestic servitude, child labor, agricultural labor, and fast fashion factories or “sweat shops.” In 2016, 99% of the 4.8 million victims of sexual exploitation, 84% of the 15.4 million forced marriages, and 59% of private forced labor were women and girls (Nigeria: Human Trafficking Factsheet, 2018). It is further estimated that \$150 billion is generated annually from modern day slavery; two thirds (roughly \$99 billion) is related to sexual exploitation, while the other \$51 billion is the result of forced economic exploitation (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).). In addition, \$150 million in annual profits is due to the smuggling route from North, East, and West Africa to Europe (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019). Reports indicate that prevalence is highest in Africa with an average vulnerability score of 62/100 (Global Slavery Index, 2018). The vulnerability scale measures how a country is affected by government issues, basic needs being met,

inequality, poverty, effects of conflict as a way to develop information, and insight to fight modern day slavery (Global Slavery Index, 2018).

Although the act of trafficking individuals from Western Africa is not a new reality, it is one that has been on the rise due to the large quantities of African victims world-wide; 9.24 million slaves come from Africa annually (Global Slavery Index, 2018). The ‘push’ factors associated with targeting victims include, but are not limited to, economic instability, war, poverty, and gender inequality, (Hodge, 2014). The ‘pull’ factors, on the other hand, involve the promise of a better future based on perceived lifestyles in western cultures (Hodge, 2014). These factors all assist in the exploiting of victims but, in Western Africa, another component enables traffickers to exert yet greater control over their victims. This is religion, manipulated by the chain of command in the trafficking rings of Western Africa. The use and manipulation of religion for control over others has been, and still continues to be, practiced throughout the world. For the purpose of this paper, Nigeria will be explored further to understand the human trafficking epidemic, the practices of African Traditional Religion, the roles of priest and others in oath-taking, and what the Nigerian culture and government is doing to fight these crimes and protect their people from modern day slavery and exploitation. Employing first-hand testimonies from a study conducted on 40 victims of human trafficking will be utilized to provide insight into the role oath-taking and Juju have.

When there is poverty, to begin with, there is an inevitably higher degree of exploitation and human trafficking. This is especially true in Nigeria, where it is reported that 90% of the population lives on less than \$2 a day, with women being at the front line of the dire poverty (Kara, 2017). Once these victims have been identified by the trafficker, they are put through the three phases that define human trafficking: recruitment, transferal, and exploitation (Fayomi, 2009). The recruitment begins based on the victims’ current environmental settings. As noted, many factors play into why and how individuals fall victim to human trafficking, such as lack of education, poverty, and false promises. These factors are inextricably related to the environment and status of the victims’ native country, and typically war and famine are at the heart of the problem. Regarding Nigeria, the current status is one that has long been driven by war and conflict, rendering much of the population ideal targets. Kara (2017) explains the connection between Italy and Nigeria; trafficking began in the 1970’s when the two countries forged a relationship based on commercial oil interests. As a result of Italy turning to Nigeria to extract

their oil, and the civil war that followed, Nigeria remains one of the poorest countries in the world. The consequences of war, subsequent lack of food, and the spread of HIV combine to create one of the lowest life expectancy rates in the world; forty-three years of age is the Nigerian average (Kara, 2017). These circumstances then greatly promote the ambitions and efforts of traffickers. Plainly, the allure of the promise of a better life must powerfully appeal to such a grossly disadvantaged population:

“We accepted because we had to go to school and at the same time working, which is a very good offer. Because in Nigeria, the people that go and travel abroad is rich, because going abroad is a lot of money. And you have to get a visa, which I know I can’t do myself. My family didn’t have the money to sponsor me abroad. So I think this is a big opportunity for me to travel, to make a good life. We traveled, I traveled with a British passport, a look alike.” (P, Confidential Interview).

