The socio-religious life of the Esan people and the implication for sex trafficking in Nigeria

Onimhawo Afiagbokhai John  
Ambrose Alli University, Ekpompa-Edo State, Nigeria  
Email: Onims_j54@yahoo.com

Ehiemua Gloria Faith  
University of Benin, Ekpompa-Edo State, Nigeria  
Email: fehiemua@gmail.com

Abstract: In situating the problem of women trafficking for sexual exploitation in Nigeria, this work argued that acceptance to be trafficked for prostitution purpose across international borders among married women from Edo State, Nigeria, goes beyond the physical evil of poverty, structure or system in the Nigerian society. It aimed at examining the involvement of married women in prostitution abroad as moral evil. It shows greed as the intersection between poverty and sex trafficking. The approach adopted was descriptive. A detailed description of the tradition and practices of the Esan people of Edo State on adultery and purification rites is based on oral interviews held with some selected personalities in the community. Finding shows that the acceptance of women trafficking in Nigeria is mostly, portrayed as women' response to an unjust system and gives the impression that prostitution abroad is a survival strategy. Therefore, effort at addressing sex trafficking in Nigeria is limited to fighting an unjust system and structure. This view minimizes the extent of damage done to core values in the society, neglecting its resounding effect on the socio-religious life of the people and the implication for sex trafficking. Recommendations aimed at reviving the moral and spiritual lives of the people become an essential in creating a society that would foster good habits and provide the basic equipment of a well-lived life.

Keywords: Religion; poverty; marriage; purification rites; human trafficking

Introduction

Trafficking in women is a growing phenomenon that has been a cause for concern in recent times to many countries including Nigeria which is designated as a source, transit and destination country for women and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking (US Dept. for States Report, 2014). According to the US Dept. for States Trafficking in Persons Report (2014), Nigerian women and girls primarily from Benin City in Edo State, are subjected to forced prostitution in Italy. Jorgen (2006) notes that of the approximately 800 Nigerian women who were returned from Italy to Nigeria during 1999 – 2001, a full 86 per cent came from Edo State.

Lamenting this horrible situation, Eki Igbinedion, wife of the former Governor of Edo State said, “The cream of our young girls and future wives and mothers of this country are being recruited and exported en masse to Europe as sex slaves to service the weird sexual appetite of some societal outcasts and publishers of obscene entertainment movies” (Olagbegi, 2006). She identifies huge returns on quick investments as a motivating factor for traffickers. She did not however, point out the “returns” from women and girls engaged in prostitution abroad as a reason why parents pawn off valued family property such as a house or a parcel of land to send their daughters into sex slavery.

As bad as the involvement of young girls, unmarried women and divorcees in prostitution abroad is, the indulgence of married women in sex trafficking which is thought of, as “unthinkable” or “not achievable” is worst. According to Adewale (1994), marriage in the traditional context is a sacred institution sanctioned by gods and any act of unfaithfulness in the matrimonial life of the couple is
punishable by preternatural beings. Fears of repercussions ought to prevent vices and preserve the tradition of the people. However, researches, (Echekwube 1999, Seeds 2005) indicate that married women from Edo State indulge in sex trade abroad. Married women’ participation in sex trade abroad, implies a collapse in morality and breakdown of the religious system of the people.

In Nigeria, sex trafficking is mainly portrayed as a poverty problem and a means of securing a desired living standard by some families. Often time, efforts at solving the problem of trafficking is centered on fighting social sin – the unjust structure and system only. But no sooner had the fight started then the futility of the task is realized, since not much can be achieved when a peoples’ moral compass is faulty. The need to rebuild morals and spirituality in the Nigerian society cannot be over emphasized.

