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Cynthia Olufade

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OLUFADE

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This Research is part of the European Project PACKING (Protection of Migrants and Asylum seekers, especially Children and Women coming from Nigeria and victims of trafficking), conducted from 2017 and 2019, both in Nigeria and in France.

PACKING Project is **co-funded by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) of the European Union** and is coordinated by the NGO ECPAT France.

The general objective of the project is that rights of Migrants are promoted and respected and migrants are protected from trafficking in Human beings.

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# **SUSTENANCE OF SEX TRAFFICKING IN EDO STATE; THE COMBINED EFFECTS OF OATH TAKING, TRANSNATIONAL SILENCE AND MIGRATION IMAGINARIES ON TRAFFICKED WOMEN FROM EDO STATE**

Cynthia Olufade

## **Introduction**

The dimensions of the transnational trafficking network from Edo State have continued to grow by leaps and bounds, as a result of the network's dynamism and adaptability. While scholars and policy makers have continued to examine the phenomenon, the network kept unraveling different approaches to the practice. The structure of the trafficking system, combined with its success and growth over the years, through the recruitment and mobilization of more and more young girls, renders the subject a viable topic for contemporary and scholarly discourse.

This paper is based on the results of a field-research conducted for 6 months in Nigeria, in the frame of a collective project on human trafficking.<sup>1</sup> This work tries to understand the sustenance of sex trafficking in Edo state by looking at three core issues.

The paper is structured into two parts. Firstly, it examines the broad issues connected with the oath taking phenomenon, it goes further to examine abstract phenomenon in transnationalism as a framework with which the intangibility of the oaths takes upon the mobility of its carriers. In addition, the paper tries to highlight the place of rituals in the oath taking process, while doing so, the concept of juju is also analysed. In a bid to understand the control mechanisms adopted by the trafficking network and the processes involved, this aspect of the paper also discusses different actors engaged by the network and the mechanisms with which they operate. In doing this, it sheds more light on the responsibilities of different actors and how their activities lead to the overall success of the business derived through the compliance of the victims, as a result of the oaths taken. Finally, the paper seeks to lay emphasis on the role of different groups in the society and how they interact with the oath taking phenomena, from religious organizations to parents and relatives of victims, as well as the state's established institution.

Numerous studies have been carried out on prostitution and sex work in Edo State.<sup>2</sup> A good number of scholars have focused on the centrality of the head of the network,<sup>3</sup> other studies have in the

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<sup>1</sup> This study is part of findings from a research project on the protection of Migrants and Asylum Seekers especially children and women coming from Nigeria and victims of Trafficking (PACKING), supervised by IFRA-Nigeria with the aim of understanding different aspects of the trafficking of Edo women and girls to Europe. The research is a transdisciplinary initiative undertaken by civil society organizations along with IFRA and funded by the European Commission. Its dimensions involve field research, conducted in major parts of Benin City and different cities in Europe.

<sup>2</sup> Edo State is located in the Southern part of Nigeria, its official capital, Benin City, was the seat of the ancient Benin Empire with the Oba as the ruling monarch. The culture and traditions of the Benin people remain strong till date; these cultural practices are evident in their language, values and belief system.

<sup>3</sup> Mancuso's (2013), study focuses on the centrality of Madam's to the network, while Kienast et al (2014) examined members of the trafficking network

past, examined the traffickers as sex offenders. More recent materials have traced the relationship between pre-colonial religion and the human trafficking network, while Whelan's (2017) thesis examined the institutional embeddedness of the sex trafficking network in Edo state, in an attempt to understand its functionality. So far, certain important variables have only been superficially addressed. A case in point is the different forms of transnational silence induced by the network and how this translates into success and profitability for the traffickers, while at the same time, making room for migration imaginations to soar. The distinctiveness of the Edo sex trafficking network compared to other prominent trafficking networks is most likely the introduction of oath taking rituals into the practices, which leads to the exploitation of women and girls, made possible by the exploitation of their belief system.<sup>4</sup> The Edo society is deeply rooted in a heritage that upholds the principles of pre-colonial religious practices that takes the promise of oath taking seriously. The historical Benin relationship to the Portuguese that led to notable members of the society including the Oba himself, converting to Catholicism. This overlap of beliefs and practices happens till date, reinforcing the syncretic aspect of the religious landscape, where people believe in the efficacy of historic polytheistic religion as well as Christianity.

### **Abstract Phenomena in Transnationalism**

The conceptualization of transnationalism and transnational configuration addresses operations that move beyond borders and can therefore depict abstract concepts. This means that transnational spaces imply durable and firm links and relationships reaching across territories and identities. It also embodies "positions within networks and organizations and networks of organizations that cut across the borders of at least two national states".<sup>5</sup> In order to fully come to terms with its ramifications, the concept of transnationalism emphasizes connections, links and ties that occur between social spaces, reaching far beyond the restrictions of territorial boundaries. It speaks to a kind of 'deterritorialization' of social and cultural ideas as well as practices. The idea therefore encompasses all kinds of social phenomena, from the activities of international NGOs that bring people together for a common goal, to the ties across borders that migrants keep, especially of 'being from here and going there', constantly linking themselves with a multiplicity of activities. This study aims at analysing oath taking rituals, the wordings of the oaths and the ambience of fear it exudes, in order to explain how oaths taken in Edo State become an intangible aspect of the trafficking process meant to ensure the compliance of sex workers. Throughout the journey and during their stay in Europe, the effects of oaths will be significant in their social behaviours, their relations with others, their bounds with the *Madams* and the repayment of their debt. Thus, the theory of "abstract

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<sup>4</sup> Osezua's (2013), study focuses on the role of religion in the Edo society, making a case for the diverse existing pre-colonial religious practices still ongoing in the society.

<sup>5</sup> Baubock and Faist (2010), argues here that transnationalism transcends dual nationalities, rather it makes a case for membership of different networks that cuts across special and temporal enclaves

phenomena" in transnationalism has been mobilised here, in an attempt to understand the connections and flows within the network and how they translate into its sustenance.

