

The Role of *Juju* Rituals in Human Trafficking of Nigerians: A Tool of Enslavement, But Also Escape

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Abstract

In 2018, the *Oba* (King) of Benin city in Edo state (Nigeria), a spiritual and traditional leader with significant authority, made a public, spiritual declaration on Nigerian human traffickers (especially those originating from Edo state) and proclaimed that victims of trafficking who were bound by oaths taken during the *juju* rituals were free. The Nigerian trafficking network relies mainly on *juju* as a control mechanism to keep the victims bound and subservient to them. Based on repeated in-depth interviews with young Nigerian women and teenager teenage victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation, this article discusses how *juju* is used by the trafficking networks to keep their victims exploited, enslaved and indebted. Concurrently, the participants' narratives also illustrate the important impact of the declaration of the *Oba* for some women and teenagers in their process to leave the trafficking networks.

Keywords

Juju, Nigeria, *Oba* of Benin, trafficking, sexual exploitation

Introduction

On March 9, 2018, *Oba Ewuare II*, King of the Benin Kingdom, who is considered both a traditional and spiritual leader in Edo state, Nigeria, made an unprecedented public declaration against Nigerian human traffickers (Ebegbulem, 2018; Ibileke, 2018; Imonikhe, 2019).

A traditional leader is defined as a person who, by virtue of his ancestry, occupies the throne or stool of an area and who has been appointed to it in accordance with the customs and tradition of the area and has traditional authority over the people of that area or any other persons appointed by instrument and order of the government to exercise traditional authority over an area or a tribe. Their primary function is to regulate and control relationship and social behaviour within a traditional community. They are in essence people oriented and not service oriented as local government structures. The authority of a traditional leader is derived from tradition and is exercised in consultation with senior advisers without being regulated by legislation. A traditional leader is a leader by birth (Mthandeni, 2002).

Several scholars (e.g., Achebe, 2004; Ikeora, 2016; Nagle & Owasanoye, 2016) have shown that before embarking on the journey abroad, traffickers take their victims to shrines where they undertake oaths stating that that they

will pay back the amount of money demanded by the traffickers for the journey, and vow that they will never disclose the identity or locations of their traffickers. Alongside his chiefs, native doctors and the priests of the various deities that are worshiped in Edo state, the *Oba* of Benin cursed human traffickers, collaborating sorcerers and herbalists, and nullified the curses that traffickers had placed on their victims (Ebegbulem, 2018; Ibileke, 2018; Lawal, 2019) through the following (translated) words:

You native doctors whose business is to subject people to the oath of secrecies and encouraging this evil act on the land, you have to repent, stop doing it. This is not a joking matter and if you do not repent, you have to wait for the repercussion ... The palace is not against those practicing the act of native doctors but those who use it to perpetrate evil in the land through aiding and abetting human trafficking in the state... We want to use this medium to tell those

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who are under any oaths of secrecies that they are now free. We revoke the oath today... I want to use this medium to tell you that the act of using charms to aid trafficking, the palace seriously frowns at it... We want us to join hands together to fight against human trafficking in the land (Ibileke, 2018).

The monarch, who formerly was the Nigerian ambassador to Italy, has been proactive in tackling human trafficking, and made the declaration as part of his commitment to the Director-General of Nigeria's National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) in support of their work in combating human trafficking (National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons [NAPTIP], 2018). Since most Nigerian victims of trafficking in Europe originate from Edo state (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2019; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2019; Okojie et al., 2003), the *Oba's* declaration was very strategic and relevant.

This paper will address the use of *juju* rituals (discussed in detail further on) and the oath-taking process as part of human trafficking of Nigerians by exploring the nature of the rituals and how the trafficking networks use it as a tool of control. It will explore how the participants of this study, who are young, Nigerian, female victims of human trafficking living in Italy, experienced the rituals before embarking on the journey to Italy. Finally, we will discuss how the women found out about the *Oba's* declaration, interpreted the declaration and whether this formed the basis for certain decisions or actions, including leaving the trafficking networks. These findings might help to better understand whether local initiatives and traditional or religious leaders could play a more prominent role in the fight against human trafficking.

Trafficking of Nigerians

Human trafficking, also referred to as "modern day slavery," is one of the largest and fastest growing criminal trades in the world, generating over \$150 billion annually (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2017). Human trafficking is defined in the UN General Assembly's Palermo Protocol (2000, p. 2) as:

- (a) "Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of sexual exploitation,

- forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs;
- (b) The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used;
- (c) The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered "trafficking in persons" even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article;
- (d) "Child" shall mean any person under 18 years of age.