A Brief History of Edo People
Edo State was created from the defunct Bendel State on 27th August 1991. The State is currently divided into eighteen Local Government Areas. The main ethnic groups in the State are Edo, Afemai, Owan and Akoko-Edo. The Benin speaking (Edos) people occupy seven out of the eighteen Local Government Areas of the State constituting 57.54 percent while others, Esan (17.17%), Afemai comprising Etsako (12.19%), Owan (7.43%) and Akoko-Edo (5.70%)(SEEDS, 2005). Esan is made up of Esan Central, Esan North East, Esan West, Esan South East and Igueben local government areas respectively. By language and culture, Esan people are Edo, located in the northeast of Benin City. However, it has boundaries on the North West with Owan and Etsako on the North East, on the South West with Orhiomwon and Ika, while on the South East with Aniocha and Oshimili (Okoduwa, 2002).

The people of Edo State operate a patriarchal family structure where a man is the head of the family. The ancient people of Edo were very traditional and will not allow any of their ancient customs to be set aside. In the traditional Edo Society, the sacred and the secular are inseparable. According to Adewale (1994) “there is no compartmentalization of life. What religion forbids or condemns society also forbids and condemns similarly. society approves those things which religion approves and sanctions.” In present times however, report (SEEDS, 2005) indicates that about 90 per cent of the people are said to be Christians, 6 per cent Muslims while 4 per cent are traditional worshippers.

The acceptance and influence of other religions as well as modernization make possible, changes, alterations and mutilations of traditions, customs and culture. As Gehman (1989) observes of contemporary African societies, “in so many areas the traditional customs are changing – technologically, educationally, politically, culturally and to some extent religiously.” However, certain culture, customs and tradition of the people remain. Marriage for instance, is deemed as an indispensable factor for the continuation of the family line of descent (Obi, 1970). As such, men are allowed to marry as many wives as they deem necessary while society demands chastity much more from the women. Whatever amount of money a man pays as dowry or bride price, entitles him to the woman and everything that she acquires afterwards. It is a common saying in Edo State that the husband owns his wife and everything that she has.

Descriptive Data and Analysis
In this work, a qualitative method was adopted. Oral interviews were conducted with some selected personalities within the community on matters pertaining adultery, purification rites and the indulgence of married women in sex trade abroad. Materials used for the purpose of this work include, books, journals and articles from the internet.

Findings
The tradition and culture of the people of Edo State do not permit prostitution.
Concerted efforts by couples to “bend” tradition to suit their purpose show that the indulgence of married women in prostitution abroad, goes beyond poverty to an excessive desire to acquire wealth and material possessions.

A collapse in morality with an erosion of good culture results from alterations done to tradition. The implication of this for human trafficking is that, more women will accept sex trafficking as a means of securing a good living while traffickers will make more gains from transporting “willing victims” from Nigeria to international countries.

The Concept of Adultery and Purification Rites among the Esan People of Edo State

Adultery is infidelity to one’s spouse and in Edo State, a taboo and crime against the family ancestor (awua egbee) and the family deity (awua erinmwi) (Aghahowa, 1996). In many societies today, infidelity does not refer only to sex between a woman who is married and a person other than her spouse but in most communities in Edo State, it is commonly assumed to be so. A man commits adultery only when he has sexual intercourse with another man’s wife. Among the Esan people of Edo State, the crux of adultery is in the defilement of a married woman by a man other than her husband. Therefore, sex outside marriage, with or without the consent of the woman is adultery and regarded as harm causing because it incurs the wrath of the ancestors who it is believed, inflict sickness and death on husbands and children of women who transgress.

Punishment meted on the culprit or victim varies depending on the circumstances. A rape case for instance, is expected to be reported and necessary rites performed to avert the wrath of the ancestors without subjecting the woman through the humiliation of walking the streets naked. There is also the belief among the people that some men in spiritual forms have sexual intercourse with married women which is commonly believed to be a cause of childlessness in women with such experiences. It is mandatory for these women to carry out some purification rites in order to have children. Again this would not involve walking the streets naked. Purification rite is performed by a woman seeking reunion with her husband after a period of separation. It is assumed that she might have had an illicit affair during the period of separation.