Ordinarily, transnationalism suggests the physical movement of people, which deals with, 'body politics' across spaces. But it is also about 'abstract phenomena' like, in this case, an oath taken before leaving home. It informs the pattern of life, work and exploitation of women from Edo State. It goes beyond, seeking explanation for the intangibility/fluidity of the phenomena not seen by others in the context of the trafficking trade but actually informs its sustenance, even when it is to the detriment of the women. This theory goes back to how transnationalism is coexistent with many other phenomena. For example, it can also be employed to illustrate the fluidity with which gender concepts and categories have flown into spaces where certain sexual practices were not stigmatized until they were stereotyped for being different from the heterosexual norm. An analysis of the 'anti-gay' legislation in Uganda and Nigeria opens up an understanding of how abstract terms have moved into Africa and have contributed to the criminalization of what was absent from the criminal code so far.

On a more specific level, the theory of abstract phenomena references the fluid movement and ties that link qualities that are not palpable yet inform people's actions and inactions as members of society. These abstract qualities encapsulate a wide variety of concepts, from cultural practices, to belief systems, to sickness and diseases, and all other forms of human expression. In this work, centrality is given to the abstract phenomenon of silence with respect to its application in the everyday experience of trafficked women from Edo State.

For the purpose of the research, the qualitative method of data collection was adopted. In-depth interviews were held with returnees,<sup>6</sup> NAPTIP agents,<sup>7</sup> chief priests and heads of local NGOs in Benin City, while observations were carried out in oath taking temples.<sup>8</sup> The interviews were made of open-ended questions which aimed to encourage the participants to talk in detail about their experience. Observing the daily lives of the returnees through daily visits to their places of business was also part of the fieldwork. Serendipity method was also utilised, in this case, during the course of the research, I remained aware of what was happening in my surroundings, on the street, in public transport, and while conducting interviews in public areas. This opened me up to a great deal of information on the study population.

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<sup>6</sup> A returnee for the purpose of this study is a woman or girl who was trafficked to Europe in the past but has returned back to Nigeria and currently resides in Edo State. In a larger sense, returnees are people who had travelled outside Nigeria and have returned, here, emphasis is not made on their sex or the nature of job they engaged in during their sojourn.

<sup>7</sup> NAPTIP is the acronym for National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons. A government agency in Nigeria, established to prevent and fight cases of trafficking in all its ramifications.

<sup>8</sup> Oath taking temples in Edo State are 'Sacred' centres of ancestral and deity worship. Oath taking rituals for different purposes are conducted in these temples. A common example of such temple is the Ayelala. There, different forms of oath taking rituals are performed; many of the women interviewed for this study confirmed that they had taken oaths in Ayelala temple.

### **The promise of the oath, the burden of repayment and all that transpires in-between.**

Any study on oath taking in Nigeria has, at some point, to deal with the term “*juju*”, which is difficult to define since it comprises several ideas and concepts. Empirical data on interaction with *juju* as practiced by Edo people designates it as the utilisation of supernatural forces to impress on the natural. This is achieved via the backing of the deities or deified ancestors. Against this backdrop, *juju* can be a tangible material or an abstract quality, depending on the need at hand, it can also be conjured into a material or an object, spoken into the air or sent on errands. *Juju* is also referred to as the representation of a particular deity on earth. *Juju* also requires that the user exhibits a level of mastery of its application, that is, through incantations, dosage to be administered (for healing and herbal concoctions) and sacrifice.

*Juju* is also quite malleable, this implies that it is the user’s intention that determines the outcome of the *juju* in question. Hence *juju* can be used positively, as protection, to bring prosperity, healing and so on, or negatively, to curse someone, or make one act against his will. Oath taking Ritual are a significant aspect of some *juju* processes, its main aim is to elicit compliance of parties involved. Till date, the Oba (ruling Benin monarch) takes oath on a regular basis, so do other chiefs and subjects under his control. Chief priests also have to take oaths from time to time, as well as their followers.

The connection between the human trafficking network in Edo and oath taking, from all indications stems from exploiting a ‘malleable’ system (*juju*) already structured in the society with the intention of making profit. The malleability of *juju* becomes an advantage to the traffickers as they can utilise it as they so please. Ensuring that most women/girls who pass through them go through the oath taking ritual is one way of safeguarding their source of income, while at the same time, for some of these traffickers, protecting the women/girls with the same *juju*, to help them through the perils of the journey across (for the desert route and also for those that go through immigrations and security personnel at ports of entry).

*“When I had agreed to my madam’s conditions for the trip, she then told me that I would accompany her to the shrine to swear to the ‘juju’. The shrine was at Orhiomwhon, a village, quite a distance from Benin. On getting there, I noticed that it was a small village with a few occupants and their major occupation there was ministrations at shrines. I became afraid, the surrounding was quite scary, it was my madam who tried to allay my fears when she told me not to worry that I was safe. There were lot of ‘juju’ inside the shrine and some black mixtures in a claypot. The juju’ priest at the shrine was a woman, who welcomed my madam and then asked us to change our clothes in commencement of the ritual...”<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> Interview conducted with a returnee at Ted-Okha road, around Efua junction on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, 2017

The respondent above was taken to a village on the outskirts of Benin City to swear an oath. The madam had arranged beforehand with the *juju* priest and then fixed a time to bring the girls for the ritual. The location of these temples helps also to create a sense of fear and insecurity in the minds of the women/girls. This may be as a result of the strange environment or stories they might have heard in the past concerning people from the town. It also implies that the location of the temple creates the mood of sacredness and fear in the minds of the girls. The relevance of taking the potential into a remote and creepy place for the oath is underscored by the feeling of fear it creates in their minds. This ritual process seals the pact between women who want to move to Europe and traffickers who commit to pay all costs of the journey while the women promise to repay the money, be respectful to the traffickers and endeavour not to divulge the identity of the traffickers to the police. The ritual itself involves the collection of items by the *juju* priest, slaughtering of animals, and making a solemn vow to repay the debt and not to denounce the traffickers to the police or any third party.

