

# Human trafficking for sexual exploitation from Nigeria into Western Europe: The role of voodoo rituals in the functioning of a criminal network

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## Abstract

This study is a content analysis of wiretapped conversations and police interviews concerning the criminal case of ‘Operation Koolvis’: an investigation into a Nigerian human trafficking ring for sexual exploitation in Western Europe. The criminal network traffics women from Nigeria, via the Netherlands as a transit country, to become street prostitutes in Italy. The aim is to explore the role of ‘voodoo’ in the functioning of the organization, applying transaction cost economics and rational choice theory. Four main categories of voodoo use were found. Firstly, voodoo is a coercive mechanism. Secondly, it is used cynically in cooperation between traffickers. Thirdly, there is non-cynical mention of voodoo as a belief system. A fourth category concerns voodoo priests as independent enforcers of contracts.

## Keywords

Criminal cooperation, human trafficking, organized crime, transaction costs, voodoo

## Introduction

*‘No one had ever beheld the Oracle Agbala, except his priestess. But no one who had ever crawled into his awful shrine had come out without the fear of his power.’*

(Chinua Achebe, 1958)

The trafficking of human beings has proven to be a crime that is hard to eradicate, despite the best efforts of law-enforcing agencies (Aronowitz et al., 2010). Since the 1990s, the

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severity and magnitude of this modern form of slavery have increasingly been brought to public attention (BNRM, 2007; UNODC, 2006). The International Labour Organization (ILO) has estimated that 2.4 million people throughout the world were lured into forced labour in 2004 (Andees, 2008). In industrialized economies, 55 percent of those in forced labour are victims of sexual exploitation (Andees, 2008). Human trafficking is an urgent social problem whose empirical evidence deserves careful scrutiny.

The number of Nigerian victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation is among the highest of any ethnicity in Western Europe, next to victims from Eastern Europe. Each year, hundreds of Nigerian women are being trafficked to Europe (Kammerman and Wittenberg, 2009). Dire economic circumstances and images of a romanticized future in Europe play Nigerian women into the hands of human traffickers. When Nigerian women are intercepted in European asylum centres, questioning by the police is often complicated by a fear of occult voodoo contracts that prevents the women from talking (Kammerman and Wittenberg, 2009). This paper aims to contribute to the criminological literature on human trafficking by exploring the role of voodoo as part of the functioning of Nigerian human trafficking rings.

### *Voodoo in the context of the organizational features of trafficking*

Prior to the empirical part of the paper, this section will provide a general discussion of the organizational features of human trafficking networks and of Nigerian trafficking for sexual exploitation in particular. Voodoo will be defined in the context of Nigerian cultural tradition as well as in terms of its place in the modus operandi of human trafficking networks. This is followed by a discussion of ideological barriers obstructing the expansion of knowledge on trafficking. This paper responds to calls in the literature for systematic empirical studies to overcome these barriers.

Human trafficking networks are comparable to drug trafficking rings in terms of their flexibility. When sections of trafficking rings are successfully removed through police intervention, the remaining network can often be adjusted in order to continue business. The remaining actors are able to find new business opportunities through weak points in immigration procedures in other countries, or by exploiting other criminal connections (Kleemans and Van de Bunt, 2003). Human trafficking for sexual exploitation can be analysed as a process divided into three stages. In chronological order, the journey of a trafficked girl will comprise a recruitment, a trafficking and an exploitation stage (Kleemans and Smit, 2014). However, if the goal is to describe a full life cycle, a stage that can be added to this analysis is the post-exploitation stage. In Nigerian networks, women control women (Siegel and de Blank, 2010). The demand for new victims ultimately comes from the 'madams', female pimps, who are former prostitutes. The 'madam' owns a girl until she has repaid her debt. She pays for the recruitment and transportation of the girl. The possibility of earning a good income as a 'madam' in the future may be one of the incentives for victims to comply in an exploitative situation. This results in a circle of victims turning into offenders.

