



West African Voodoo: A technique for control by human traffickers

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Many western countries believe that voodoo is simply a superstition where witches cast spells to control an individual or see into the future. Sadly, controlling victims, either psychologically or supernaturally, voodoo has become a tool used by many human traffickers coming out of West Africa.

In the past five years, multiple cases have been discovered where traffickers are using voodoo as a means to control their victims. The Netherlands in 2012, had one of the largest cases known as the Koolvis case that involved over 120 victims. There were several convictions involving an organized gang of traffickers bringing women from West Africa to Europe for commercial sexual exploitation. It is common in trafficking cases for victims to have a fear of testifying or speaking out against their traffickers, but in this particular case, it was compounded by a fear of breaking a voodoo oath which almost protected the gang of traffickers from a conviction. It was not until law enforcement enlisted the help of a local Nigerian priest that the victims could feel free of their curse and comfortable enough to talk to the police and help convict their trafficker. Similar cases involving trafficking and voodoo have been seen throughout Europe. In 2010, German federal police dealt with a case involving 170 Nigerian women. In 2009, 23 individuals were arrested in Spain trafficking women from Nigeria. Cases have also been prosecuted in Ireland in 2012, Portugal in 2014, and Greece in 2009. With trafficking cases increasing, more cases will surely emerge in the upcoming years.

What is voodoo?

Voodoo is used in various animism religions which believe that there are spirits in all living things. Most voodoo religions are monotheistic, but believe that individuals are in daily contact with spirits. Spirits can be both good and bad; often bad things in life can be credited to bad spirits. In voodoo, many fetishes are used which can help to communicate with spirits or as protection someone from bad spirits. Fetishes can include masks, food, talismans, tattoos, or books. The voodoo itself is used to contact God or the spirits and can be used to bless or curse people as well as ask for advice.

In many West African countries, there is a fear of voodoo. Some countries such as Benin or Togo have large populations practicing these traditional religions, but even in other countries such as Ghana or Nigeria, where Christianity or Islam are the majority, an underlying belief or fear of voodoo and traditional beliefs still remains. Voodoo is taken very seriously throughout West Africa and this religious practice is often exploited by the traffickers that are coming from the region.

How is voodoo used?

For many victims, voodoo and voodoo ceremonies are quite scary and have a powerful effect on those involved. If victims are Christian or Islamic, they are often taught that voodoo is bad or evil which only makes the fear more intense. Traffickers will force victims to take an oath before leaving the country. The oath normally requires the victim to promise to pay back fees that traffickers will charge to take them to Europe, often under a false pretense. These fees can be around 60,000 to 100,000 euros and are often impossible for the victims to ever completely pay back. The

oaths also generally forbid victims from talking to the police or disclosing information about their traffickers or their journey to Europe. If this oath is broken, victims fear that they will never have children, they will get sick, or their family and loved ones could be harmed. Curses can act on someone from afar and only expire once the oath has been fulfilled.

The voodoo ceremonies normally begin with drums and dancing, often with women going into a trance. Hair, nails, or menstrual bloods can be used to make concoctions which are either used in the ceremony or are kept by the priest symbolizing that part of the victim is remaining in Africa with the possibility that it will be used later if victims do not cooperate. Sacrifices are also common with women having to drink the blood of a chicken or other animal. Victims can also be scared with cuts that are filled with ashes under the skin in order to please spirits and remember their oath. This idea of branding has been used by traffickers from all cultures, but the voodoo ritual adds a religious component to the scaring.

When victims arrive at their destination, often with false travel documents, many are instructed to seek asylum with the local police. After being placed in a shelter, the traffickers and other organized crime groups can begin exploiting them as they slowly repay their never ending debt. Similar to other trafficking victims, the fees that must be paid back are often impossible to meet and force the victims into a vicious cycle of exploitation. When victims are found by police or traffickers are arrested, the victims will not show up in court or will not cooperate with the police out of fear. This can make it very difficult for police to create a case against the trafficker; especially if police do not understand what is happening, women can be accused of lying or not cooperating, preventing them from receiving the victim assistance that they need.