Between 2017 and 2018, Nigerians ranked the highest among nationals of non-EU member states who were trafficked into the EU (European Commission, 2020). The prevalence of human trafficking for sexual exploitation in Nigeria is thus felt locally, and also internationally. In 2016, IOM estimated that 80% of the Nigerian women and girls that arrived in Italy by sea, were most likely victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation in Italy and other European Union countries (IOM, 2017). Most identified victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation originating from Nigeria, are female (CLEEN Foundation and Pathfinders Justice Initiative, 2020). Although victims also originate from other states such as Lagos, Ogun, Delta, and Cross-River (European Asylum Support Office [EASO], 2015), Edo State, in Southern Nigeria, has been labeled as the "*most endemic source of human trafficking in Nigeria with up to 80% of Nigerian victims of sex trafficking in Italy originating from there*" (Brimah, 2013, p. 1).

These women and girls undertake dangerous journeys to get to Europe from Nigeria (see Figure 1 below) and many die *en route* (The Migrant Project, 2021). They travel overland from Nigeria to Niger, then through the Sahara Desert into Libya. According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2018), in Libya they

are systematically held captive in abusive conditions, including starvation, severe beatings, burning with hot metals, electrocution, and sexual abuses of women and girls, with the aim of extorting money from their families through a complex system of money transfers, extending to a number of countries. They are frequently sold from one criminal gang to another and required to pay ransoms multiple times before being set free or taken to coastal areas to await the Mediterranean Sea crossing. The overwhelming majority of women and older teenage girls interviewed ... reported being gang raped by smugglers or traffickers or witnessing others being taken out of collective accommodations to be abused. (pp. 5–6).

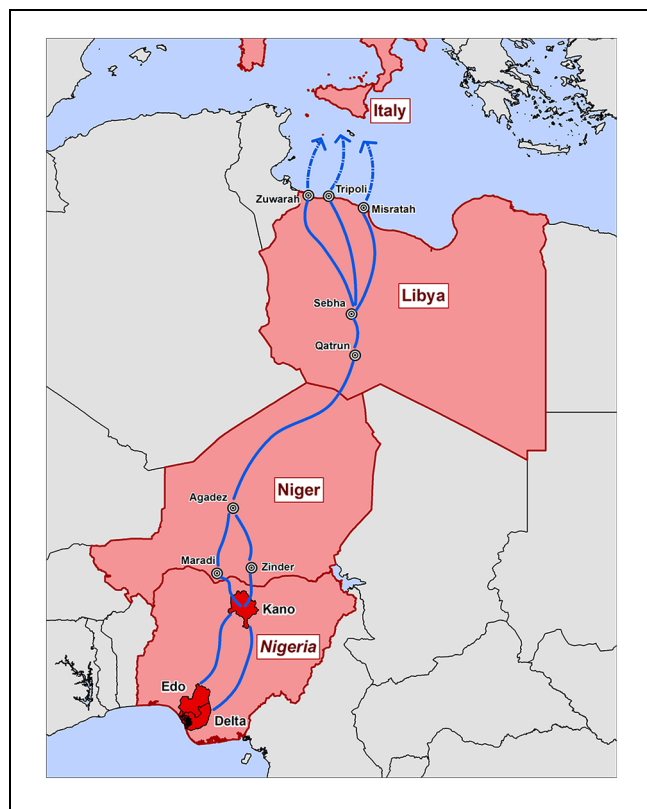


Figure 1. Nigeria to Italy: central Mediterranean route(s)

These women and girls experience different forms of physical and sexual violence during their migration trajectories (Adeyinka et al., 2023a; IOM, 2017; Orsini et al., 2022). Upon arrival in Italy or another European country, they live with and work for a “madam” who controls their lives and puts them to work on the streets where they solicit clients (Suuntaus Project, 2015) or, in other cases, they are locked in private homes and forced to attend to clients there. They are often moved from one location to the other to avoid and/or escape police checks, and to hinder them from building and/or developing close relationships with social workers and clients (Save the Children, 2017).

While speaking of *juju* and human trafficking of Nigerian women and girls, the key role of “madams” must be emphasized. In this phenomenon, a “madam” is a woman who was formerly trafficked but stayed with the trafficking network (Iacono, 2014). Studies on the role of madams in human trafficking of Nigerians (Olaniyi, 2003; Siegel, 2007; Siegel & de Blank, 2010) shows the key role that madams play in the trafficking of Nigerian girls and women for sexual exploitation. Madams “buy girls who become their slaves” (Mancuso, 2014, p. 3), they are usually at the top of the trafficking hierarchy, and they control the girls and women working for them (Carling, 2006). Madams organize victims’

recruitment, they collude with government officials and smugglers to secure passage for victims, and they ensure that the victims work in prostitution after arrival in the destination country (Carling, 2005). They don’t do this on their own, but collaborate with extensive criminal networks (Siegel & de Blank, 2010).

