

## 2.8 *Ogun, the car god, and the others*

### *Localized practices of power and the perception of health among Nigerian women in prostitution in Italy*

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#### *Premise*

This article is the fruit of a training-research project (1997-1999) conducted within the framework of an *Unità di strada* (*Street Unit*)<sup>(1)</sup>, and focuses on the theme of identity and conceptions of the body, sexuality, and health among immigrant prostitutes.

Street prostitution acquired social visibility in Italy in the early 1990s, when a considerable number of women immigrants from Eastern European countries began to occupy the streets of our country. Ensuing years have seen an increase in the street presence of women from different ethnic groups, with a large component of women from Nigeria and Albania. The only research so far that has attempted to measure the phenomenon (CAMPANI G. *et al.* 2000) has estimated the number of women prostitutes operating throughout the country to be between 18.800 and 25.100.

In the face of the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity also characteristic of immigrant prostitutes operating in the area around Perugia, research has focused increasingly on the group of Nigerian women. This choice has been determined by the relatively large size of the group (representing some 5.000-6.000 women nationwide, or 30% of the total of immigrant prostitutes), but also by my own special interest about their hypothetical different condition of “temporary enslavement” that seem sealed, in many cases, by magic rituals.

### *Globalization, debt bondage and Nigerian prostitutes*

While the mass media have recently informed the Italian public about the common use of coercive practices in the sexual exploitation of immigrant prostitutes, there is also well-documented evidence of diversity in the strategies used by individuals and criminal organizations in the recruitment of Albanian women (and Eastern European women in general), on the one hand, and African women, and particularly Nigerian women, on the other (CAMPANI G. *et al.* 2000). This documentation shows how the Nigerian prostitutes, in addition to being subjected to direct forms of violence and abuse, seem also to be bound by a shared pact sanctioned by magico-religious rituals whose violation can lead to harmful and even fatal consequences for themselves and their families in Africa. The condition of many Nigerian prostitutes has been compared with “debt bondage” (ARLACCHI P. 1999). Generally speaking, once they have paid off the debt incurred to pay for their arrival in Italy, the women are able to reacquire their autonomy, even though it often happens that the people who purchased them attempt, through various forms of harassment, to maintain control over the girls for a longer period.

Several investigators have stressed how, in some countries the impact of colonialism and expansion of the market economy has transformed traditional forms of subjugation into debt bondage (FALOLA T. - LOVEJOY P. 1994). Debt bondage is the central issue of several studies of bondage now being conducted in Western countries (ARLACCHI P. 1999, BALES K. 2000).

Many Nigerian women have recounted how, during various ceremonies, pubic hairs, locks of hair, blood or pieces of fingernails are removed and placed together in a container – often a pair of underpants – and conserved by the shaman. The women generally accept such rituals – which effectively are transformed into rites of initiation to prostitution – as an integral part of the possibility of immigrating to Europe without money of their own.

Participation in a ritual as cultural practice also can constitute a strong moment of identity formation. Women who wish to cut the bond and leave forced prostitution behind generally do not feel protected by Western social workers, who do not offer suitable alternatives to support them.

Appadurai (APPADURAI A. 2001) has insisted on the importance of cultural practices with respect to the production of “local” subjects, or social actors who learn to belong to a situated community of relatives, neighbors, friends, and enemies. Such practices are also *practices of power* because they sanction and codify relationships of hierarchy and domination.

Globalization has acted as a powerful resonator for localized practices of power – tied to local subjects – amplifying their effects and diversifying their aims.

Nigerian women's initiation to prostitution comes about through rituals inscribed in a horizon of shared meanings that displace or re-place their sense of belonging and reconstruct moral and economic ties. The magico-religious ritual can be interpreted as the seal on an instrument of commercial exchange and power. As with other transactions, the traffic in Nigerian prostitutes is inseparable from a "moral" traffic in human and superhuman powers.

At the same time, forms of recourse to religion and magic have been on the upswing in Africa, now undergoing the great economic and social transformations brought on by globalization, because religion and magic take on – on the level of fantasy – the fundamental function of conferring power and guaranteeing some form of control over a world perceived as rapidly changing (COMAROFF J. - COMAROFF J. 1993).

