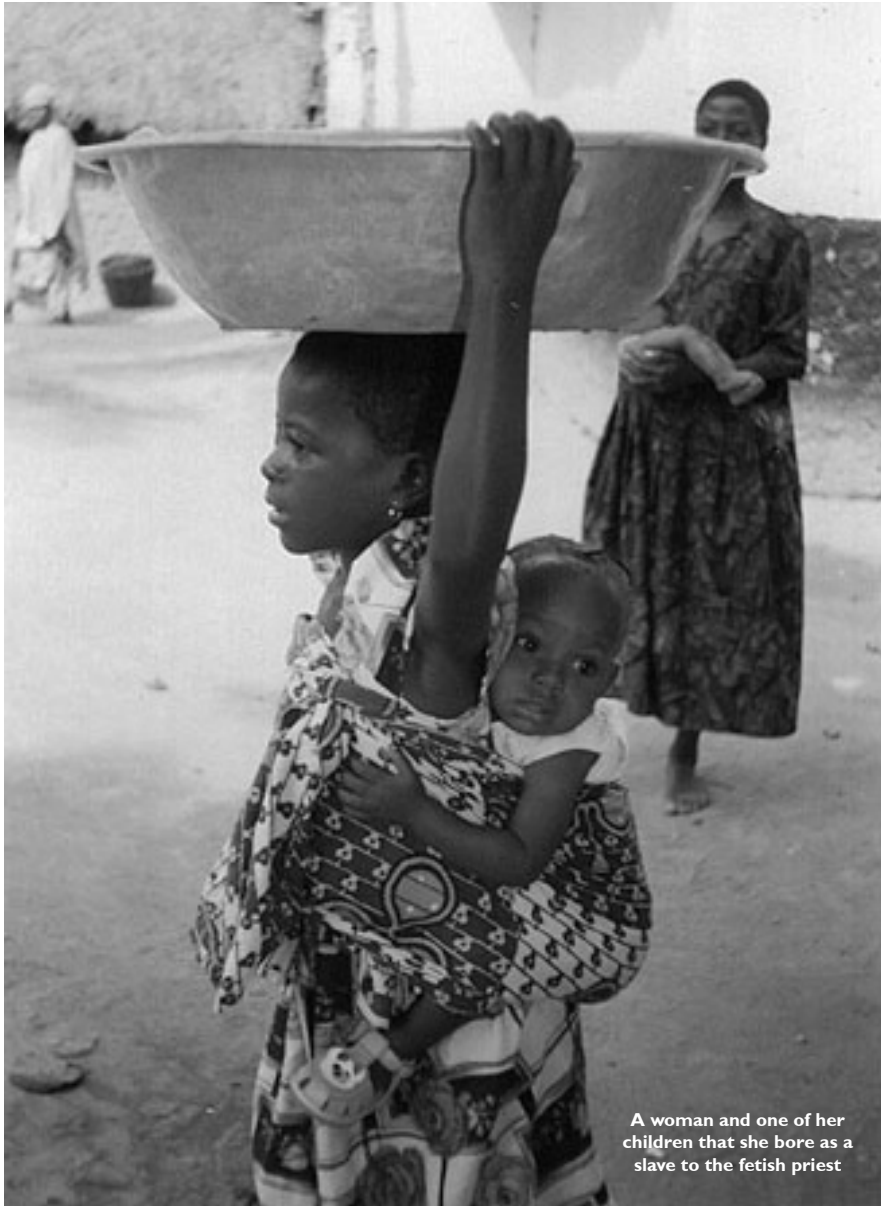


Atsufe Attise is nine years old. She has just been set free, literally. In Ghana, Western Africa, she has been held captive and sexually abused by a group of fetish priests. This custom has a long history but has gained very little international attention. Reverend Walter Pimpong travelled to Australia last year hoping to change that. He spoke to
TIMOTHY AYLIFFE.



A woman and one of her children that she bore as a slave to the fetish priest

Sex Slaves to the Gods

In 1990 the Ghana director of International Needs, Reverend Walter Pimpong, embarked on a crusade to free more than 5,500 young girls and women enslaved to fetish priests in more than 60 shrines throughout his country.