Several factors have been identified that enable the human trafficking phenomenon to survive and thrive, such as poverty (Adepelumi, 2015), insufficient or lack of access to education, inequality (Akor, 2011), the devaluation of girls as economic burdens (Reid, 2010), family involvement in trafficking (Adeyinka et al., 2023b), neglect by family members, and weak legal systems (Davidson, 2005; Peters, 2013), including corrupt politicians and law enforcement officers (Ovuoire, 2014). Yet, in the case of Nigeria, one of the key elements employed by the Nigerian human trafficking rings to keep the women bound and subservient to them is *juju* and the use of *juju* rituals, which we will expand on in the next section.

Additionally, studies also identified several factors that enable people to leave trafficking, including spirituality, which provides a sense of hope and the motivation to escape (Hickle, 2017), social support (Wilson & Nochajski, 2016), social awareness programs on trafficking (Crawford & Kaufman, 2008), and access to economic empowerment programs for victims (Ferrari, 2016). Traffickers in turn use different strategies to control their victims, including, but not limited to, isolating, humiliating, and assaulting victims (Baldwin et al., 2015), and issuing or carrying out threats of violence against the victims and their family members (Kim, 2007).

Juju

Juju, often referred to as black magic, sorcery, *ojuju* or even incorrectly as voodoo, is a ritual that is practiced in many West African countries and involves the conjuration of spirits and deities to get involved in the affairs of man—for good or for evil, hence, the terms “good *juju*” and “bad *juju*” and the observation that *juju* may be used for both negative and positive purposes (Cbanga, 2009). Tembo (2016, p. 1) describes *juju* as “one of the most abused, misused, and misconstrued concepts by Europeans,” but importantly notes that “amongst its many uses is as a sanction for social behavior.” It involves the invoking of deities and/or spirits to grant one’s request, calling upon ancestral gods, such as Ayelala—the punisher of crimes and revealer of secrets, Sango—the god of thunder or Ogun—the god of iron, to intervene in the affairs of man (Babalawo Orisha, 2021; Cbanga, 2009). For example, while some use *juju* for protection against evil spirits, to reveal a traitor or to punish someone who has done evil or wrong, others

believe that it will bring them good fortune in life or business, so they may wear certain charms and amulets which they procure from the native doctors also referred to as *juju* doctors or sorcerers, for that purpose. It is believed that once someone's personal items are given to the *juju* doctors, the person's item which has their aura on it can then be manipulated for good or for evil, highlighting the crucial element of symbolism in *juju* (Cbanga, 2009; Nagle & Owasanoye, 2016).

So, while a person may give their clothes to the *juju* doctor to fortify them with good luck, they may also give the shoes of their enemy to the *juju* doctor to curse that person. The *juju* in itself is thus not good or bad: its use, however, can be good or bad; and unlike voodoo, which is a religion, *juju* is a practice/ritual.

In the case of Nigerian women who are trafficked, the *juju* ritual that is carried out by traffickers to bind the victims to them should then be referred to as "bad *juju*." These oaths are taken by the women before embarking on the journey before deities such as *Ayelala*, a deified deity who is invoked to ratify an oath between two parties and believed to cause diseases or calamity to befall whoever breaks the oath (Ojo, 2014; Oviasuyi et al., 2011). Therefore, before the commencement of the journey to a European country, the women are taken to the shrine of a *juju* doctor/ritualist who performs a *juju* rite/oath-taking ritual on them (Adeyinka et al., 2021; van der Watt & Kruger, 2017). The ritualist's job is to ensure that the women vow (1) to never reveal the identity of the person taking them to Europe; (2) that they will repay the cost of the trip as demanded from them; and (3) that if they breach the terms of the vow, they would lose their sanity and wander the streets mad or that the spirits would inflict their families with evil (Achebe, 2004; Aghatise, 2005; Baarda, 2016; Elabor-Idemudia, 2003; Ikeora, 2016).