### *Colonial discourse and voodoo*

The effects of ritual loom over the lives of Nigerian women, can constitute a pervasive reality in their collective consciousness. Social workers tell of women who have shown signs of psychic disturbance. In other cases, episodes of adversity, such as street incidents in which women have figured as victims, the incidents have been interpreted by the women themselves as products of witchcraft.

Nigerian prostitutes – especially initially and often in part due to their scarce knowledge of the Italian language – are very untrusting and reluctant to talk about aspects of their daily lives, even more so when it comes to the question "magic ritual". They generally talk about it with staff only when they have filed complaints against their protectors, limiting themselves to recounting only certain, by now well-known aspects of the ritual.

At the beginning of my research it was above all in the literature addressed to social workers and other professional figures involved in the world of prostitution that I found explicit references to what is defined as a voodoo ritual.

Later on, the importance of the magic dimension for my women informants began to become more obvious, starting with a few episodes dating back to December 1998. At that time, many Nigerian women asked re-

peatedly and specifically to have their blood tested. Although they seemed to be well informed about HIV, the women gave the impression that their requests were motivated by reasons that went beyond the risks of contracting disease. Two Nigerian women declared openly that they were worried about the possibility that the health workers would appropriate their blood.

In another episode, a prostitute spoke of the Nigerian women as *wicked women, with dirty blood*, victims of voodoo spells, especially the women that have *scars on their face and bellies*.

In the encyclopedia edited by Di Nola (DI NOLA A.M. 1976) the terms *vudu*, *vodun*, *voodoo* are variants in transcription of the African term with which, in Fon languages, in Dahomey and Togo, one designates a god, a spirit, an object charged with numinous powers. The term is used to indicate the religion of Haiti, composed of a mixture of African traditions and Catholicism.

Although the prostitutes themselves always use the term voodoo, it is clear that they cannot be referring to the Afro-Catholic religion of the Caribbean island.

We are faced with a misunderstanding – and not only a linguistic one – which is highly significant.

The diffusion of the idea, among social workers and other staff, that the women are victims of the “black magic,” voodoo, derives from a particular Euro-American colonial consciousness, subject of studies in a wide range of literature (MUDIMBE V. Y. 1988, LOOMBA A. 2000, GUHA R. - SPIVAK G.C. 2002).

Though generally speaking, this consciousness places blacks and Africa in a position of otherness and ignorance, more specifically the association blacks/wicked magic/voodoo is tied to white colonialist fears with respect to the first black Republic in the world.

In 1791 Saint-Domingue was the epicenter of the struggle by black slaves for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade. The revolt of black Jacobins was so shocking as to represent a constant threat to colonialism and racism.

Colonial discourse contributed to the reduction of that type of experience to a series of stereotypes tied to religion and magic. American film has also drawn extensively on Haitian religious culture, exasperating some of its more magic aspects.

The spread of a colonialist stereotype that reduces all African magico-religious facts to the same model produces a new syncretism. In the encounter with the other, the Western stereotype is confirmed, to the point that it is

the other, as the women tell it, who becomes convinced that voodoo is the Italian translation of juju, or magic.

We are witnessing, on the one hand, a process of unconscious reduction of complexity, and on the other, a syncretic assumption of the terms of the other – whose original meanings are different – to define aspects of one's own identity.

Others have arrived at this same syncretism. For example, the *Madame*, the ex-prostitute that manages the smuggling of women into Italy and who participates in the rituals of subjugation performed on the women, was called for a certain period by social service staff and in the literature on prostitution, *maman*, re-utilizing a term formerly used to indicate the voodoo priestess.

By the same token, in communication, and especially in asymmetrical power relationships, discrepancies in discourse between form and content can be read as a space open to interpretation of the conflict; the unsaid can conceal an attitude of avoidance and resistance with respect to the gaze of the other.

#### *Ogun the car god, and the other*

Most of the Nigerian women come from the southern part of the country and they belong mostly to the Edo, Yoruba, and Igbo ethnic groups. More specifically, many women come from the Edo State, and Benin City and Lagos are the central clearing stations for women emigrants. The region of West Africa served as a great human reservoir for the Atlantic slave trade, which in the Americas led to processes of acculturation and the production of religious practices such as the voodoo in Haiti.