Eiwo (2010) reveals that purification rite that involves walking the streets naked is performed by a woman who owns up to an act of adultery or who was caught in the act. She is made to confess to the act in the presence of her husband’s family. In order to avert the wrath of the ancestors on her husband and children, the purification rite must be observed. Among the Esan people of Edo State, purification rite plays a very important role in reconciling a woman to her family and her reintegration into the society. It facilitates her acceptance in the family and society.

According to Macaulay (2010), admittance to an illicit affair most times, comes from a sick man or a woman whose husband or child is sick as well as from a woman at the verge of delivery. Such admittance usually necessitates a gathering of the elderly men in the community where the confession is made. The man and woman involved are invited by the elders to give an account of what happened particularly, when they are from the same community or kindred and when both parties reside in the same community. However, if one of the parties is not from the community and does not reside within the jurisdiction of the community, he/she may choose not to be present at such gathering. In this case, the other party, usually a woman bears all expenses of the purification rites alone, if found guilty of the offence except in cases where both parties are available and found guilty by their account of what happened, then, both of them are fined.

According to Adewale (1994), religious rituals are performed to stabilize and hallow the marriage. Eiwo (2010) recalls the religious rituals thus, the man is made to pay some amount of money and present two goats to the elders. He is also made to present a mattress, a replica of the clothes worn by the woman on the day she was defiled, a hen, alligator pepper and eggs which are used as objects for cleansing her kitchen. The woman on the other hand is made to present a goat to the elders and is paraded naked on a day fixed by the elderly women in the husband’s family.

On the fixed day, women from the husband’s family prepare a perforated bucket, filled with water mixed with cow’s dung and “Devil’s bean” and made heavy with stones. The adulteress is made to
carry the bucket with its overflowing content on her head while she is paraded round the town naked. In these modern times, she is left with her underwear. As she moves along the streets, she is made to tell the onlookers her offence. At times, a ground substance made from devil’s bean is blown on her to induce itching. If she attempts to scratch her body, she is flogged while the crowd hoots, tease, make derogatory remarks about her person and throw stones at her. Afterwards, a goat is killed to appease the ancestors and she becomes acceptable in her family and the society.

Support for Traditional Approach to Adultery among Esan People of Edo State

Adultery is regarded by a vast majority of Edo people as a shameful, evil and demeaning act that is against the dictates of traditional morality. As such, the people are of the view that using the tactics of “shame feeling” by parading mostly women through the streets naked, they could prevent future occurrence and deter other people especially women from making the same mistake. According to Macaulay (2010), it provides a common standard for people living in the community and serves as a guide to human conduct (Beauchamp, 1991). Eiwo (2010) is of the view that the traditional approach of reintegrating women to the society helps them conform to the standards of morality in the society noting that the thoughts of undergoing the humiliating experience of purification rites creates fear in women and curb attitudes that could lead to moral laxity and the spread of contracted diseases. This way, it helps to protect and promote a decent society. He argued that the purification rites help in reconciling women with their families and enable them carry on with normal activities in the society where they are accepted. Macaulay (2010) similarly argued that this approach saves the lives of the children and husband of the adulterous woman who would have died as a result of the woman’s wanton behavior.

Poverty, Marriage and Faith in Sex Trafficking

Trafficking in women and girls for sexual exploitation in Nigeria is often times presented as a poverty problem. The acceptance to be trafficked for prostitution abroad is portrayed as a response by women to the unjust structure and system in Nigeria. According to Olagbegi (2006), Guest (2000) observes that the movement of people across international boundaries began in the late 1980’s when Nigerian women travelled to Italy to work in tomato fields in search of daily bread. Agbu (2003) agrees that the mass migration of young girls and women to Europe started in the 1980s. He describes the period as characterized by economic hardship, suffering, helplessness, disillusionment, starvation and death. He argued that the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Program took its toll on a lot of families who could no longer afford to eat three times a day.