The oath-taking process is often scary as the women are made to eat things like the raw heart of a chicken or other unknown items, as part of the ritual. Especially in human trafficking cases, the *juju* doctors take some of the women's personal items, including panties and pubic hair, nails or even their blood after making incisions on their skin with razors (Aghatise, 2005; Aronowitz, 2009; Kara, 2009; van Dijk, 2001; Van Dijk et al., 2006). This is symbolic because the women are convinced that as long as the *juju* doctors have these items, they can control the woman through her personal items which are believed to have her spiritual aura (Nagle & Owasanoye, 2016). Achebe (2004) explains that "*in a society [Nigerian] where traditional religious beliefs still hold sway, these rituals are effective because the girls believe in the potency of the medicine*" (p. 182). Nwaubani (2016, 1) refers to *juju* as "*a potent ingredient in a cocktail of coercion that keeps thousands of Nigerian women and girls in sex slavery in Europe, mostly*

in Italy." *Juju* may therefore be considered as the glue that binds the women to the traffickers. While certainly not all *juju* doctors are willing to be involved in nor support the *juju* rituals that traffickers employ, others are involved, mainly for monetary benefits.

While there is some general knowledge on what the *juju* ritual entails in trafficking processes, little is known about its meaning in the different phases of the trafficking process (at the start, in its continuation and when leaving) from the views of the victims themselves. Moreover, the possible impact of the *Oba* declaration on Nigerian victims' decisions to leave the trafficking networks is unknown. This study therefore presents the narratives of thirty-one Nigerian victims of trafficking about the nature and the role of the *juju* rituals as well as how the *Oba*'s declaration influenced, informed, or validated their decision to escape from traffickers. This study, therefore, will add to existing knowledge on the factors that both retain people in trafficking and enable them to escape. As such, this knowledge may lead to recommendations about the role of local initiatives and traditional or religious leaders in tackling the problem of trafficking in persons.

Methodology

Procedure

The empirical data for this research was gathered between June 2018 and October 2020 as part of the ERC-funded "ChildMove" study. Ethical approval for the study was granted by both the Commissione per L'Etica della Ricerca e la Biotica, Italy and the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Ghent University, Belgium.

The study had a longitudinal design, following the participants over a period of 2 years, with repeated semi-structured interviews. The interviews included conversations about the respondents' journeys from why and how they departed Nigeria to their arrival in the shelter in Italy and the transit locations in-between, about their past and current challenges, their wellbeing, social support networks and coping perspectives, and their future perspectives.

While 3 of the 31 respondents were recruited individually by the researcher who was previously acquainted with them in a humanitarian capacity, the majority of the respondents were recruited by approaching three associations and non-profit organizations that work with victims of trafficking in Italy. Two of these associations and organizations support both victims of trafficking and other irregular migrants in need of housing, food, health care, etc. The third organization mainly focused on supporting victims of trafficking, and while they had several victims of labor trafficking in their shelters, most of the

residents were victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation.

Participant observation was possible in two of the three organizations, where 28 respondents were recruited for the study. This period allowed the first author to get better acquainted with the organizations and their staff, as well as with the young women and teenagers that they assisted. She was then able to approach the women and teenagers, present the research to them and inquire whether they were willing to participate. The researcher explained the study to the participants several times—first in big groups, sometimes in smaller groups, and lastly, individually before the interview. That way, the process was made clear, and the participants were informed about the meaning of the informed consent and that their consent or withdrawal of it would be confidential at all times, as would any information that they shared with the researcher. It was important that the researcher reiterate to the respondents that none of the conversations would be discussed with the shelter directors, managers, or social workers, unless it was a health-related issue for which the respondents specifically granted permission for the issue to be discussed with a member of staff at the shelter. Additionally, when participants requested specific types of support, efforts were made by the researcher to connect the interviewee with possible services. This included the follow-up phase, during which several participants now lived on their own and no longer resided in shelter housing. Hereto, the researcher had a referral network list of diverse organizations that the participants could be referred to (only with their consent) when needed.

Since the interviewing researcher is Nigerian herself, the interviews were conducted in the preferred language of each participant, with the options being English, Yoruba, Pidgin English or a combination of those. Having a shared nationality and language(s), as well as general norms and values which are prominent in the Nigerian society allowed the first author to connect with the group very easily. She was welcomed by the participants who introduced her to their lives, and to their children. The participants also shared both terrifying and joyful memories with her. This also meant however, that the researcher needed to constantly process and work through several ethical challenges, such as requests for additional support or for a longer-term friendship relationship with the researcher.

The Interviews occurred in three measurement moments (M1, M2, and M3) over a period of 2 years, from June 2018 to October 2020, with an interval of 8 to 10 month between measurement moments. There was a constant negotiation between the researcher and the participants over the subsequent 2-year follow up period, during which some participants agreed to continue with the study while others did not. This was either because

they did not want to remember painful memories which some of the interview questions triggered, or because they relocated, and the researcher could no longer reach them. In-between measurement moments, we stayed in contact with the participants who were willing to do so, through phone calls and text messages.