Voodoo or *juju* is a form of witchcraft in Nigeria existing alongside Christian or Islamic belief. Voodoo in the context of Nigerian human trafficking will refer to a variation on ancient West African religious traditions, in which a priest connected to a voodoo

shrine has the power to manipulate outcomes in people's lives (Van Dijk et al., 2006: 61). A journalistic account states: 'In West Africa, voodoo priests still are often used to seal financial transactions or root out suspected thieves – often with a threat of a deadly curse for the wrongdoer' (Murphy, 2005). These priests may either have a public community role or serve as private providers of religious services. Since the 1980s, there has been a resurgence of voodoo priests who seem to cater specifically to the needs of human traffickers (Van Dijk, 2001). Before leaving Nigeria, traffickers lead recruited women to ancient shrines where voodoo priests perform rituals, which can include the eating of chicken hearts, superficial cutting of the body with razors, and the beheading of goats (Van Dijk, 2001; Van Dijk et al., 2006). Voodoo plays into fears and beliefs that are latently present in Nigerian culture, which are then abused and adjusted into rituals specifically for the advantage of human traffickers (Van Dijk et al., 2006). This does not mean that trafficked women have no agency at all; they may define and manipulate voodoo in their own way, but from a vulnerable position in an increasingly unequal power relation with their traffickers (Van Dijk et al., 2006).

Voodoo distinguishes the Nigerian *modus operandi* from other human trafficking streams. For example, in East European rings, direct monitoring is often necessary: 'loverboys' bring women to Western Europe and exploit them under the threat of violence in the event of defiance (Kleemans and Smit, 2014: 6). In contrast, Nigerian networks can exercise remote control. Recruited women are made to go through elaborate voodoo rituals in Nigeria to enforce a contract, which dictates that they will repay their enormous debt. The terror-inducing rituals lead to a situation in which the women will not run away when travelling on their own, out of fear for themselves or their family being hurt by voodoo. Often the women cooperate in the rituals voluntarily, albeit under misleading promises: they may not be aware of the size of the debt and the exploitative circumstances in which they will have to work in Europe (Kleemans, 2011). More detailed empirical knowledge on voodoo is required to understand its role in the *modus operandi* of Nigerian human traffickers, which is what this paper will explore.

Even though there is impressive analytical work to build on, criminologists have noted ideological barriers to progress in the field of human trafficking. Kleemans and Smit (2014: 394) state that 'discussions about smuggling and trafficking are often clouded by generalizations, such as the cruel smuggler and the innocent, uninformed trafficking victim, lured into prostitution.' They add: 'The contested nature of both illegal immigration and prostitution, and widely opposing views on these matters seem to block sound empirical research on human smuggling and human trafficking' (Kleemans and Smit, 2014: 395). Many statistical estimates are based on unrepresentative reports issued by governments or non-governmental organizations (Zhang, 2009). Conclusions are based on superficial observations from unrepresentative data; researchers are trying to observe the unobserved (Tyldum and Brunovskis, 2005). Currently, the majority of studies draw inferences about the nature of human trafficking that lack systematic analysis (Zhang, 2009). Only a limited number of contributions to the debate investigate the organizational features of human trafficking. The debate so far has mostly been ideologically rather than empirically informed (Zhang, 2009). It is not enough to discuss sex trafficking as one of the most alarming transnational criminal activities facing the world today; instead of passing moral judgements, the phenomenon requires thorough,

empirically informed understanding (Zhang, 2009). The following section introduces the research aims of this paper, responding to a call for empirical studies on human trafficking that avoid ideologically informed bias.

### *Research aims and theoretical framework*

There is a lack of systematic analysis of empirical evidence on the organizational features of human trafficking (Zhang, 2009). This paper makes a contribution by exploring new empirical evidence comprising wiretaps and police interviews on a particular Nigerian human trafficking ring. The aim is to explore in what ways voodoo is a part of the modus operandi. The phenomenon of voodoo in human trafficking has long been disregarded as an occult myth that cannot play a real role in crime (Van Dijk, 2001). For police forces dealing with human trafficking, it was enough to explain voodoo as a coercive mechanism adding to the evidence required to prosecute traffickers (Van Dijk, 2001: 572). This paper argues that rational choice theory and transaction cost economics can help us trace the choices that offenders and victims face. Through this method, it may be possible to grasp why the use of voodoo may be a rational option to increase the capacity and therefore the profit of the network. The perspective allows for an analysis of the role that voodoo rituals play in the functioning of Nigerian trafficking rings.