Items collected are arranged as packets; and kept with the *juju* priest. The content of the packets ranges from; hair from intimate areas (pubic, armpit), hair from the head, to intimate clothing (already worn but not washed underpants, finger and toe nails, used menstrual pads, sometimes mixed with a piece of metal to depict the presence of Ogun.

*“I was asked to come with a pair of pants I had worn the previous day without washing it, on getting to the shrine, my finger and toe nails were collected, strands of hair from my armpit and public region were also shared. All these were put in a nylon bag, tied and a paper with my name on it was included to identify the owner (...) They collected hair from my vagina in the shrine; they also asked me to cut my finger nails and submit to them; they told me that if I refused to obey the vow I was about to take, the items they had collected from me would help to prepare ‘juju’ that might either kill me or any member of my family whom I loved so much”.*<sup>10</sup>

The efficacy of the oaths taken also relies on the beliefs of participants involved in the process of the ritual, it speaks to the performativity of the oath taking ritual, viewed as episodes of cultural communication that seeks to send a message to its participant but can only be understood by such participants that possess a ‘shared’ belief, culture or tradition. The use of symbols and sacrifices in such ritual processes also serves to heighten such ‘shared’ understandings of sacredness, with aims to authenticate the entire process. The symbols and ritual processes also serve to make the

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<sup>10</sup> Interview conducted with a returnee at Ted-Okha road, around Efua junction on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, 2017.



ritual intelligible to all parties involved, thereby creating a lasting impression. These impressions move along with the potential hustlers<sup>11</sup> and influence their life while in Europe.

*“The fact that my underwear (pant) was with the juju priest, unwashed and the blood of the chicken which I swore with made the whole process very real and scary to me. I was aware that with those materials, any evil can be done to me because the items have a link to me. For this reason, I decided I was going to work hard and pay back the debt”.*<sup>12</sup>

### **Commitment to the Cause**

As the ritual proceeds, the person who is to take the oath is an active participant in the whole process. The priest controls the ritual and other witnesses such as *trolley*<sup>13</sup> and relatives may assist, for example, in undressing the woman/girl to be trafficked.

*“As we got to the shrine, I was asked by the priest to remove my shoes and then undress and change into a red wrapper, tied round my underarms. The priest then told me to kneel down in front of the statue of a deity inside the shrine, he gave me kola nut and hot drink sprinkled with blood from a chicken he had killed when he began the incantations. I drank and was asked to repeat after the priest “I will pay back the sum of forty-five thousand Euros to my Madam, I will strive to always obey her instructions, I will not send money home without her consent or maybe after I had paid off my debt and then I would not report any of the processes to the police”*<sup>14</sup>

The wordings of the oath for the above respondent preclude any ambiguities. In this case, default cannot be blamed on lack of clarity of the wordings of the oath. The symbolic use of specific words by participants to express a promise underscores the principles of performance in ritual. In addition, emphasis is placed on silence. In this case, the potential hustler is warned not to involve the authorities or any third party in the activities of the network as she understands it. This ‘rule’ becomes ingrained in the minds of trafficked women, even on arrival in Europe. On a regular basis, NGOs and agencies try to get them out of the clutches of the network with so much difficulty as a result of the promise back home to keep their activities silent. The various forms of silence do not

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<sup>11</sup> A girl/woman recruited by the Edo trafficking network to engage in selling sex for cash in Europe, any monies realized from the sales are to be remitted at the end of the day/week/month. The hustler before leaving the shores of Nigeria had sworn to pay back an agreed upon amount to the madam, who is usually the head of the network. The incurred debt range 30,000-60,000 Euros.

<sup>12</sup> Interview conducted with returnee on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May, 2017 at Upper Sakponba way, Benin City

<sup>13</sup> The Trolley is a logistical administrator of the network, he is also a major gameplayer, attending to different issues that leads to the smooth running of the network’s operations

<sup>14</sup> Interview conducted on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May at Upper Sakponba

only involve the absence of speech, rather, it signifies manipulations and deceptions that are woven to ensure the smooth running of the network's operations, in which the hustler is made to believe is for her own benefit.

In the minds of the women/girls who have taken these oaths, the tendency to keep to the dictates of the traffickers from the processing of travel documents and the entire process, to the oath taking ritual (usually conducted when the journey is about to begin), to the actual exploitation is quite high. In addition to this, a good number of the hustlers have been made to swear before gods in whom they either believe in or have heard of their exploits in the past. These forms of compliance displayed by victims of the sex trafficking network in Edo State also speak to transnationalism of silence, in this sense, the women/girls become an embodiment of the silences that the network operates to such an extent that it becomes a part of their lives and makes them inaccessible to others (at home or in the destination country), a vivid illustration finds expression in the fact that girls of even the same madam are not allowed to mingle freely with one another, in order to create some sense of competition and to keep them on edge.

*“My madam always made sure me and the other girls who worked for her were on edge. She did not give us information together and she made sure some of us were treated better than the others, especially those that submitted enough money. When I first started the work, I was giving all the money I made back to my madam without keeping anything to send back home, I couldn't approach any of the other girls because I felt it may get back to our madam, it was during our street stays I spoke to another girl with another madam who told me how to keep some money in specific spots before taking the rest to my madam. I was so happy I did not tell any of the girls from my madam because not too long after, there was a fight and different stories of how some of the girls were being overly cruel to each other just to get on madam's good side, they even went as far as telling lies about each other to our Madam.”<sup>15</sup>*

### **Periodic Reinforcement of the efficacy of the Oaths**

Apart from the oaths taken in different temples in Benin City and other parts of Edo State before someone embarks on the journey, on arrival in destinations across Europe, facing the reality of the job, sometimes, some may try to either default on payments or seek alternative means of reducing the amount of the debt. It is at this stage that the *Madams* employ the use of physical violence, threats and *juju* on girls/women who do not 'perform' or deliver expected remittance on a