During M1, $n = 14$ interviews were recorded on an audio device, while the remaining $n = 17$ were either typed out on a laptop or handwritten, based on the preference of each participant. During M2 and M3 respectively, $n = 3$ and $n = 4$ interviews were recorded, while $n = 19$ and $n = 12$ were typed out. Some participants, especially those with an uncertain legal status, were nervous about having their voices recorded and did not consent to it. This fear of their voices being recorded and their madams (regardless of where the madams were located) finding out where they were, or their stories being used against them, as was previously experienced by some participants, was very evident. Therefore, the researcher explained and reiterated the informed consent process, stressing the participants' right to withdraw consent at any time, and the confidentiality and anonymity of the research data.

Participants

The participants of this study were all victims of trafficking who were smuggled from Nigeria into Italy. During their migration trajectories, the participants experienced rape, attempted rape, or other forms of sexual molestation, and all of them experienced being beaten or tortured at least once. These accounts and experiences of violence were described by the participants in many instances, as terrifying and different from what they had either been promised or what they expected.

During the first Measurement Moment (M1), all participants, with one exception, lived in apartments, houses or centers under the care of NGO staff, and had been physically out of the control of trafficking networks (Table 1).

In the subsequent follow-up periods of the study, of the 16 participants who completed all three measurement moments, few ($n = 2$) had rented their own apartments, some ($n = 5$) lived with their boyfriend or husband, and others ($n = 8$) still lived in the housing provided by the NGOs or associations that were assisting with their legal matters. One participant's housing situation was unknown. Several participants became mothers between M1 and M3, and others got married.

Analysis

The data were thematically analyzed using the MAXQDA software. While in the interview grid, we did

Table 1. Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Participants During M1.

Info.	n = 31	%
Age (years)		
<18	10	32.3
18–25	16	51.6
26–35	5	16.1
States of origin	M1	
Delta	6, 5, 4	19.4
Edo	20, 14, 10	64.5
Other	5, 3, 2	16.1
Months spent en route to Italy		
1–10	2	6.5
11–20	15	48.4
21–30	13	41.9
31–35	1	3.2
Took the oath/Juju ritual		
Yes	26	83.9
No	5	16.1
Participation in study		
M1	31	100
M2	22	71.0
M3	16	51.6

Note. The table shows the participants' ages, and states of origin. It also shows the amount of time spent en route to Italy, how many participants took the oath/participated in the juju ritual, and the number of participants who partook in each measurement moment.

not include specific questions about the Oba declaration and how that impacted their process of leaving the trafficking networks, reading through the interview data, it was clear that this was an important aspect in our participants' narratives. Given its importance in their stories, we decided to re-analyze our data, looking specifically at these themes of the Oba declaration and the *juju* rituals. Therefore, at first, we coded all data mentioning or related to (1) *Oba's* declaration; (2) madams; (3) *juju rituals* and oaths. We intentionally coded for *madams* with the understanding that the mentioning of a madam would most likely be linked to conversation around exploitation and *juju* rituals. Next, we coded mentions of leaving madams and the networks, what happened since leaving madams, and reactions by the participants and family members to their departure. Yet, while we did not specifically inquire about this theme during the interviews, not all participants narrated about it.

Results

During the course of this study, the participants who were taken to the shrine for *juju* rituals prior to departure for Italy described their experiences of the rituals and the possible impact of the *Oba's* declaration. In the next section, we first focus on the women's experiences

of the *juju* rituals, and then elaborate on how they found out about and reacted to the *Oba's* declaration.

The Women's Experiences of the Juju Rituals

As indicated in Table 1, 26 of the participants confirmed that they swore an oath, and although these women each took the oath at different time, they had some shared experiences and realities when individually reflecting on the *juju* ceremony.

At first, many participants mentioned how they were very terrified during the rituals.

I was afraid when I saw that he had brought me to a shrine. They forced me to bath with water that the *juju* man put there, and he forced to lick one very peppery and bitter thing. I spit it out, but the *juju* man was very angry he and warned me not to spit it out again and made me to lick it. Then I had to kneel at the shrine and swear that if I ever refuse to pay the money, they say I owe for the trip to Europe, I would run mad, and that bad things would happen to me and to anyone that tries to help me not to pay back or escape. Then they put a chicken around my head three times and removed the heart for me to eat. (Minor, M1)

Their terror was also exacerbated by having to eat or swallow something that was inedible, something many participants mentioned.

So, we went to the shrine to swear and she [the madam] was there... I also had to swallow something very bitter, aunty, I don't even know what I swallowed. I don't know what I ate, whether it was human meat or fowl, I don't know. (Minor, M1)

The woman said that we had to swear that we would pay her back, because she had helped more than one girl who ended up running away with her money, so she needed the insurance. We went to a shrine and the native doctor [a woman] tying a white wrapper made some marks on me with a razor and made me swear that I would pay back, or else horrible things would happen to me. I also had to drink some kind of dirty water. (Adult, M1)

Equally, having personal items including blood and/or hair being taken from them was a shared experience amongst the participants.