One of the most important building blocks of society is the need to trade (Weber, [1922] 1978). Many modern institutions, such as the state and judicial courts, can be traced back to the necessity to trade beyond a circle of personally trusted contacts (Nozick, 1974). State governance is the standard mechanism to solve issues in transacting; however, in several situations private ordering may be more efficient (see Varese, 2010). The central question that arises when looking at criminal organizations is how offenders are able to cooperate without legal institutions to appeal to in the event of disputes (Varese, 2010). The replacement of a third-party enforcer with personal trust is not generally feasible: many criminal organizations are made up of people who are used to cheating on agreements, and require resources from people beyond their direct family or trustworthy friends to operate (Campana and Varese, 2013). A credible commitment between parties increases the costs of cheating or removes the possibility altogether (Campana and Varese, 2013: 7; Dugatkin et al., 1992). Williamson (1983: 519) contributes to an existing literature on credible *threats*, which are unilateral efforts to gain an advantage; whereas credible *commitments* are bilateral reciprocal acts of engagement to maintain a relationship with a long-term goal in mind (Schelling, 2006). An example that is discussed extensively is that of taking a hostage from the contract partner in order to make the cost of cheating higher than the cost of cooperating (Allen, 2006). These insights will be applied to the use of voodoo in human trafficking transactions.

Furthermore, this paper will make the case that the people dealing with voodoo should be considered rational actors. It is a misconception that rational choice is guided by objective facts. 'Rational choice is subjective through and through' (Elster, 2009: 191). In this case, the agent may not be able to specify the mechanism by which magical practices work, but the costs to gather more information may be too high (Elster, 2009: 202). A person acting rationally can find themselves in a 'belief trap' that leaves them with a false belief, because the assumed costs for belief-testing are

too high (Mackie, 1996: 1009; see De Graaf, 2013). An important theoretical finding in the case of monitoring human trafficking victims is that ‘we easily believe what we fear’ (Elster, 2009: 155). It induces bias in the rational actor and leads to a less than optimal amount of information. Fear tends to make an actor calculate the probability of an event occurring again as much higher than the actual probability (Tversky and Kahneman, 1986). Alongside individual fears, collective belief formation adds an extra barrier to correcting the bias in one’s beliefs: ‘If we consider episodes of rumour formation, it appears to be that only fear-based rumours cause people to modify their behaviour’ (Elster, 2009: 384). Collective beliefs appear to be more stable over time and often limit the individual to making inferences only on the basis of indirect evidence.

The aim of this paper is to go beyond the dismissal of belief in voodoo as irrational, and to consider it as part of the reality of rational actors that we try to understand. Applying this lens, we can analyse the role of voodoo in criminal transactions. The following research questions are asked to explore the dimensions of voodoo use in the data:

- What is the role of voodoo rituals as part of the functioning of a Nigerian human trafficking organization?
- How are victims of the organization bound to a voodoo contract?
- Although we know that voodoo functions as a coercive mechanism, does it play a role in cooperation between offenders as well?
- What service does a voodoo priest provide for the human trafficking organization and is this service internalized in the network or are priests found on the external market?

## Data

### *‘Operation Koolvis’*

‘Operation Koolvis’ was initiated after hundreds of Nigerian women arrived and disappeared from asylum centres in the Netherlands from the 1990s (Kammerman and Wittenberg, 2009). The investigation took place between 2006 and 2009. The strategy behind this operation was to seize the criminal chain throughout the recruitment activities in Nigeria, the trafficking to Europe via the Netherlands, and its termination point in an exploitative stage where the women work in street prostitution in Italy or Spain. This is a case study of the criminal network that was under investigation in ‘Koolvis’. Instead of looking at individual cases of victims arriving in the Netherlands, this investigation focused on mapping the entire organization. The human trafficking ring operated in the following countries: Nigeria, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany, France and Italy. To give an indication of the volume of the data, the hardcopy version comprises 65 files representing 16,200 pages in total. The files include indictments revealing who co-offended with whom, wiretapped phone conversations, lists of money transfers and phone calls, and intercepted text messages and mail.