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<sup>15</sup> interview conducted on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April in MMA area of Benin City

daily/weekly/monthly basis to the *Madams*. These threats are utilised to ensure the compliance of the hustler. Where the strategy of threats or violence fails to yield any positive results, *juju* becomes the last resort and only hope. At this point, the *Madam* calls upon the *juju* priest to intervene, without the knowledge of the woman/girl in question. When this happens, the *juju* priest utilises different methods to drive his/her point home, sometimes it is done in form of dreams, at other times, the madam is given items/objects that are markers of the deity. Once this is sighted by the erring girl/woman, she understands the consequences.<sup>16</sup>

*“Any madam who seeks my services concerning oath taking for girls to travel to Europe has to pay for each girl that takes the oath. Future expense is added to this amount because some of these girls, when they get overseas and begin to enjoy the life there, they might decide to run away from their Madam. If the Madam tries to stop them and fails, she calls on me to help. What I do is to use the contents of the packet of the particular girl/woman to make a concoction and then remind the gods of the vows she took to ‘repay’ the debt. What happens afterwards is that the girl in question would dream of the oath taking ritual performed before her trip to Europe and then the gods would appear to her. This would serve as a reminder not to break the promise she made. If after a while, the madam still complains of non-compliance of the girl, then the ultimate punishment is invoked. The punishment depends on the oath the girl had taken before, ranging from madness to grave illness of the hustler or of loved relations (especially parents)”.*<sup>17</sup>

The oath taking ritual is not a final process in itself. The end goal is for the payment of the debt to be complete so any defiance is met with consequences especially if it involves default. In other instances, *Madams* also arrange for the ‘fortification’ of their girls so that they can always receive ‘favour’ and become the epitome of attraction for men in Europe and ‘clients’ in general.<sup>18</sup>

*“I was already with my Madam for more than a year. We were eight girls under her at that time; then my Madam began complaining that our ‘delivery’ was becoming too small, every one of us had one excuse or the other, ranging from the economy in Italy and how it affected our work to how clients prefer slimmer girls (...) She then put a call to a Nigerian juju priest who she asked to send some ‘favour packets’ down; we got the packages and followed the instructions for use which involved making some incisions in our*

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<sup>16</sup> See definition of juju

<sup>17</sup> Interview conducted with juju priest on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May, 2017

<sup>18</sup> See malleability of juju

*pubic region. Things changed tremendously in terms of patronage after that*"<sup>19</sup>.

This periodic reinforcement of the efficacy of the oaths reinforces the significance of 'silence' to the network as it aims to put the hustler in check if the question of default crosses her mind. It also speaks to the theory of "abstract phenomena" which this study utilizes, being that some items can be packaged in such a way that although they are visible, they represent a form of intangibility embedded in cultural materials that are not comprehensible to 'outsiders' of the practice. This makes it nearly impossible for others to penetrate such silent and subtle deceptions and at the same time keeps the hustler in the network's web.

## **Actors and Mechanisms of the Edo Sex trafficking network**

### ***The Leader; a Symbol of Success***

The *Madam* in the Edo transnational sex trafficking network is both a concept and a personality. The former conjures up images of a shrewd individual not approachable by hustlers as they prefer to remain anonymous. This category of madam is more flexible and have created a 'successful cliché' for themselves that paints a picture of affluence and integrity in the minds of the; thus the potential victims are convinced of the credibility of the 'story' of an awaiting position or job in Europe. To maintain this cliché, the *Madams* therefore rely on the existing networks and families in Benin City to oversee operations such as recruitment of potential hustlers which may otherwise dent the exquisite image of success these categories of *Madams* have tried to portray.

*"A neighbour of mine introduced me to a man that promised to take us to Italy. He arranged for our document to be processed and convinced us to take an oath. He said we were going to work for his sister, whom he made sure we spoke to at intervals. It was when I got to Italy that I realized that the man's sister who I had been speaking with on phone was my madam and she had employed her brother to organize the travelling process and oath taking, but all through my work and stay in Italy, I never got to meet her".*<sup>20</sup>

For other categories of *Madams*, directly handpicking the potential sex workers is a priority, this demands more often than not their presence in Benin City, the help of others might be required in the process; but they make sure to view the girls before the recruitment process is over. This could be done by having a friend or relative introduce her to the potential hustler; it becomes quite easy for women to approach these potential victims as they have "easier access to other women..."

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with a returnee, conducted on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, 2017

<sup>20</sup> Conducted this interview on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April, 2017

In other instances, there is a fluidity of roles between the *Madam* and her ‘boyfriend’. In this case, the *Madam* contracts her ‘boyfriend’ to take on the role of recruiting and managing the recruitment process. In other examples, the *Madam’s* boyfriend also serves as the network’s disciplinarian, that is, one who commands the obedience of hustlers under their leadership. These ‘boyfriends’ more often than not have major ties with other networks, *juju* priests, as well as cult groups that are highly feared.

A young respondent who had returned from Europe mentioned in pidgin that;

*“It was my Madam’s boyfriend who took me to Lagos after taking the oath in Benin. He raped me for a couple of days in a hotel while they were processing our papers. When the papers were finally ready, we then boarded a flight to Europe together”.*<sup>21</sup>

The *Madam* also has to maintain a working relationship with other members of her team. In what strikes as a symbiotic relationship, the *Madam* has to pay her workers including the *juju* priest and listen to advice as at when due. For *Madams* who were former victims of the system, the duties and advice of other members of her team are priceless and she does everything in her power to maintain a cordial relationship with her ‘employees’.<sup>22</sup> The explanation for this can also be hinged on the fact that the burden of overseeing such a ‘clandestine’ network may be quite tough to handle without the assistance of others, hence her reliance on their ‘counsel’.