They made me swear the oath in the shrine before beginning the journey. My madam took my pubic hair and armpit hair as well and made me swallow the inside of a live fowl. The place was scary, and the native doctor watched me swallow the things and really scared me. (Minor, M1)

The participants' narratives about the *juju* ceremony that they underwent before their departure from Nigeria to Italy highlight the role of the *juju* ritualist in instilling fear

in the young women in order to perpetuate the belief that grave consequences would befall them should they rebel.

We went to a beach and sat on the floor, I was scared and shaking... The man then told us not to cry, that anyone who cries in that place will die within 24 hours. She [the trafficker] then brought out the paper with my pubic hair and with that of the other girls, she had now written our names on each one. She gave it to the man [*juju* ritualist] and told him: "these are the girls," and she wants him to make sure that we pay. So, the man told us to come with him one by one. (Minor, M1)

Only one participant out of those who told us about their experiences with the *juju* rituals explained that she took her parents with her to the oath-taking ceremony.

I originally didn't tell my mother, but when the woman told me that we would swear, I told my mother. So, we went to swear the oath together me, my father, my mother, and the woman; then we started the journey. (Minor, M1)

The participant took her parents with her once she found out that she had to swear an oath before undertaking the journey. This was probably because she knew the gravity of the ritual as is understood by Nigerian society. The rituals are considered sacred and the fear of calamity that is believed will befall those who dishonor it by breaking their vows forces some victims to stay with the traffickers.

When I refused to go to my madam, she warned me that my mum's sickness would only get worse, but I kept praying, and my mum seemed to be recovering, then, all of a sudden, she died. My madam then called me to say, "hope you've heard the news about your mum"... but I did not go back to my madam. (Adult, M1)

The traffickers often keep tabs on their victims' family members in Nigeria and are quick to mention when something bad happens to any of those family members, citing it as vengeance by the gods and a warning to those who may want to escape or break their vows.

How They Found Out About and Reacted to the Oba's Declaration

The *Oba's* public declaration against traffickers, and his revocation of oaths which kept Nigerian minor and adult victims of trafficking bound to their traffickers, emerged during the research. All participants indicated having heard about the *Oba's* declaration, even being thousands of miles away from where the ceremony took place in the *Oba's* palace in Benin city. The knowledge of the ceremony then enabled some to find out more information for themselves, before deciding on how they would react

to it. Since the *Oba* is both a traditional and a spiritual leader, his words and actions carry a lot of weight, as shown in following quote:

Oba said I shouldn't pay again and that is why I thanked my God, because nothing happened to me when I ran away. (Adult, M1)

This is highly significant because one aspect often emphasized in the oath is that diseases, mental illnesses, and all forms of evil would happen to whomever broke the oath. Therefore, for one to leave the traffickers with unpaid debts and have no retaliatory health consequences is viewed as powerful. For several of the participants who had been thinking of ways to leave without facing the consequences of breaking their vow, the *Oba's* declaration was timely.

I just needed a little help, someone to help me leave the jungle life that I lived while working on the streets. (Minor, M1)

Here, the *Oba's* declaration functions as the nudge that was needed to escape and leave behind the exploitation and seemingly lawless world that she found herself in, and enabled her to do what she already wanted to do.

Those who specified how they heard about the *Oba's* declaration, all heard about it from their friends, specifically other girls and women working for madams. This shows how information spreads very quickly, but also how discovering something as significant as the *Oba* of Benin's declaration from others in a similar predicament, was the confirmation that the participants needed to verify that the declaration was real.

I asked for help from some of my girlfriends who ran away from their madam, they told me about what *Oba* said. So, I called her mum to ask if it was true and my mum said yes... So I asked another friend, and she said: "Yes, *Oba* told us not to pay and that she is a Bini girl [from Edo state] so she herself will not pay again..." So, I asked her to help me. (Adult, M1)

So, someone told me that there's a Benin girl who told them that girls have stopped bringing in money because of the *Oba's* curse. The person told me that I should run for my life and shouldn't give my madam any money, even if she asks... I went and hid at a woman's house. (Adult, M1)

Several participants ascribed a certain amount of credit to the *Oba's* declaration as part of the reason why they were able to finally leave their traffickers. One participant described her life on the streets while trying to earn enough to pay her madam what she demanded as the cost of the journey, as horrible for several reasons, including extreme cold in the winter, extreme heat in the summer, violence, sexual assault and theft by clients. Yet, she felt helpless and unable to change the situation, until she

found out (alongside two other girls) that the *Oba* had revoked the oaths, so they all ran away.