Moving beyond the above recruitment factors, research is ongoing in both internal and external trafficking as related to the second phase, transferal. Internal trafficking within Nigeria involves transporting victims from rural areas of the country to urban environments. External trafficking, not unexpectedly, involves moving these individuals across country borders. It is also common for victims to be transferred internally from a rural village to a major city, exploited and “broken” in that city, and then externally transferred (Kara, 2017). By doing this, the victims are already exposed and “taught” to not defy their madam/ trafficker, and consequently are worth more money in a new country (Kara, 2017). There have been alarming rates of Nigerian women and children being trafficked into Europe via Italy. According to the Nigerian Ambassador, 10,000 Nigerians are engaged in prostitution in Italy, accounting for 60% of all prostitutes in that nation (Fayomi, 2009). In 2016, 21% of the total 181,000 migrants arriving in Italy were Nigerian (Nigeria: Human Trafficking Factsheet, 2018) In 2018, Nigeria is still in the top five countries that have migrants illegally entering Europe (Nigeria: Human Trafficking Factsheet, 2018).

“When I get to Italy, they collected my passport, everything you had that you could contact your family, address. Then, there was no phones, so if you want to have contact with your family you play cassette with your voice and mail it to them or you write a letter. Everything that would make you contact your family was taken away. They told us that we had to do prostitution to pay

our money back. They told us there was nothing we could do, because you don't know anybody, you don't have anybody abroad" (P, Confidential Interview).

The third phase of human trafficking is the exploitation, or the slavery itself. This encompasses the former two phases and represents the most despicable component of this thriving international industry. It may seem that the recruitment and transfer processes would be enough to guarantee the exploitation of an individual. Nigerian traffickers, however, take this phase to another level, to enhance their success; they incorporate the power of religion over the victims and their families for what often defines the rest of their lives.

### The Role of Religion

Many religions are practiced throughout Africa, with the primary three being Christianity, Muslim, and African Traditional Religion (ATR). ATR is based more on oral rather than written script and is comprised of various different components that are believed to bring humans and nature together as one (Ikeora, 2016). There is also belief in a supreme creator and spirits, veneration of the dead, magic, and the use of traditional medicine. Regardless of which beliefs are held, religion is incorporated into various components of life in Africa and plays a crucial role in day to day living; the majority of the 40 participants interviewed reported practicing religion (97.5%, n=39).

Within ATR there is as well *juju*, which, although difficult to properly translate, is the understanding that there are two worlds: "The visible and the invisible, or the real and the spiritual; divinities and spirits are believed to act as intermediaries between mankind and a self-existent being" (Dunkerley, 2018 p. 85). The connection between the real and spiritual world is aided by a medicine man or priest, who uses various objects, spells, and movements to produce a desired outcome (Baarda, 2016). The majority of interviewed participants stated they believed in spirits, demons or angels (95%, n=35). Further, 77.5% (n=31) had stated that they believe in the existence of voodoo (ATR). The goal, as with other faiths, is spiritual enrichment and personal empowerment. For example, once these rituals are performed, they are thought to bring about wealth, safe travels, and/or protection from those posing dangers (Dunkerley, 2018). In other situations, these rituals are also believed to have the effect of doing harm to, or casting unimaginable control over, others (Baarda, 2016).

In the literature, there is some controversy on the use of the word “juju” itself, as it may be viewed negatively based on Western cultural appropriation of it. Throughout Africa, nonetheless, oath-taking is an understood and fundamental practice. No matter which religious service is being used, oath-taking has great meaning in a religious context, as well as in the judicial system. The individual goes before a shrine and swears an oath in the name of a deity (Ikeora, 2016). During this process, the oath being taken is done in such a way that the individual puts a conditional curse on themselves in return for a desired outcome (Baarda, 2016). For example, a desired outcome could be an opportunity to live in Europe and start a new life and the conditional curse could be illness or death to themselves and family. If the individual does not honor their part of the oath, this curse will be bestowed on them and their families by the powers of the ‘gods’ (Ikeora, 2016). Of the 40 participants interviewed, 72.5% (n=29) stated that they have been to a shrine where rituals were performed on them. The relevance to traffickers is then all too apparent. These agreements may last only a short time, as in paying off a debt, but they are also easily employed to create a lifetime contract when the victim is a believer. Persuaded to take the oath, for example, the victim will never inform the police that they have been trafficked.