**Table 1.** Overview of the content of the 'Voodoo indictment'.

Subject	Number
Intercepted phone conversations	28
Suspects	10
Suspects indirectly mentioned in conversation	6
Victims	10
Victims indirectly mentioned in conversation	10
Interviews with victims	6

### *Voodoo indictment*

A part of the investigation is devoted to the use of voodoo. An indictment on the mention of voodoo in the organization encompasses 100 out of the total pages of file. This part forms an independent indictment showing evidence to the court that voodoo is used for the means of coercion in this case. In some circumstances, threatening with voodoo can constitute coercion under the Dutch criminal code on human trafficking.<sup>1</sup>

The voodoo indictment will from hereon be referred to as 'the data'. The full prosecutor's files were checked for references to voodoo, including indirect mentions in the broadest sense, because some references might have been left out of this particular indictment. Law enforcement officials who worked on the case were consulted to place the material on voodoo in the context of the entire investigation and to take the strategy behind the investigation into account. The finding was that every reference to voodoo was recorded in the voodoo indictment. It includes attributes of the actors, intercepted phone conversations and police interviews with victims and one key suspect. Table 1 gives an overview of the data used to answer the research questions at hand.

## **Methods**

### *Study design*

The data are subjected to a qualitative content analysis. From the complete files, only the voodoo indictment has been analysed after purposive sampling (Krippendorff, 2004: 98, 118). The challenge in content analysis is the use of data not intended for academic research. Content analysis allows for a coding of the data as an ethnographic investigation of wiretapped conversations. Ethnographic content analysis does not necessarily avoid quantification, but encourages categories to emerge from the text. Krippendorff (2004: 74) states that content analyses tend to be more successful when they focus on *how* statements are made. Contractual agreements and inequality are constructed in how language is used and in what is said. Valuable inferences can be made from conversations in which actors were not (fully) aware of an audience listening in. Krippendorff recommends capturing those statements that are their most unpolished and raw. The police translator has frequently noted the tone of voice and show of emotions in the intercepted phone conversations. A reading of the full case validates the authenticity of the

conversations; actors were not aware of the interception of their conversations until the last phase of the investigation. A thick description and ordering of the data will lead to results that are of a hypothesis-generating nature (King et al., 1994). The inferences made from the raw data should do justice to the complex narrative the data hold.

### *Procedure*

After in-depth reading, the relevant sections of text were separated into units with meaningful starts and ends. These units were collated in a table, together with the relevant characteristics of the context: the overall theme of the conversations, the interlocutors and their demographics, and the stage of trafficking during which the conversation took place.

The coding was an iterative process. When assigning codes to units in wiretapped conversations, the following proved relevant (Krippendorff, 2004): who was speaking in what capacity, who was talking to whom, tone of voice, and the context of the conversation.

When all units were coded, they were assigned to overall categories structuring the results. Where the data was at its most raw – when deep faith or hope or incriminating information was shared – anecdotal citations were included or described in the results section (Morse et al., 2002). This contributes to the validity of the results by illustrating how the data were processed from their purest form to an analytical concept.

### **Results**

The coding of the data resulted in 20 different codes that could be sorted into four main categories relating to the research question. Direct quotations from the wiretapped conversations and interviews are included to increase the transparency of the inferred conceptualization. Table 2 describes the demographics of the actors involved in voodoo-themed conversations. All actors are of Nigerian nationality, which is why this demographic is omitted from the table. Out of 11 key suspects followed throughout the entire ‘Koolvis’ investigation, 8 appear in voodoo-related conversations. Another two ‘madams’ speak about voodoo, but they were not key suspects and their conversations were not intercepted throughout the entire investigation.