We ran away because we know that as long as *Oba* decreed it, she cannot do anything to (harm) us. (Minor, M1)

This statement also highlights the girls' role in the situation, because while the *Oba*'s revocation of the oath may have removed the spiritual obstacles for her, she believed it and took the decision to leave her madam. When asked if the madams still contacted them or if they would keep paying their madams, the majority said no.

No, she [madam] does not disturb me anymore.... I think that it's possible that the *Oba*'s curse catches up with them, but I don't know if they believe it.... Also, some of the girls are still worried about the oath they have made and still keep paying the madams. (Adult, M1)

Several months after the *Oba*'s declaration, some of the madams began to call their victims, asking that their debts be paid. Most participants avoided the calls, refused to pay, and did not want to discuss with the madams further, taking comfort in the *Oba*'s decree.

While some of the girls believed that the *Oba*'s curse had liberated them from their oaths and that they could leave their madams,

Since our *Oba* said we should leave, I have peace of mind, I have not afraid for myself or my [unborn] child and I will give birth in peace. If not for that [declaration], I don't know where I would be now or what would have happened to me. (Adult, M2)

others continued to pay the madams, afraid because of the oaths that they had taken, and worried that leaving meant not being able to retrieve their personal items from the *juju* doctor, or that their madams would hurt their loved ones in Nigeria.

A few participants expressed their anger at their madams and sought justice for themselves, while pointing out the hypocrisy of madams who exploit the children of others while protecting their own. They reflected on the irony of madams who used *juju* to extort and control many girls and women, now fearing the same *juju* being used against them.

After *Oba* swear, my madam called begging me not to curse her, that I shouldn't return the rest of the money, because she was afraid of *Oba*'s swear and death. She begged me that she has a daughter, and I should please have mercy on her ... Now the madam started calling again to ask for money.... I was very angry, so I went directly to the capo [shelter director] to tell her everything. Then the capo took me to the police to report the situation. The calls make me angry because she even has

her own child at home, she is a mother, but she uses other people's children. (Minor, M1)

I ended up going to court to testify against her [madam].... In court, I looked my madam in the eye, and I said: "You, you are the one who brought me here and forced me to do ashawo [prostitution] work" and she was found guilty and sentenced. I think she is under arrest now. (Adult, M1).

One participant even sought revenge:

I know that my madam has a child with her here in Europe, and I have plans for her and her child. Part of my plan is to make sure that the madam is locked in prison and the child is deported to Nigeria. (Adult, M2)

Another participant felt emboldened to forbid her younger sister from undertaking the journey and was grateful for the *Oba*'s declaration.

My junior sister in Nigeria now wants to come to Europe, because she said that she sees the nice pictures that I post on Facebook, that it looks as if I am enjoying life here, so she wants to come too. But I warned her not to try it, though I know that she is stubborn, she should not try it. The swear that our *Oba* did helped a lot because that swear now made people more afraid to come. It makes them to finally believe what those of us who are here have been telling them since. (Adult, M2)

Discussion

This article discussed the experiences of a group of Nigerian female victims of trafficking with *juju* rituals, their understanding and interpretation of the *Oba* of Benin's declaration against traffickers, and what steps, (if any), they took in response to it. We discussed the solemnity of *juju* rituals and its description as a terrifying experience by the participants who believe its power and its ability to punish those who break their vows. This complements existing literature on the use of *juju* by Nigerian traffickers as a control mechanism for keeping victims subservient to them (Akor, 2011; Baarda, 2016; Kleemans & van de Bunt, 2003; van Dijk, 2001).

Although *juju* is well-known in Nigeria, it is not part of the public discourse and some even believe that talking about it may bring harm upon them (AFRUC, 2010 in Msuya, 2017). Interestingly, the Nigerian Criminal Code criminalizes several forms of *juju* rituals and witchcraft on the one hand, yet validates some on the other hand (Nwauche, 2008; Oba, 2008). The *Oba*'s declaration and its effects however show that more discussion about this ritual, which is being used by traffickers (Ikeora, 2016) may be beneficial in tackling human trafficking.