Superstitious tribal traditions have forced these women into a life of sexual depravity, frequent beatings and hard labour at the hands of their masters for centuries. These women are known as 'Trokosi' slaves, which

means wife or slave of the Gods.

A decade has past, and Reverend Pimpong and his team have overseen the release of more than half of these women and children, with almost 900 freed in early August this year. He says that they must be patient in their plight to free the 'Trokosi' girls, for it's not just a matter of walking in and freeing those held in bondage - it is a rehabilitation process.

A former Trokosi girl recounts her experiences in the Shrine before

being released by Reverend Pimpong and the work of International Needs. "The Priest was a very old man, and because I refused him sex, I was tied to the bed and beaten by four other men until I had bruises all over my body. I was beaten throughout the whole night. When I think of that day, I feel like crying," she says. Eventually she gave in to the priest's advances in order to protect the innocence of the younger slaves.

Hundreds of years ago, at the ►



height of the slave trade, the Volta River in Ghana was used as the main conduit for the transportation of Black slaves to the Americas. Over a century has passed since this practice was abolished, and still a small group of anti-slavery activists fight for the freedom of thousands of young girls and women enslaved in rural Ghana.

Villages in the Southern portion of the Volta have been saturated with a fear of the 'Demon Gods,' due to the superstitious tribal beliefs of the 'Awe,' (pronounced ay-vay.) Thousands of young virgins are being forced into a life of sexual servitude and physical bondage to atone for the sins of their male ancestors.

Petty theft, adultery, and more serious cases of murder result, not in the punishment of the perpetrator, but an offering of a female relative to a life of slavery. This is an endless process where girls continue to pay for the same sins over and over again. If they manage to escape from the fetish priests, Reverend Pimpong says, their families will bring them straight back in fear of the demon gods.

"There is a stigma, and they don't want to change," Reverend Pimpong says. If they try to escape, families "see the girls as turning their backs on them because they were sent in there to atone for the offences of their entire family in the community. So if they decide not to stay in the shrine, it literally means that they don't want to help their family, that they are disrespecting them."

Reverend Pimpong estimates

there to be still more than 2500 slaves in Ghana seeking freedom. He says that freeing the women has been a delicate and lengthy process, as it was not just a matter of moving in and telling the people that their religion was wrong.

"For any change to take place I thought that it should not be a forced change. I established a relationship with a particular tribe," Reverend Pimpong explains of his initial interactions with the villages.

"The Priests had to trust us, so that they did not feel threatened by virtue of what we were doing. So we (directed) our project in a way that it would benefit them. It has actually taken us 10 years to get where we are. The initial project was a voca-

Thousands of young virgins are being forced into a life of sexual servitude and physical bondage to atone for the sins of their male ancestors.

tional training school that was funded by International Needs," he says.

Reverend Pimpong maintains the school is important in the rehabilitation process. In seeking to educate the slaves, the women are also taught methods of mat weaving, farming, pottery and other forms of production serving to prepare them for an emancipated life.

Even though the number of slaves in Ghana has halved in recent years, there remain more than 30,000 women and children enslaved in similar shrines throughout West African

nations. In Togo, Benin and Nigeria, girls enter the Shrine from as young as three years of age, where it is not long before they are beaten, raped, and forced to bear children when old enough, yet still children themselves.