Living became an issue of the survival of the fittest. Traffickers’ stories of picking tomatoes in farms, working as nannies, hairdressers or domestic servants abroad and earning foreign currencies enticed those who participated. Others, who were carried away by the robust business, in no time, were paying registration fees, signing agreements and submitting collaterals (Seeds, 2005). Awareness on human trafficking issues at this initial period was low and most trafficked persons thought they were going to do some legitimate work abroad, not prostitution. In Nigeria today, a lot of people believe that travelling to Europe entails working as a prostitute which is usually embarrassing for those Nigerians doing legitimate jobs there (Echekwube, 1999). According to Abubakar et al. (2010), families insist that their female members, particularly, daughters and their wives also, go abroad and support the household through casual sex or prostitution business, observing that some of the men, who sent their wives to Europe to prostitute, said they did so to boost the income at home.

In Edo State, married women’ indulgence in sex trade is adultery. It is socially and morally condemned particularly for fear of repercussion. Idahosa (2010) and Omorogbe (2010) agree that there are incidents of married women in prostitution abroad but stressed as deadly, the participation of a married woman in sex trade when the dowry or bride price is not returned to the husband’s family. Idahosa (2010) explains that a married woman indulges in sex trade when there is an understanding between the husband and wife that she is travelling out to prostitute for some time in order to help the family as such, money made should be sent back home. An arrangement is made for a temporary sep-
aration. This is reached when the woman pays back the dowry or bride price to her husband’s family. However, there is always an intention to come back home and be reconciled to the family.

Returning the bride price or dowry is important because it signifies the dissolution of the marriage. With this supposed dissolution, the woman is no longer regarded as the man’s property. Whatever she does will not incur the wrath of the ancestors on her husband or children. She is regarded as a free woman since the bride price or dowry has been returned. Because tradition forbids a man from spending the earnings made from his wife’s prostitution, money made is sent back home for developmental projects (Echekwube, 1999). The choice to invest in developmental projects – usually a house or business is deliberate. People rent the houses, buy or pay for services rendered in businesses. Such monies are no longer considered as proceeds of adultery. As such, it can be used by anyone without incurring the wrath of the ancestors.

In Edo State, purification rite is a must for any woman who has been separated from her husband but wishes to reconcile particularly when the man is aware that she had been unfaithful. To prevent the ancestors from striking him dead, tradition recommends that he should not eat food prepared by her neither should he have sexual relations with her until the purification rite is observed. She is also excluded from partaking in the activities of the husband’s family.

Socio-Religious Effects and its Implications for Sex Trafficking

The action of men and women whose crave for material things trivialize an act that is regarded as abomination is condemnable and the consequences of their actions are grave. According to Echekwube (1999), they believe that after they have been enriched by prostitution, they can perform the purification rites and be at peace once more with the gods and ancestors, including neighbors. Trafficked married women calculate prostitution abroad as a quick way of making money but fail to cost the long term effects of being prostitutes on themselves, their marriages, children and the society at large.

Human trafficking fosters separation and divorces. Separation leads to weak control and indiscipline among children who are left without adequate guide but with enough money and sufficient time to indulge in vices. Again, stigmatization of women in prostitution is severe in Nigeria where such women are called italos (coined word for prostitutes living in Europe countries). This could have a traumatic effect on their children.

New World Encyclopedia (2015) on human sexuality notes that parents united in the common goal of parenting their children can ensure that their lineage is secure, healthy and prosperous. Affection and trust in marriage may also be broken based on the opinion formed about the character of women in prostitution. Trafficking in women has increased the rate of divorce in Nigeria and resulted in deaths. Again, It is widely acknowledged that stability in marriage inevitably contribute to stability in the entire social structure.

Nigerians suffer shame as the name of their country is put in disrepute by the act of women in prostitution abroad. The people of Edo State who used to boost of a stringent custom that upholds chastity and fidelity among women can no longer do so. The high rate indulgence of women and girls from Edo State in trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation despite the stringent tradition on infidelity has earned the State a title, “the hub of international prostitution in Nigeria” (Adesina, 2006).

In this trafficking situation, traditions are not only undermined but rendered meaningless. The result is a loss of good culture. When this begins to happen, it is a sign of a loss of the sense of sin. The danger of eroding values such as chastity, long suffering, honor and dignity which are inherent in the customs, culture and traditions of a people lies in the loss of the sense of sin. This makes everything become acceptable leading to an atmosphere of moral and sexual laxity which has implications for sex trafficking.