The analogies between the traditional Yoruba religion in Nigeria and voodoo religion have been well documented (MÉTRAUX A. 1971) and we can notice analogies between the initiation rituals in such cults of possession and the rituals described by the prostitutes. The woman is initiated to the cult of possession of a divinity who will watch over her behavior, especially during the period in which the adept of the cult (the shaman) will take care of her "soul," represented by the bodily substances that have been exported during the ritual.

The rituals, generally conducted the first time in Africa and in the presence of a woman intermediary from the criminal organization, may be repeated in Italy for the purpose of reinforcing the woman's condition of subjugation.

An informant told of being convinced that *her things* had been sent back to Africa by the shaman, so that she would be a victim of witchcraft. The woman, although stating she did not believe in magic, had repeatedly asked the “madame” for the return of *her things* without obtaining any result. Despite this, she did not seem particularly worried about the consequences that the witchcraft would have for her, and she even filed a complaint against her protectress. The woman stated that she was “serene”, especially because she had already paid back the sum of money stipulated in her contract.

The women’s native region has always been a place of intense cultural exchange and there is no lack of important divinities belonging to all of the various traditional religions (BARNES S.T. 1997).

This is the case of Ogun, originally the god of metal – and therefore also of all those who work with metal, such as warriors, hunters, or blacksmiths – and of war.

As the god of metals, Ogun has played an important role in the technological advances that have made metal working a fundamental aspect of the spread of civilization. In many African cities, he has become the divinity who protects those who work with automobiles: many taxi drivers, for example, dedicate a little altar to him in their cars.

Ogun, along with other important gods like Shango – god of fire, lightning, and fertility – is one of the traditional divinities invoked by shamans as guarantors of the contract to which the prostitutes are subjected.

The threats and violence incurred by the women have to do with the ire of the gods and their manifestations. Ogun wounds them with knives and cutting weapons, sends cars to run into them on the streets; Shango sets fire to their parents’ houses or makes the women sterile.

### *Machines for Making Money*

In his book analyzing the cosmologies of sub-Saharan Africa, *Iran, gender and power: Rituals of Transformation in African Society*, Herbert (HERBERT E. W. 1993) has examined the relationship between power, gender, and technology. These cosmologies are read as constructions of a gendered world in which female reproductive activity – source of a dangerous power to be controlled – becomes analogy/homology of the reproductive and creative power of the smelter. The blacksmith smelts, in fact, raw metals to forge utensils in furnaces, which in sub-Saharan Africa – Herbert demonstrates –

often resemble parts of the female anatomy. The male monopoly of technology and the reduction of the female body to an instrument or utensil are themes dealt with in the anthropology of gender.

The street women work with their bodies; bodies that have been alienated from them and transformed into *machines for making money* (as one prostitute stated to a journalist who interviewed her) (KENNEDY I. - NICOTRI P. 1999).

In the Nigerian *lukudi* (magic for making money) described by Matory (MATORY L.J. 1993), the maximum alienation of the female body is effected. Parts of the victims' bodies are exported and are used to evoke magic spells capable of producing money.

According to Matory (MATORY L.J. 1993), the female body and its generative powers are metonymies of social relations and metaphors for the integrity of the social body. The *likudi* tell us something about the new capitalism, the infamy of its technology, its alienation and its fragmenting effects on the social body and on the human body itself.

In the West, illegal female immigrants make their alienated bodies available to occasional consumers of *kunt*, *mouth*, and *ass*, thus activating a magic capable of producing money.

Ogun is certainly one of the divinities who best represent the contemporary world, interpreting the anxieties and fears of many Africans, and he can be adopted with different meanings by both the torturers and the victims of the slave trade.

The woman threatened by the Madame with being hit by a car sent by Ogun if she were to violate her contract (by going to the police or hiding money), herself transformed into a machine, sees modernity (represented by money and by machines) as both a death threat and as an opportunity for social and economic advancement (not coincidentally many Nigerian women refer to their clients on the street as machines, thus giving back to them the level of alienation they themselves experience).

## Note

<sup>(1)</sup> The "Unità di strada Cabiria", organized by Arci Solidarietà Ora d'Aria di Perugia, is a project for the prevention and reduction of sexually transmitted diseases among immigrant prostitutes. The activities of the Unit are now part of the much larger "Project Free Woman 2000. Perugian Network Against the Slave Trade," sponsored by the City of Perugia as part of the fight against the smuggling and commercial trade of human beings for purposes of sexual exploitation.

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