#### *The voodoo contract as a coercive mechanism*

A Nigerian girl calls home from her room in a Dutch asylum centre. She is called ‘Beauty’ (V1 in Table 2). A boyfriend provided the mobile phone; he knows how things work in the land of white people. Her father (F1) picks up. There is a tone of concern in his voice. She comforts him. She wants to know whether he and her mother (F2) are healthy. Her father is dragged before the ‘Ayelala’ shrine daily.<sup>2</sup> Beauty is causing trouble; she has still not managed to escape the asylum centre to go to her destination in Italy. The ‘madam’ who is waiting for her arrival in Italy is angry because she is paying interest on the debt Beauty has accrued. Beauty tells her father that she wants to start paying back but that she cannot leave. The rules in the asylum

**Table 2.** The demographics of the actors involved in voodoo-themed conversations.

Code	Gender	Location	Role	Number of conversations	Contacting whom
S1	Male	Nigeria	Main director stream 1	1	V2
S2	Male	Nigeria	Main director stream 2	6	V1, V2, V4, V6–V8
S3	Male	Nigeria	Logistical tasks – brother of S2	2	V1, S4
S4	Male	Spain	Moving women to end destination	1	S3
S5	Male	United Kingdom	Logistical tasks for S1	3	S6, S7, S8
S6	Male	The Netherlands	Retrieving women from asylum	1	S5
S7	Male	Italy	Moving women to end destination	1	S5
S8	Male	France	Unknown	2	V6, S5
S9	Female	Italy	Madam	7	V10, Priest, Unknown
S10	Female	Italy	Madam	3	V1, V3, V9
V1	Female	The Netherlands	Trafficked girl – trafficking stage	7	F1, F2, S2, S3, S10
V2	Female	The Netherlands	Trafficked girl – trafficking stage	1	S1
V3	Female	The Netherlands	Trafficked girl – trafficking stage	1	S10
V4	Female	The Netherlands	Trafficked girl – trafficking stage	3	S2, Unknown
V5	Female	The Netherlands	Trafficked girl – trafficking stage	1	Unknown
V6	Female	The Netherlands	Trafficked girl – trafficking stage	1	S2
V7	Female	The Netherlands	Trafficked girl – trafficking stage	1	S2
V8	Female	The Netherlands	Trafficked girl – trafficking stage	1	S2
V9	Female	Italy	Trafficked girl – exploitation stage	1	S10
V10	Female	Italy	Trafficked girl – exploitation stage	1	S9
F1	Male	Nigeria	Father of V1/Hostage	2	V1
F2	Female	Nigeria	Mother of V1/Hostage	1	V1

Coding keys: S = suspect, V = victim, F = family member.

centre have been tightened. None of the women can go out to school or church anymore. Beauty knows it is not her fault. She thinks her traffickers should not trouble her family:



- Beauty: If they bring you before Ayelala next time, you should flash [call and hang up] me from there, so that I can talk to the Ayelala priest myself.
- Father: Ok.
- Beauty: So that I can talk to him myself.

The conversation lasts a couple of minutes. Beauty promises to call again soon, and she assures her father that she is well. The next day, Beauty talks to her mother and discusses the 'Ayelala' shrine again.

From this fragment, a few aspects of voodoo as a coercive mechanism can be distinguished. The girl and her family seem to have been taken hostage both mentally and physically. Apparently, members of the trafficking network are able to force her father to appear before a voodoo temple in Benin City: the 'Ayelala' shrine. Furthermore, debt bondage is connected to a voodoo contract. Beauty incurred a debt by travelling to Europe and has to pay it back by working as a prostitute in Italy. Whenever she does not cooperate, threats are made to her and her family. At this stage, where she is being trafficked and in a vulnerable position, she still seems to have some agency to negotiate the content of the voodoo contract. She wants to talk to a voodoo priest directly. It appears that she believes the priest judges independently from the trafficking network. There are several conversations between Beauty and her family, in which the implications of the voodoo contract are discussed. In some conversations, it becomes apparent that both the girl and her parents are aware that the girl will work in prostitution.