### ***The Gameplayer of the Network***

Previous studies have identified the *trolley* as ‘specialist saddled with administrative duties of the sex trafficking network in Edo state’, these studies describe them as specific employees of the network. But the question remains that who are these individuals, what role they play in the network and how do they contribute to the sustenance of its activities? They may or may not be directly involved in the network but their operations are closely connected to provide supplementary services to the network, for instance, obtaining forged documents from local experts, knowledge of the best routes to take, connections with immigration officers and recruiting new victims. Where the *Madam* is on ground physically or not, the *trolley* is also recruited to perform the specific functions that fall into his area of expertise which range from:

Organisation of the recruitment process: here, the aim is to utilise informal networks at their disposal to their advantage in spreading the word that ‘openings’ exist to be filled by potential hustlers. It also entails securing the ‘preferred’ type of recruits.

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<sup>21</sup>Same interview as above

<sup>22</sup> See Carling (2005)

*“Our work involves so many things; you can’t call it a job. It’s like using the connections we have to get what we want, I have ‘eyes’ in all government agencies that help to provide travel documents that the girls would need, sometimes if we can’t get the one from the legal authority, we go for the fake travel documents that are very similar to the original. In fact, if you don’t take a good look at it you won’t differentiate it from the original document”.*<sup>23</sup>

Securing ‘documents’ for the recruits: this role requires the expertise of a *trolley* who has been able to negotiate the boundaries of multiple networks, especially the forgers and makers of fake travel documents or immigration officials who are ready to assist in securing documents for the recruits.

One of the respondents affirmed that:

*“A friend of mine introduced me to the man who was in charge of the processing of the trip. It was the trolley that helped me secure my international passport at a fee, he also was the one who took ‘us’ to the juju priest that conducted the oath. On the day we embarked on the trip, I learnt he was also the one that would take us through the desert. I later found out that he was a returnee from Libya who was very conversant with the ‘route’ we took”*<sup>24</sup>.

The *trolley* is characterized by the multiplicity of his duties. From documentation to recruitment, the *trolley* also acts in most cases as a ‘guideman’ especially if the journey to Europe is taken by road; their role here includes penetrating diverse networks of drivers, rebels and security agents along the Kano-Agadez-Dirkou-Tripoli route. For hustlers who are taken to Europe by air, the *trolley* acts as a ‘coachman’ that guides the potential hustler through the visa acquisition stage and what to expect of the process.

*Madams* who detach themselves from the whole process of recruitment and transfer of recruits also require the *trolley* to locate ‘powerful’ *juju* priests or priestesses who conducts the oath taking ritual for the recruit. This is a very important aspect of the whole process for the network as it would determine the extent of compliance of the recruits especially if the priest is famed to be powerful.

*“In our work, we have to carefully select the ‘juju’ priest to use. Some priests are better when it comes to preparing ‘protection’ charms which is also needed as not all the people we deliver across*

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<sup>23</sup> Interview conducted on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May, 2017 at a canteen in Ring Road, Benin City

<sup>24</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> May interview with a returnee at New Benin Market

*the desert are girls; some men who want to go to Europe for 'greener pastures' also seek our services. For this kind of job, we require a priest that has protection spell expertise; if I am to deliver girls to their madam who wants them to stay under 'control', I will get a priest who is renowned for his 'oath-taking' powers. In short, the make-up of my 'passengers' determine the kind of priest to use"<sup>25</sup>.*

### **Connection between Humans and the Deities**

The *juju* priest is an individual (male or female) regarded as a spiritual leader, 'Ohen'<sup>26</sup> or native doctor; the priests serve the purpose of surety to the network to ensure that the promise of the debt is secured. They also perform the functions of 'fortifying' the whole operation. The role of the '*juju*' priest in the sex work industry in Benin cannot be overemphasized. Statistics have it that about 95% of trafficked victims go through a process of oath taking usually done in a shrine and conducted by a '*juju*' priest. The priest is usually not a direct employee of the Madam. His employment is contractual, to oversee the ritual process and handle all spiritual matters concerning the operation. This dual nature of the priest often confuses some victims who generally believe in the efficacy of the protection service offered by the priest but also have to come to terms with the oaths taken. What ensues therefore is a psychological dependence on the *juju* to serve as protection, which in a sense becomes a chain reaction of dependence (Olufade 2018). Other duties of the priest include; conducting the oath taking ritual, serving as advisor, counsellor and mediator between the hustlers and their *Madams* in case of disputes. The priest or priestess also serves as a point of contact in cases of threatened default. Here, the *Madams* hold them to the promise of the oaths taken and ensures the priest reminds them of the promise of the oath through vivid nightmares, summoning, and so on.

One of the respondents confirmed that:

*"On getting to Italy after the long trip in the desert, I was shocked at the kind of work my madam expected me to engage in. I cried and cried for days and then sought advice from the other girls. They advised me to stay-on and work as I was already there; but I was not convinced and so did not follow them out to work. My madam soon ran out of patience and decided to call the 'juju' priest who conducted the oath-taking ritual back home in Benin. My madam was very angry and told the priest to speak with me and try to convince me. He spoke with me, reminding me of the oaths I had taken and*

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<sup>25</sup> Interview conducted on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May, 2017 at a canteen in Ring Road, Benin City

<sup>26</sup> Benin word for priest

*how his 'juju' can make me 'suffer' in life which he didn't want to happen. He asked if I was the only one in such predicament and told me to seek advice from the other girls on how to 'do' the work. He also mentioned that the 'juju' might decide not to affect me if I renege on the agreement of the oath but instead affect my mother''<sup>27</sup>.*

The *juju* priest serves as a constant reminder of the oaths taken and a tool used by the Madam to externalise the threat. The Madam is not the only one in control. The coercion is 'deterritorialised', that is, active in the two countries at the same time. It automatically increases the feeling of oppression the girls/women have once in Europe.

### ***Logistics Administrator in Europe***

This actor has managed to remain 'invisible' over the years but their activities have gone a long way in achieving the aims of the network. Often domiciled in the destination country in Europe, the *chaperone* is contracted to 'introduce' newly recruited hustlers to the 'business', through an orientation process. The new hustler is taught the rudiments of the game and how to avoid the police and other law enforcement agents when in the line of duty and also introduce them to techniques for attracting and pleasing customers.