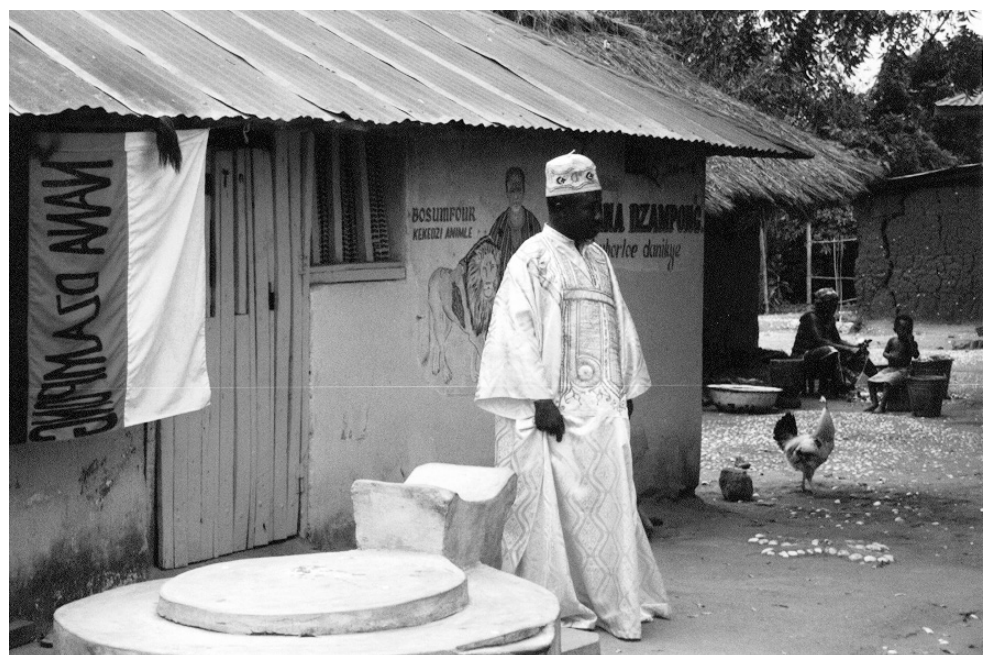
Each Trokosi girl has an average of four offspring fathered by the fetish priests in Ghana. The girls must raise their children without the support of the priests while still slaves. On their release from the shrine, the 'Trokosi' women are forced into poverty, and to raise their children alone.

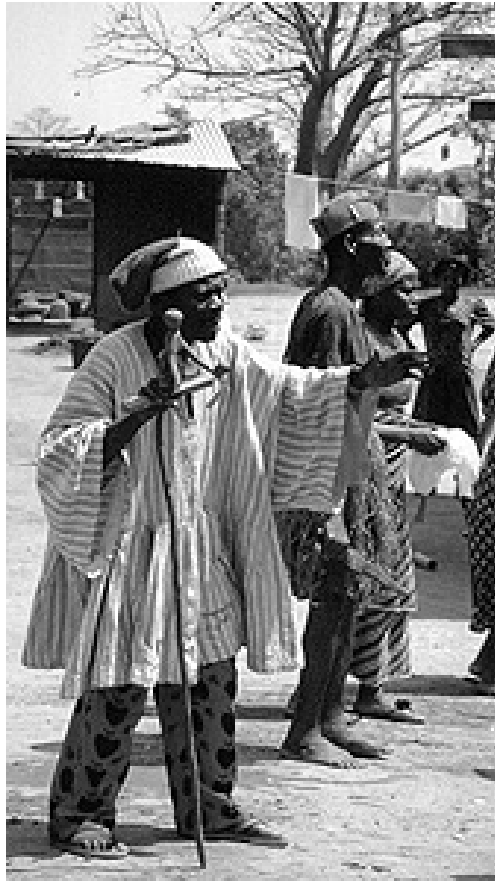
The rehabilitation of former slaves saw the introduction of the 'micro-credit scheme,' similar to the 'Grameen Bank' (meaning 'village bank') begun by Muhammad Yunus in Bangladesh in 1983. This involved

"Small amounts of money being disbanded to the needy people on the ground that they pay back," Reverend Pimpong explains.

The money lent to the liberated slaves is usually only a few dollars, and because of this, banks were not interested. The initial grant to begin this program was provided by the New Zealand government, with more than \$72,000 in support also coming from Australia.