Firstly, an atmosphere of moral and sexual laxity would aid the acceptance of prostitution in the society and increase the participation of women in sex trafficking. More women will see it as an alternative way to achieving a good life. Secondly, it will promote the activities of traffickers who would have “a pool” of willing preys to exploit. Sondergren (2005) notes that when sinful actions become
accepted by society, structures of sin can emerge, which tend to push others toward committing sinful acts.

Religion as a Panacea

There are many reasons for the decline and fall of a nation but an important and often overlooked reason is its lip service to religion. Religion in its nature seeks to give meaning and purpose to life and humanity. It provides the set of standards that govern a nation and its people. In religions therefore, the impression is given that behavior, standards and principles that have moral values should be such that help improve the well being of the nation and people. Most Nigerians including their leaders claim to be adherents of one of the three official religions in Nigeria (Christianity, Islam and African Tradition) but, they do not adhere to the teachings of Islam, Christianity or African Traditional Religion since one of the root causes of women trafficking for sexual exploitation is in the inhumane treatment of others by leaders whose greed, insensitivity and corrupt practices led to the downturn of the nation’s economy, uneven distribution of income and the nation’s resources.

Life is constructed as unlivable for many Nigerians who do not possess what it takes to live well. It is the responsibility of leaders to preserve the well being of those they represent but in Nigeria, leaders prioritize their selfish interests and governance is centered on “me and my family” a syndrome that fosters corruption and embezzlement leading to a loss of confidence in the system as well as a breakdown in law and order with citizens resorting to self help in order to ensure their survival. The free choice of leaders to cause inequalities that lead to suffering and emotional pains in the midst of plenty is moral evil. Inequality is a social sin that has made many women accept immoralities such as women trafficking for sexual exploitation as an alternative way out of poverty. The acceptance of prostitution aboard by women has a linkage with the accountability of the poor or powerless in the society by the government.

Although Nigeria is a rich nation judging from the size of its oil export and non-oil exports, the failure of the leaders to reposition Nigerians for development has put many people at a disadvantage position. In Matthew 18:7 Jesus said, “woe unto the world because of offences for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh” (KJV). The insensitivity of the leaders to the plight of the people is a failure to work from the premise of what is needed in order to make life livable. Leaders are to manage the wealth of the nation and provide needs. Jesus Christ in his teachings, described himself as a good shepherd who is ready to lay down his life for his sheep. Thus, the missing tool in the running of Nigeria administration is in virtuous men and women who have the fear of God and are ready to discard their interest for the well being of the nation and her people.

Human beings cannot achieve happiness or even something that approximates happiness unless they live in communities that foster good habits and provide basic equipment of a well lived life. As long as women turn to prostitution because they are desperate, the problem of women trafficking will likely persist. However, while a concern should be shown for the material side of life, people are encouraged to be satisfied with whatever they have. Islam forbids greed and over ambition as well as the love for the accumulation of wealth. The Quran warns that the accumulation of wealth cannot make people live forever (104:1-4). For Christians, prostitution is always wrong to choose. Turning away from the purpose of procreation for which sex is created, is seen as a corruption of the gift of God. Moreover, humans are created in the image and likeness of God as such, should not objectify as commodities to be sold and bought since it degrades and debases personhood. In Africa, adultery is always wrong and discouraged. In these religions, people are encouraged to be patient and wait on God in cases of short comings.

Nigerians and their leaders got it wrong when they attached little importance to religions and relegate it to churches, mosques and other religious institutions where leaders struggle to win converts and keep followers by emphasizing more on areas of divergence and disagreements. In a bid to show one religion as better than the other, the essential teachings that call humanity to a higher purpose and standards of personal behavior is lost. Loving one’s neighbor as oneself is misconstrued for self love.
as “your neighbor” is restricted to members of the same religious affiliation. All others are perceived enemies and evil.