*Chaperones* are also regarded as 'mini-Madams', women themselves, who are into the hustle business and are tasked with the responsibility of recruiting new hustlers to speed up the debt paying process. On arrival, these new recruits are taken under the wings of these *chaperones*, which have to make sure they work hard, remitting their income to her, to enable her pay up her own debt faster and without too much stress. In Chateau Rouge district of Paris, some *chaperone-hustler* situations were observed, whereby the *chaperones* were literally taking the newly recruited hustlers around the area, to get them acquainted with the neighbourhood and how the hustling 'market' operates.<sup>28</sup>

Other duties of the *chaperone* include; monitoring the hustlers in their place of business and giving feedback to the *Madam*, who relies on these to make important decisions, for example, hustlers who do not 'deliver' as expected could be sold off to a stricter *Madam* in a different city. The *chaperones* also take charge of the collection and record of income in the "record book"<sup>29</sup>. This is a highly sensitive part of the whole process as it requires a high level of trust for such duties to be delegated.

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<sup>27</sup> Returnee was interviewed at Ted-Okha road in Benin on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, 2017

<sup>28</sup> Observation carried out on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January

<sup>29</sup> A notebook kept by the madam or logistics administrator, meant to record the daily/weekly/monthly remittances delivered by the hustler to the madam/administrator



The activities of the different actors in the transnational sex work in Edo depicts a group of people working together to maximize profit, no matter the cost to others, especially victims. The economic justification of their action fuels them on, withering whatever circumstances they find themselves in, irrespective of the legality of their actions, while for religious groups involved one way or the other, validation comes from the ‘justification’ that one party is made to bear the cost of transportation and expenses to Europe and the other is to pay up the debts incurred (however exorbitant) while on the move. The economic benefits of the ‘endeavour’ to these spiritual leaders are downplayed and made to seem irrelevant. Other actors however highlight the economic ‘benefits’ of embarking on such journeys and amplify it to gain the desired attention of potential hustlers. These and many more keep the network running.

### ***Anti-trafficking actors: Crusaders or Enhancers?***

During the course of this research, interviews and observations were carried out in the area command office of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP henceforth), a state established body that handles cases of trafficking. During the re-integration process of some returnees, NAPTIP organises oath breaking rituals to ‘cut off ties between the victim and madam’, and to erase any effect of the oath taken in the past. These rituals involve contacting (and sometimes compelling) *juju* priests who conducted the ritual to nullify it and its effects. During the ritual, the returnee is released from the curse of the oath and is declared free from any *Madam* or network. The efficacy of such ritual is highly dependent on the psychological state of the returnee at the point of return, sometimes, relieving the experience of the oath taking ritual may help with closure, on the other hand, the trauma of the journey to Europe, the demands of the hustling job, and the threats, pressure from family, all combined may have been so complicated for the mind that a simple ritual may not be able to cure.

In addition, churches and other Christian places of worship (deliverance centres and spiritual homes) also conduct ‘deliverance’ sessions for returnees, with the aim of nullifying the effects of the oaths. In this case, the returnees undergo a period of fasting and praying exercises and ‘spiritual cleansing’ recommended by the church.

The resulting effects of these ‘oath breaking’ ritual and ‘deliverance’ session is quite contrary, to its intended outcome. It seeks to ‘free’ the returnee from the shackles of the oaths but also feeds the society that the oaths taken are efficacious enough that if not broken or ‘fasted and prayed’ on, it could actually come to manifestation. For members of the society, and the younger generation, the oaths become a formidable force that when taken, needs to be adhered to or broken for it to lose its efficacy. This stems from the rooted belief the society has for existing pre-colonial religious practices, this system is further strengthened by the prevailing socio-political atmosphere in the country in which a lot of public services are failing and recourse is paid to other ‘structures’ that have been able to withstand the test of time. People from such societies have a strong belief in any

practice tied to *juju* (which oath taking is a salient part), hence, defaulting on any oath taken is minimal; also the breaking of such oaths renders it null and void.

## **The Burden of Silence**

In engaging the different forms silence take, the study by Ganzevoort (2015) presents an excellent revelation of how the self relates with others through silence. In this regard, silence illuminates the complexities of presence and absence, substance and emptiness, speech and gestures. It expands the dimensions of meaning to embody other forms of non-verbal communication which broadens the discourse on identity and identity formation. Ganzevoort's study reads silence as a socially constructed phenomenon and a way of expressing the failures of speech in given contexts.

Centrality is paid to the relationship between the *Madam* and the hustlers in the sex trafficking network in Edo State and silence; the hustler has to maintain a level of silence, which renders her powerless to the network but ensures its smooth running, while the *Madam* is empowered by the silence of her hustlers. Another angle to this renders agency to the women/girl who are silent about objects/items they carry along the journey. Their silence at this point, serves to their advantage as those materials laced with *juju* is meant to serve the purpose of protection or profitability in the 'business.

Members of the society also contribute to the 'silent' narrative; this is evident in a lot of instances. When a hustler successfully crosses over to her European destination, rejoicing and jubilation is heard in her household (for families that are aware). Also, former hustlers-turned-*Madams*, who return with affluence, are celebrated by the society and become a force in the community recently, a former madam returned to Benin to run for political office before she was convicted in the UK.<sup>30</sup> On the contrary, for returnees – this is the huge majority – who had returned whether voluntary or deported, with little or nothing to show for their European experience, the society treats them with a deafening silence laced with stigma and disdain.

The communities of Nigerians in European cities also feed the narrative of silence by keeping default stories minimal. Here, the motive is to spread the notion that the oaths taken back home is effective enough to deter hustlers from defaulting.

The harrowing experience on the Mediterranean route is also deliberately 'hushed', this is because if a hustler becomes 'successful' the society becomes more interested in her 'success' than the story of how she came about the 'success', while for hustlers who are still struggling or who return without 'becoming', no one pays attention enough to listen to their travails. Hence, more often than not, the life-threatening journey through the desert to Europe is left out of the narrative.