The elaborate voodoo rituals that trafficked women have endured in Nigeria before their journey to Europe do not come up extensively in the phone conversations. However, police interviews with victims give insight into the content of these rituals. The rituals seem to take an extremely fear-inducing form that none of the women had experienced before. Voodoo priests perform them, sometimes in the presence of a boyfriend involved in human trafficking, or a 'madam' who takes care of recruitment. The fragment below is from an interview with a girl who was brought to the private house of a voodoo priest by the 'madam' who promised to bring her to Europe.

[Note by translator: V7 sounds scared throughout the whole interview]

- V7: S2 said I should eat the raw heart of a chicken. I then ate the raw chicken. My stomach hurt and I had to throw up. The priest said I should not throw up and had to swallow it, because it was very important for the oath. My stomach hurt a lot afterwards. I cried when I had to do that, I did not expect I had to do something like that. I did not know it was that bad.

Traffickers increase their threats to women who are unable to run away from asylum centres and to women who are generally less obedient in their communication with them. The suspect in the following fragment is a man who frequently traffics women to Europe. He contacts a group of victims placed in a Dutch asylum centre. He wants to let them know they are the most difficult group he has ever experienced. He tells them that, if everyone had been like Beauty and the others, he would never have stayed in this business.

- S2: They will smear the blood of her father over Beauty. Doesn't Beauty know how many people have died from foreign debts? Many people have died because of their debt. Even if she wants to talk to me now, the curse will remain.

### *The cynical use of voodoo in cooperation*

In addition to voodoo as a coercive mechanism that is effective even when victims are outside the direct physical control of their traffickers, the emergence of this category indicates that voodoo is also used in relationships between traffickers, logistical operators and 'madams'. Although some actors are able to give orders to others, their relationships are relatively equal compared with the vulnerable and bonded position of the trafficked women when threatened with voodoo.

One of the logistical operators, G, is stationed in Paris. He is not involved in any of the conversations directly but is frequently mentioned. Apparently he receives a sum of money to secure the journeys of women to Italy and Spain. He has asked for more money than he deserved and has to pay it back. His debt is due to S5, who resides in the United Kingdom and is in charge of overall logistics. G is called a cheater in several conversations. The news that G has been arrested reaches S5. He then makes a phone call to one of the traffickers, S6, who resides in the Netherlands but is currently in Nigeria:

- S6: What is G's full name?  
 S5: [Gives full name of G]  
 S6: I need it for the voodoo priest.  
 S5: You didn't tell the voodoo man that G was arrested?  
 S6: No.  
 S5: Tell the voodoo man they have to kill G. Tell him to stay stand-by in case O does not want to pay either.  
 S6: I will do one by one.

In a subsequent conversation, S5 confirms to S7 that this is the punishment appropriate for those who cheat on business agreements:

You should not live like that. What happened to him now is good for him, because some people will die in their sleep. I don't know who G thinks he is, because you cannot continue cheating people like this and think God will bless you, one day God will punish you.

Information on punishments and threats seems to travel through the network fast. All actors in the sample express a firm belief in voodoo. However, some seem to have a superior position that enables them to manipulate co-offenders by mentioning voodoo. S8 calls S5 to explain a predicament. He got arrested and feels like fortune is not on his side.

- S8: I am guessing something of voodoo. My Italian residence permits have been retracted, I cannot enter Italy, my father passed away, and my wife's Mercedes was stolen.

S5 asks him for details on his situation. The cause of the problems and their potential solution are discussed in terms of voodoo:

- S5: You are still under the influence of voodoo, you have to survive here first. Your problems started since you travelled back home.  
 S8: I don't know anymore, but I miss my wife and children.  
 S5: When will you be released?  
 S8: I expect in nine days.