Our study showed that the *Oba*'s public declaration, an event that was orchestrated by a respected traditional

and religious leader, triggered and/or emboldened many participants into taking the significant decision to leave their traffickers with unpaid debt and without fear of the *juju* rituals' consequences. There are some indications that the declaration made it more difficult for traffickers to recruit victims and even led to some *juju* ritualists ending their practice of performing the ceremony on victims (EASO, 2021; Nwaubani, 2016). This illustrates how local beliefs and customs can be engaged in the search for solutions to end the trade of trafficking in persons. A parallel may be drawn here with Lederach's three principles "*necessary for establishing peace constituencies- indigenous empowerment, cultural sensitivity and a long-term commitment*" (Lederach, 1995, p. 214). Our results show that empowering local significant individuals and understanding cultural beliefs and practices may help to create and/or achieve positive and long-lasting results, even in very complex phenomena, such as human trafficking. Drawing on existing knowledge in the Nigerian society in this case, and empowering those with the knowledge and authority, such as the *Oba*, may be beneficial to the fight against trafficking. While the importance of individual, client-centered and rights-based approaches in services offered to victims of trafficking and exploited persons is often stressed (Bales & Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2012; Delap & Wedge, 2016; Groza & Bunkers, 2017; Hilton, 2018; Lisborg, 2017), there is also a strong need to integrate local/cultural practices and traditional leaders in these care and support initiatives. Moreover, these local/cultural practices may also play other roles. An example is that of a case in 2011 during which a Nigerian man was convicted in the United Kingdom for the trafficking of two Nigerian girls while using *juju* rituals as a control mechanism (Bell, 2011). In his work on the role of local initiatives/organizations, Carl (2003, p. 3) asserts

there is a danger of INGOs offering the kind of support we can provide, rather than what is needed, or of encouraging the creation of local partners, often in the image of INGOs, in order to meet our own institutional needs.

This became also clear in our research: although *juju* is almost always labeled as a traffickers' tool of control and exploitation, therefore viewed negatively; our findings indicate that a *juju* ritual was (also) the tool employed by the *Oba* of Benin against traffickers and for the liberation of victims, thus as a positive tool—stressing, once again, the diverse roles rituals can play. Therefore, caregivers and others working with women and girl victims of trafficking must understand the importance and sacredness of rituals and its effect. This may include including the meaning and effect of these

results in mental health interventions or integrating spiritual support in care programs.

In African cosmology, "*rituals are symbolic, routine and repetitive activities and actions through which we make connections with what we consider to be the most valuable dimension of life*" (Kyalo, 2013, p. 35). In Ghana, for example, the Krobo (an Adangme tribe in the Volta) have different types of rituals with different expected outcomes [including good luck, blessings, justice etc.], and it is believed that these rituals "*influence the deities and spiritual beings, thus securing desirable results, namely salvation or wellbeing*" (Ossom-Batsa, 2009, p. 1).

While highlighting the role of the *Oba* and his bid to tackle human trafficking in Benin, it is important to mention that trafficking from Benin has not ended. While the declaration may have slowed down the process for some, and enabled others to leave the traffickers, as seen in our study, that cannot be confirmed of other Nigerian victims of trafficking. Stakeholders indicated that the criminal groups are merely re-strategizing and finding other ways to control victims, because the push factors which either force or encourage irregular migration remain, trafficking is most likely to continue (EASO, 2021). A reminder that the criminal networks utilize these rituals as tools to bind the victims to them and keep the victims under their control.

Limitations

Thirty of the 31 Nigerian women and unaccompanied minors who were interviewed for this research lived in NGO provided and managed houses or apartments during the first measurement moment of the research, so they were no longer involved with the trafficking networks. Their perspectives and experiences thus potentially differ from women and teenagers with similar trafficking experiences who are still in the trafficking networks or those who were unable to gain access to a shelter or an NGO program.

Overall, victims of trafficking are not a "*universal or homogenous group*" (van der Watt & Kruger, 2017, p. 81) and "*individuals do experience coercion differently*" (Van der Watt & Kruger, 2020, p. 948). Conclusively, some participants may have been hesitant about speaking about, or going into details about their experiences with *juju* rituals and madams because they feared the implications of providing details about their traffickers. Especially when living in NGO-structures, this could lead them being asked to testify against the madam and thus having to face her again; something most of the participants did not want to do. The *Oba's* declaration and its effect were not explicitly included in the interview grid, and the findings in this study only emerged during our data analysis. Therefore, while we have data on the participants' reactions to the *Oba's* declaration, we don't

have the exact number of participants who left the traffickers due to or with the support of the declaration; we only have the numbers of those who mentioned it during the study.

Conclusion

Our study showed that the *Oba* of Benin's declaration against traffickers positively impacted Nigerian victims of trafficking who were thousands of kilometers away. It shows how alternative measures, such as including respected traditional leaders, could be another way to tackle human trafficking in a way that empowers victims and enables them to take action where possible. Additionally, the findings add an additional layer to the existing complexity of factors related to getting involved and/or bound to human trafficking networks, and the ability to disconnect from these networks.

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Data Availability Statement

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