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<sup>30</sup> BBC news of 4<sup>th</sup> July, 2018, Josephine Iyamu jailed for sex trafficking

*“I regretted my decision to ever go to Italy and put myself through this torture of a journey. I was beaten, locked up in a cage, unable to move any part of my body. I was also beaten with a hose and dealt with severally by ‘Arabus’ in Libya and maimed at some point. At the point of crossing the Mediterranean, I had already resigned myself to fate”.*<sup>31</sup>

The network also ensures that the hustler is led to believe that arriving in Europe is a privilege, so in this case, whatever price/pain she has to undergo to get to that destination is worth it. On arrival therefore, emphasis is placed on making the best of living which means working hard instead of dwelling on the past.

### **Between the Mirage of a Superior Life and the Quest for a Place of Utopia**

The understanding that the diaspora is a place of abundance is deeply engrained in the human mind. Perhaps a better illustration of these finds itself in the definition of diaspora. For this study, I shall unpack the concept by employing Susan Suleiman’s ‘a state of being away from home’. Here, the diaspora can be associated with the idea of movement from the homeland, in search of greener pastures or a place to go and make a living. The Edo society presents an excellent example of this definition of diaspora and the imaginations surrounding its existence. These imaginations are now used as bait to lure unsuspecting young women, while other institutions, for instance, the family have consciously or indirectly fallen prey to their construction.

The family plays a major role in the construction of migration imaginaries, whether directly or indirectly. It may be expressed as a subtle effort to encourage the young woman to view the idea of ‘hustling’ as a means of attaining success or an aggressive drive to see that there is a family representative in Europe because of subtle pressure emanating from the society, family, peer groups and friends.

*“My cousin, who had travelled abroad for only two years, began sending money back home to her mother who started the construction of a building on her behalf. When my mother confirmed this, she wanted me to go and join my cousin and urged me to keep in touch with her.”*<sup>32</sup>

Here, the stay-at-home cousin was pressurised into embarking on the journey as a result of the ‘successful exploits’ of her ‘diaspora’ cousin. The interesting fact in this case is not the nature or demand of the job, rather, the desire of the family - translated on the hustler - to catch up with their

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<sup>31</sup> Interview conducted on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, 2017 in Ted area of Benin City

<sup>32</sup> Interview conducted with a former “hustler” on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2018, in Paris.

aspirations as painted by the cousin in diaspora. In addition to this, the reliance on the young women/girl, especially firstborn girls to assume the position of breadwinners and cater for the needs of the family puts the said girls under pressure to deliver, which in turn makes them vulnerable to traffickers and the promise of a better life in Europe.

*“I am the first-born girl of my mother, she was actually aware of my trip. I had to take the decision to leave home for Europe. The poverty in my family was so harsh that everyone looked up to me to do something...”*<sup>33</sup>

For young girls like the above, the family looks up to them to proffer solution to the problem of hunger and poverty. This underscores the patriarchal nature of such societies whereby women are made to do all the work and also fend for the family, the connection between trafficking and gender violence and concludes that the victims become ‘chattels of their families’<sup>34</sup> in their bid to put their families first and try to please them. She argues that the trafficking process is sustained not only for its economic potential but also to enforce obedience of young female members of the families who should not be free to do whatsoever they want but subject themselves to the authority of the male heads of the households. Here, the girls in the families are considered inferior and subjected to unequal treatment in comparison to male children. This breeds situation of gender violence.

### **Remittances as Sustenance Discourse**

An outstanding argument on the issue of remittance, makes a case for ‘hustlers’ who send money home and in the process, create the illusion that Europe is a space flowing with milk and honey. Remittances<sup>35</sup> to families, friends and peers should indeed be seen as an essential factor of the trade’s sustenance. The society stands a great chance to always benefit from members domiciled abroad, who, in one way or the other, strives to make ends meet. When a young girl trafficked to Europe, begins hustling and manages to send money home as soon as possible, the family starts to enjoy remittances from her and become the envy of the neighbours. From this point, the accessibility of this kind of engagement where such ‘success’ is gained in record time becomes a priority for peers and friends, as they try all means possible to penetrate the ‘abundance’ in Europe. The implication of this trend cuts across the society in general, from the level of the traffickers who need to spin these ‘success’ stories as a means of attracting new recruits, to the family who desire a better life and oath taking temples that make a great deal of money out of such ventures. Eventually, members of the community become caught up in the whole process and decide not to let go as a result of its benefits.

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<sup>33</sup> Idem.

<sup>34</sup> See Attah (2013)

<sup>35</sup> See Odorige (2014)

A thorough understanding of the dynamics of the Benin society is needed to fully comprehend the ramifications of remittances. Problematizing the resignation to the job therefore becomes an interesting angle to investigate; for some hustlers although, brutally forced into following this line of work, the decision to remain and continue working with the madam rests solely on the ‘young’ newly recruited. What therefore informs their decisions to continue in the line of work? A respondent who had spent four years in Italy, touring a lot of countries while on the job explained that:

*“For me, I was introduced to this line when I was barely fifteen years old. In fact I was soliciting for funds for my final exams in secondary school when a neighbour friend of my paternal uncle who I lived with told me she was going to help me out. I never realized that the ‘help’ meant coming to Italy to ‘work’ like this for money, however, I coped. I was able to cope because of the ‘freedom’ that came with this place, so far I paid my Madam whatever I earned and avoid the police while on duty, my freedom knows no bounds, in fact, I have been able to travel the world through this lifestyle and I believe if I had remained in Edo, my life would not have been this interesting<sup>36</sup>.”*

This invites critical reflection on the reason for continuance from the perspective of hustlers’s ‘freedom’ in this case can be examined literally or metaphorically. From a literal point of view, women can gain their freedom after they have paid their debt to the *Madam* and then have the right to move around without necessarily being answerable to anyone but ironically, the sense of freedom can also be experienced while still enslaved to the network. Another angle however suggests financial liberty, one that guarantees her living in comfort and some form of affluence compared with her humble “beginnings”<sup>37</sup>. This particular ‘freedom’ plays a major role and determines and informs her decision to stay. For other hustlers, the construction of Europe as a place of Utopia goes a long way to make them believe that their dreams can only be achieved there. The sense of ‘freedom’ a hustler feels while in Europe may be an indication of the circumstances, she was faced with back home in Edo State, for some girls, their deeply oppressive background had relegated them to the lowest rungs in the society, without access to basic needs of their age, for instance, education or skills acquisition. For others, the pressure to deliver also has its impact, that they constantly look for ways to free themselves of it. In other instances, this ‘freedom’ they feel may be a result of the ‘rosy’ relationship they had with their *Madams* (sometimes termed mother-daughter sort of relationship). Finally, girls/women who got to Europe via the desert-