Crucial in understanding the import of the oath-taking to the victims are the processes in which absolute fidelity is assured. During these rituals, priests collect the hair, nails, and menstrual blood from the woman and present it in front of a shrine; these items fully bond her to the oath (Kara, 2017); “you swear a oath and is like- they take something from you. It will disturb you in your life and every good settle life if you don’t keep to their instructions” (A, Confidential Interview). Sometimes, the women are cut with blades and chalk is rubbed into the wounds (Ikeora, 2016). In other instances, animals are sacrificed, and some victims reported they were forced to consume parts of the animal such as chicken livers, hearts, and blood (Dunkerley, 2018). The manipulated women then take an oath, pledging to repay their debt in full, to never go to the police, never discuss the purpose of their trip, and never run away (Kara, 2017). If the individual goes against their oath, they believe that the spirits will cause harm, and quite possibly death, to them and their families. There is, in fact, a report of victims being locked in coffins overnight, to signify the deaths they must suffer if they violate the oaths in any way (Dunkerley, 2018). Of all the participants interviewed, 60% reported that voodoo (ATR) “greatly” affects their life. Further, when asked “are you afraid that if you do not do something that you were told to do (in oath-taking ritual) something terrible will happen to your family”, 72.5% (n=29)

answered “very afraid”. It also happens that property of the victim is taken and kept by the trafficker as a symbol of possession (Ikeora, 2016). This inestimable fear instilled in Nigerian victims renders them extremely compliant, and consequently profitable.

“She has to take an oath to pledge her loyalty to her trafficker to pay back the debt assigned to her. Vivian was taken to a shrine run by a ‘priest’ called Dr. Stanley who instructed Vivian to undress and wash herself in the hut outside the shrine. When she finished, he blew chalk dust over her body and smeared clay over her forehead, ‘marking her out so the spirits can identify the soul that is being offered to them’. He then asked her to kneel before him to swear the oath of allegiance to her trafficker”. (Ikeora, 2016, p.5).

The relationship between religion, oath-taking, and the victimization is then profoundly emphasized by documentation of trafficking in this highly religious nation; “When somebody asks you who’ll bring you, don’t say who’ll bring you. You no say to police. So they will carry you to shaman man who will do the Voodoo. Here you make an agreement that you will no put them into problem here. And you know, you obey them. So you have to come to Europe- you have to everything. Because I want to end happily” (J, Confidential Interview).

Edo State in Nigeria has the largest amount of trafficked cases and is known internationally as a sex trafficking hub; 94% of all Nigerian women trafficked into Europe are from here (International Organization of Migration). Of the sex slaves in Italy, 80% are from Edo (Kara, 2017). Once these victims are brought to Italy, the madam receives their bodily connection to the oath and holds the power over the individual until the debt has been paid. It should be noted that Nigeria slaves are also held to higher debt due to the sheer control these oaths have on them. They are more likely to work harder and not try to escape due to fear of illness and death on themselves and their families back home, which is the force of the oaths. As an example of the debt difference, Nigerian slaves are tied to debts often going to 50,000 euros, and this is up to 10 times the debts imposed on other nationalities (Kara, 2017). While they work, moreover, the madam sends some money back to Nigeria, as a way to entice other families to send their children (Kara, 2017).

The capital of the Edo State is Benin City, and it is noted that: “Virtually every Benin family has one member or the other involved in trafficking either as a victim, sponsor, madam or trafficker” (Nigeria: Human Trafficking Factsheet, 2018). A further and interesting component of the trafficking in Nigeria is that women and children are identified as both victim and



trafficker. In more situations than not, and once the debt has been paid in full, the victim will then become a madam and recruit new victims. The process of transforming from victim to madam is encouraged by realities of the home, as well. The villages of the native country and Edo are conservative to the point of fanaticism, and particularly in regard to women, morality, and sexuality. In Edo, prostitution is forbidden and, if a man even touches a married woman, she must inform her husband and undergo cleansing by purification rituals to be forgiven (Kara, 2017).