International Needs is a Christian organisation working to aid minorities in need all over the world. Despite its



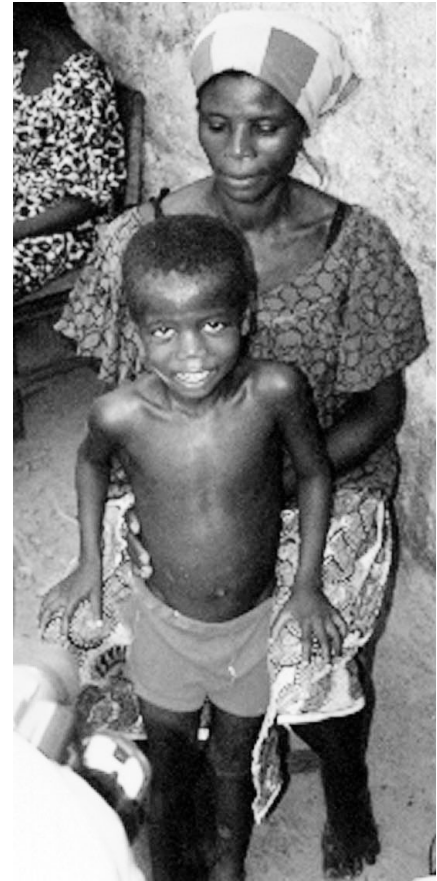


Pictured left: Rev Walter Pimpong.

Below: Bosem - is a fetish priest who agreed to release his slaves.

Right: A funeral ceremony for a man who committed his village and shrines to releasing the slave women in response to the work of Walter Pimpong.

Far right: A woman and one of her children that she bore as a slave to the fetish priest.



religious motivations, Reverend Pimpong attests that International Needs' intentions in Ghana are not imperial, he claims that they're primarily concerned with the stamping out of a primitive and inhuman practice.

"I have to be careful in packaging," he says. "Christianity is definitely my motivation for doing what I am doing, but when we release (the girls) from the shrines, if some of them don't want to be Christians, we would not force them to be."

The organisation's work in Ghana was honoured at the 11th Annual Reebok Human Rights Awards held at Columbia University, New York City, in March 1999. Reverend Pimpong accompanied former 'Trokosi' girl, Julie Dogbadzi, to the ceremony where she was presented with a cheque for \$25,000 US on behalf of all the liberated slaves in her country.

Work to end this primitive practice has not come without considerable sacrifice and strain on the personal life of Ghana's International Needs director. Reverend Pimpong and his family are under constant threat of physical and spiritual attack, where masses of 'cult' supporters and practitioners continue to band together and pray against them by name.

Earlier this year, a united front claiming to represent traditional Afri-

can 'religion' began a campaign seeking to misinform Ghanaians about the work of International Needs in the form of a series of articles published by daily newspapers - the organisation chose not to respond to the lies.

Gross overspending, mismanagement and corruption within the Ghanaian government prior to 1982, has driven a once prosperous country into a state of poverty. The government's failure to support the work of

Freeing the women has been a delicate and lengthy process, as it was not just a matter of moving in and telling the people that their religion was wrong.

International Needs comes as no surprise to Amnesty International refugee case-worker John Clugston, who says that government intervention in such cases is rare, and often too late.

"Western Governments allowed the genocide in the Great Lakes region without taking any action until it was too late in Rwanda and Burundi," he says.

Clugston maintains that slavery is still an international issue, long ignored. "I think Africa is the biggest problem there," he says. "I know in places like the Sudan some non-government organisations have been involved in purchasing slaves in order to free them."

This is, in part, what Reverend Pimpong has been forced to do in many cases. He says that in most instances, a gift of a 'cow' often accompanied by a small amount of money is needed to compensate the priests' loss when a slave is freed. He says that, while International Needs does not put a price on slavery, the average cost of a 'Trokosi' girls freedom is about \$250.

Last year, Reverend Pimpong com-

pleted a tour of Australia and New Zealand in an attempt to raise awareness for the existence of slavery in Ghana, and to accumulate more support for the 'Trokosi' girls' freedom.

Atsufe Attise has just been released from the Tsaduma shrine and a life of physical bondage. She now goes to an International Needs school in Ghana and, in the future, she would like to be a teacher.

Atsufe is nine years old, and her life has just begun. ■

Timothy Ayliffe is a freelance journalist. This article was first published in the Reportage Online.