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<sup>36</sup> Interview conducted on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July at a tailoring shop close to Ted junction in Benin City

<sup>37</sup> See Kienast et al. (2014)

Mediterranean route find the conditions of work pleasurable compared to what they had experienced.<sup>38</sup>

*“I had a neighbour who had gone to Italy very wretched and in a space of years had come back to build a gigantic edifice for her parents in Benin. Another cousin of mine whose mother was heavily in debt was able to set up a very lucrative business for her mum when she went to Europe. So, when I heard of the ‘connection’, I was determined to go through with the process, so far it did not include the loss of my life... At some point, I really wanted to return, and then I remembered that I was not going to come back to anything.”<sup>39</sup>*

For this returnee, the decision to stay back was borne out of the ‘fear’ of living in the dystopian conditions in Benin. For her, the thought of returning to her poor economic state of affairs was the motivating factor, implying that the harsh economic realities in the current state of affairs back home did not avail her the opportunity to make ‘her dreams’ come true invariably, leading to her decision not to come back despite the nature of the job. Also, the fact that she might have pictured the European space as one of affluence evidenced by stories of ‘successful’ returnees who had remitted funds back home to effect development may have influenced her decision to stay on in order to make such money for herself and of course her family.

Members of the network see the hustling as a means of survival. The zonal commander of NAPTIP Benin command, in an interview, stated that:

*“A lot of cases I have handled, the parents of returnee sex workers are aware of the intention to travel and encourage their wards to embark on the journey. One particular case struck me because the mother of the sex worker who came to report to us was at first in the whole business, but after years and years of wanting for returns of her daughter who was in Europe and nothing was forthcoming, she decided to report the issue to us, claiming that she had not spoken to her daughter for two years and she was scared the worst might have happened”.<sup>40</sup>*

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<sup>38</sup> The fact that all the interviewees had returned back to Nigeria before sharing their experiences makes a case for the place of memory in any narrative. Here, the detachment from the actual process gives them some time to think about their experience in Europe compared to their present circumstance and present it in a more rosy way than it actually was.

<sup>39</sup> Interview conducted on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July at a tailoring shop close to Ted junction in Benin City

<sup>40</sup> Interview conducted on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July at a tailoring shop close to Ted junction in Benin City

## Conclusion

Oath taking plays a major role in the human trafficking network in Edo State. It begins from the moment the potential hustler agrees to the idea of travelling to Europe with the network and moves significantly with them throughout the period of sojourn until they are relieved of their duty or deported back. The oaths may need to be reinforced in some cases to renew its efficacy, but the result is that, the network relies on the oaths and the transnational silence it breeds to ensure the hustlers' compliance to the status quo.

The culture of different modes of moving silences is a major factor that complements the oaths taken and ultimately leads to the success of the network so far. The culture of 'transnationalism of silence' operated by the network is as effective as the oaths taken in the sustenance of the sex work industry in Edo State. This is why these silences are encouraged by the network and they form part of the wordings of the oaths. An abstract quality, such as the oaths taken in temples back in Benin, develops into different forms of silences upon the mobility of those who embody it. It is powerful enough to keep them in control even when things are not going according to what was envisaged. These silences are in different forms and begin from the point of recruitment, and then even when faced with deportation, it still moves along with the back home and translates into a challenge for anti-trafficking agents to prosecute members of the network. The realization that the efficacy of the oaths is transferred to the level of silence they maintain when faced with deportation or other grave consequences makes the 'transnationalism of silence' a major priority in its operations.

The oath taking ritual examined highlighted different aspects of the ritual and their significance. From the collection and packaging of items bearing the names of the individual potential hustler, to the slaughtering of animals for the ritual and the wordings of the oaths taken, every part of it gives the network the boldness to operate and demand compliance. The temples where the rituals are performed also reinforce feelings of fear in the sex workers' subconscious which stayed with them wherever they may go.

A combination of the oaths taken, silences in the network and the general lifestyle lived in Europe as hustlers is reducing the risk of default in the operations of Edo transnational sex trafficking ring. From the orientation exercise of newly arrived hustlers to stories being told and retold in the network, the fear of running away and its eventual consequences is passed on to new recruits. Other techniques employed to distract hustlers from default also include the use of physical threats, control through the oaths taken and summoning (which leads to intimidation of family members in Benin) by oath taking temples, which if not responded to appropriately, is believed to lead to death of the hustler or that of a loved one.

The sustenance of the transnational sex trafficking industry lies in a lot of factors that remotely involves the economic reality in the state, rather it confirms the evolving culture of acceptance of hustling as a means of attaining quick 'success' because of the economic gains and status it accords.

Finally, recent happenings in Edo state and Europe has led to a major declaration given by the Oba of Benin. The declaration in summary renders any oath taken for sexual exploitation purpose, null and void. The implication of the Oba's pronouncement may be read from diverse viewpoints; would it signal the replacement of spiritual threat by physical violence to elicit compliance? Or would the network begin to recruit from other regions as the Oba's declaration only covers Edo indigenes? If the pronouncement of the Oba is respected, *Madams* and *juju* Priests might lose their power over the girls, and their capacity to maintain them in fear. But the marginalisation of people from a position of power creates an avenue for possibilities that may involve innovation which hitherto were assumed near impossible (Musila, 2018). The complexity of the trafficking process, the diversity of actors and dynamics at stakes, their high ability to adapt and the financial impact of this business on the Edo society make the whole system incredibly strong and powerful.



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