“To tell you the truth, I never told my family that I was doing prostitution because it would break their heart. Especially where I come from... when they hear that a woman is a prostitution, it’s a taboo... Your family will disown you, you will not find a husband, you will just be an outcast. So, I couldn’t tell any of my family. They never knew I did such a thing. I hide it from them.” (P Confidential Interview).

Due to these beliefs, it is extremely difficult at best for victims to return home and try to begin a new life. As these victims are in another country, it is “easier” for them to switch roles within the business and spare the family disappointment and shame. Nonetheless, it is not fear of being disowned that is the greatest influence; that remains the consequences of the oath that is taken. By converting roles, the individual remains true to their oath, and avoids illness and death to themselves and their family.

### Intervention

Examining this cycle of oath taking and lifetime psychological control from an outside perspective poses a complex obstacle: the lack of education and knowledge of these practices, and the severity they manifest in those not involved in this culture (Ikeora, 2016). Over the course of the last few decades, governmental agencies from around the world have been focused on combating human trafficking, especially from countries where the rates of exploitation are highest. In 2007, Netherlands law enforcement conducted an investigation of human trafficking from Nigeria into the EU, named “Operation Koolvis” (“Netherlands- 4. EU AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION Together Against Trafficking in Human Beings European Commission”, 2019). This operation included the help and attention from other destination European countries, such as Italy, and the National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Person and Other Related Matters (NAPTIP) in Nigeria (“Netherlands- 4. EU AND

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION Together Against Trafficking in Human Beings European Commission”, 2019).

In this same year, arrests were made of traffickers throughout Europe, the United States, and Nigeria. As a response to this success, training programs have been established to assist Nigerian law enforcement, prosecutors and border police helping to identify victims (“Netherlands- 4. EU AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION Together Against Trafficking in Human Beings European Commission”, 2019) In addition, awareness about the oath-taking practices has been taught, to help other countries understand the significance of these rituals and the power they hold over their victims. In 2010, 140 Nigerian victims were rescued during an investigation that led to the arrest of four men (Dunkerley, 2018). During this investigation and trial, the authorities sought help and guidance from Nigerian priests to build trust with the victims. Due to this collaboration, all four men were convicted (Dunkerley, 2018), so the necessary and positive impacts of international cooperation, and education, become evident.

Dunkerley (2018) conducted a study that examined various forms of law enforcement and first responders involved in cases of human trafficking, especially where oath-taking had occurred. This study aimed at providing insight in working with these victims, getting the information needed to arrest the traffickers while also maintaining the victims’ safety and sense of security. They determined that, in order to provide a safe space for the victim to tell their story, the interviewer should be female, keep an open-mind, ignore their preconceptions, not to disregard anything they say and to take them seriously (Dunkerley, 2018). In addition, allowing the victim the ability to give a free-narrative account of their story enabled them to build trust and rapport with the investigators (Dunkerley, 2018). In order to test the spirits to see if any harm will come to them, victims use what is called ‘drip-feeding’ to tell small bits of their story at a time (Dunkerley, 2018). It was stated that the process of building trust and rapport with a victim can take upwards of two years (Dunkerley, 2018) but this process is important to ensure the safety of the victim and them overcoming the control of the oath-taking ritual.

Lastly, and while education about oath-taking is crucial for law enforcement and prosecutors, it is still inadequate to remove the fear oath-taking instills. In March of 2018, Oba Ewuare II, leader of the Benin located in the Edo State, took a stand against the traffickers in an attempt to save the victims of his country. Oba invoked curses on any person who used witchcraft (juju/ oath-taking) to aid in illegal migration of individuals (Murray, 2018). This led to

priests and madams refusing to aid in the trafficking of others, for fear of deathly consequences. Additionally, this curse on traffickers has encouraged more victims to come forward and testify about what happened to them (Murray, 2018). It is too soon to tell the exact numbers of incidents since this curse was placed, but NAPTIP and law enforcement are hopeful that there will be a significant decline in Nigerian victims. Most remarkably, the Oba curse reveals how the religious component itself may be turned to an advantage in fighting West African trafficking.

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