In Nigeria today, religious life is focused on external devotions, people go to churches, mosques or religious institutions, pay tithes, carry out their daily ablutions, go on pilgrimages, take on titles or sacrifice to their gods without a thorough understanding of the basic truth of these religions which lies in expressing one’s love for God through selfless service and love for humanity. Religious leaders fail in effectively communicating spirituality and morals to their numerous followers because they measure discipleship in terms of wealth, prestige and power. There is a decline in spiritual commitment, morality and practical religious living as some people deviate from the intrinsic values in religion to some motives which are in variance with its fundamentals.

To achieve the moral transformation that is needed for human development in these contemporary times, the fear of God must penetrate through every facet of life. A rebranding of the spirit man in such a way that yields a positive response in character and nature of man is what is needed to take Nigeria and Nigerians to the “next level” in human and nation building. Religion can rebuild the mindset of the people to accepting proper values and the fear of God as the only way forward when properly interpreted and adhered to. For instance, if Nigerian leaders had been moral enough to execute their duties with equity, fairness and justice as the fear of God demands, Nigeria and Nigerians would have been better placed. Our ability individually, corporately and in our national governance to extend service and love to those in need will go a long way in minimizing women trafficking for sexual exploitation and achieving the millennium goals that will put Nigeria on an almost equal footing with developed countries that the need to travel out to seek for “greener pastures” will be unnecessary.

**Conclusion**

The involvement of married women in prostitution abroad, illustrates the disastrous breakdown of law and order in the society. Nigerians are disappointed that their leaders have abdicated their responsibilities of providing for the well being of citizens, majority of whom, live below poverty level. In order to improve their conditions, some married women resorted to making quick money. This led them to the so called flourishing trade of trafficking that resulted to a loss of respect for tradition and a degradation of morals. Trafficking in women brings about immorality, the corruption of religious beliefs and the degrading of human life. This work is of the view that, the moral and spiritual decay of the nation is one of the root causes of the escalating political, economic, social and other problems confronting Nigerians. It suggests a spiritual and moral revival as the way out for Nigeria and Nigerians.

For the menace of women trafficking to be brought to the lowest minimum, the following steps should be taken.

- Religion and morality should be given a central place in all activities that promote human development in governance
- Governments at all levels should be dedicated to their duties and live up to their responsibility of providing a robust and sustainable economy for human development
- Nigerians and their leaders should imbibe the attitude of living altruistically. They should others as an extension of themselves and treat them as such since the evil one does to another one does in the end to oneself
- Religious leaders should emphasize issues of spiritual growth and values that will help inculcate the fear of God
- Empowerment and awareness programmes should be carried out by governments at all levels, religious and non-governmental organizations should help women rediscover their worth as persons of integrity by exploring their hidden potentials and using them for positive growth
- Traditional and religious leaders should sensitize their communities on the inherent dangers of sending their wives and daughters to prostitute abroad
human trafficking should become an area of study in schools at all levels in order to promote an early awareness of the issues involved, the inherent dangers on persons involved and its effects on the society at large

References
Eiwo, G. Teacher. (55 years). Personal Interview, 5 November, 2010
Idahosa C. Community Leader (54 years). Oral Interview, 4 July, 2010
Macaulay, A. Farmer (60 years). Oral Interview, 5 December, 2010
Omorogbe O. Lecturer (60 years). Oral Interview, 4 January, 2010
Appendix
Clarification of Terms
Religion
Dictionary.com (2015) defines religion as, a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.
Poverty
Poverty is defined as the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions (Merriam-Webster, 2015)
Marriage
According to Oxford Dictionary (British and World English) marriage is the legally or formally recognized union of a man and a woman.
Purification Rites
Purification rite according to Ortner (2013) is any of the ceremonial acts or customs employed in an attempt to reestablish lost purity in relation to the Sacred (the transcendental realm) or the social and cultural realm.
Human Trafficking
The Protocol (2000) defines trafficking in persons as
The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or the other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or position of power or of vulnerability or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include at 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.