According to the Nigerian National Agency for Prohibition of Traffic in Persons (NAPTIP) about 90 per cent of girls that are been trafficked to Europe are taken to shrines to take "oaths of secrecy".¹ The frequency that voodoo is used makes it important for police to understand what is happening and be sensitive to the pressure that these victims are dealing with.

Why is voodoo so powerful in West Africa?

A victim of trafficking and voodoo violence spoke with me about the problem of voodoo in Guinea. While many people are moving away from traditional beliefs and towards Christianity, most still strongly believe in the power of voodoo. It can be difficult to believe in both Christianity as well as voodoo, but even devout Christians can still return to the traditional beliefs especially when they are struggling, sick, or when seeking help and comfort.

In Guinea, voodoo is often exploited for wealth or power. Many politicians go to voodoo priests to wish death upon rivals or ask for future success and fortune; therefore, these priests have power within the community and have ties with the leadership throughout the country. In these ceremonies, sacrifices are often used, sometimes an animal, a part of the person's body, an albino child, or a loved one. Especially with albino children, the government officials will take the children from their families to use in sacrifices, and the families do not have a choice. Even though many locals will say that child sacrifices do not occur in Guinea, the man I spoke with saw his own friend killed in a ceremony because he was an albino.

For individuals that have been affected by violence in the name of voodoo, there is nowhere to go for help. The government is seen by many as corrupt and going to the police can get people in more trouble for speaking out against the violent practices. Non-profit organizations are doing work with underprivileged children, but they still have no power to help victims of voodoo violence. Additionally, there are no specialists in Guinea for people to go for therapy and counseling. They are forced to either repress their fears and grief or turn to the same voodoo priests that helped commit the violence against them for support.

Voodoo is a part of the culture in Guinea and other parts of West Africa. Because the driving force is money, it makes it hard for people to address the human rights and abuse issues that occur in the name of voodoo. People will disregard their actions even if it means sacrificing a child or family member in a hope for money or power. Similarly, politicians and police will not stop the violence because they too turn to voodoo in their quest to obtain their position of power and authority. For less than 100 euro, individuals can pay police to look the other way when dealing crimes especially deaths related to voodoo or voodoo sacrifices. The deaths are never reported in the news even though it

¹ Garcia, Ana Dols, Voodoo, Witchcraft and Human Trafficking in Europe

happens throughout the country. With voodoo being so common and violent in parts of West Africa, it is easy for traffickers to use this practice to control victims abroad.

What can be done?

Traffickers continue to use the practice of voodoo to control their victims. Currently, spiritual leaders are not legally allowed to conduct voodoo oaths for traffickers in many states including Nigeria, but money is still a huge factor attributing to the prevalence of oaths associated with trafficking. One voodoo priest told CKM staff that they had almost an 80% loss of income when these ceremonies for traffickers were outlawed.

Cases involving voodoo oaths have forced investigators to try new methods to get victim cooperation. The Dutch case required law enforcement to work with local Nigerian priest to both understand the cultural differences as well as help the women involved feel comfortable speaking against their traffickers. A similar case in Germany was almost overlooked when immigration officials found an unaccompanied Nigerian minor traveling to Germany to “visit her father”. It took a long time for law enforcement to realize that she was lying to protect herself from a voodoo oath until they could finally treat the case as a trafficking case. It is easy for victims to be disregarded or accused of lying when first responders are unaware of the possible unseen pressure that is forcing them to act a certain way.

Voodoo oaths continue to be used in trafficking coming out of West Africa. It is important for all parties dealing with trafficking to be aware of this phenomenon and be sensitive to the pressure and fear that voodoo imposes on many victims. Not only are victims in a foreign country unable to understand the legal system, but they are bound by an oath that is invisible for outsiders to see. Voodoo is very real for the individuals involved and is present throughout West Africa. Traffickers will continue to evolve and find new ways to control their victims and protect their enterprises, but it is important to understand the use of voodoo and the power that it has over victims of trafficking.

Sources:

Garcia, Ana Dols, “Voodoo, Witchcraft and Human Trafficking in Europe”. (October 2013). Issues in Refugee Research. UNHCR

Personal interviews with CKM staff and victims