This fragment shows how voodoo seeps into the daily lives of the traffickers. Explaining the situation by the influence of voodoo may be used cynically by S5 in order to reach a goal, but he would not be able to manipulate others if there was no authentic belief in voodoo among offenders as well. In other situations, offenders use voodoo to solve disputes over the coordination of criminal activities between each other. In these cases, the connection is always made to a third-party priest who can solve these issues. The dividing line between victim and offender fades where a 'madam' (S9) talks about the complicated system of debts. She names the women who owe her money in a conversation with a trafficker; she wants to punish the women with voodoo for not repaying a debt that stems from years ago. She also owes money to a trafficker who sold her women. Finally, a phone call reveals that she has also incurred a debt with a voodoo priest in Nigeria:

- Priest: I gave you my help when you were in prison. I got you your freedom back. I now want some money from you.  
 S9: I just have a new house, I was just released. I have no money now.  
 Priest: Where are you from?  
 S9: [mentions a village name]  
 Priest: Voodoo will be on you if you do not pay.

### *Non-cynical mention of voodoo as a belief system*

The effect of using voodoo in a cynical manipulative way can exist only if the actors actually believe in the reality of the consequences of voodoo. In the data, we also find actors mentioning voodoo as a part of their belief system in a non-cynical context. The codes making up this category concern the taboo that remains on the use of voodoo outside of a criminal context; voodoo is publicly discussed as an immoral practice, but it is nevertheless widely used and perceived as real in its effects. In many phone calls, voodoo is mentioned casually as a blessing or as an explanation for both misfortune and luck. The following excerpt illustrates the status of voodoo in the home town of a victim. She tells the police about her experiences with voodoo at home. She is told that voodoo does not exist in the Netherlands and that there is nothing to fear.

- V8: Yes, they practised voodoo at the palace. It's tradition. My father taught other people voodoo. There were more people who did voodoo. They were called Eddas. They stood closer to the king than my father. The king is called Oba.

### *The role of a voodoo priest as a third-party enforcer*

The role of the voodoo priest emerges as a theme in conversations that concern both the coercion of women and the solution to issues in cooperation, such as debt collection and dispute settlement. The role of a priest seems to be independent of the human trafficking network. The priests are paid for their services. Several actors, such as family members of victims and offenders, are able to approach a priest but the costs appear to be high. One of the traffickers has been arrested in the Netherlands and calls a co-offender in Nigeria to go to a voodoo priest in order to influence the outcome of the court judgment. He has called the man in Nigeria before and he promised to 'do voodoo for him'. Apparently, the arrested man wants to increase his chances and calls the wife of his friend in Nigeria as well (no details are available on her person):

- S4: I have to go to court on the 16th. Please do voodoo too.  
Unknown woman: I do not have the money. I don't. I will call my husband.

The priests that are called upon are linked to a religious shrine in Nigeria. A shrine that is mentioned by name in the conversations is 'Ayelala'. When attending to the needs of traffickers, the priest asks for specific information and names in order to perform voodoo. Some actors choose to withhold incriminating information from the priest, but in general a lot of details come his way. The priest is able to maintain a position of authority in all respects of voodoo use. There are instances where 'madams' perform voodoo rituals themselves. They imitate the inventions of the priest by making voodoo packages of the clothes and bodily fluids of women to intimidate them further. However, the ultimate authority seems to be the priest and there are no examples of actors directly contradicting a priest. Priests seem to use voodoo cynically. Their practices are adjusted to the needs of the human traffickers. A 'madam' (S10) accuses a girl of not making enough effort to escape the asylum and reach her destination in Italy. The 'madam' asks a priest for help:

- Priest: I will text her the curse. Even if she does not pick up her phone, the curse will reach her.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The categories that emerged from the data relate to levels of voodoo use: cooperation between offenders, the independence of the voodoo priest, coercion of women, and non-cynical mentions unrelated to human trafficking. Some actors condemn the use of voodoo, but none deny its existence. These findings broaden the understanding of voodoo beyond its use as a coercive mechanism. The categories are informed by a rational choice perspective that allows us to discuss participation in voodoo practices as a choice that actors face and seen in the context of the other options they have. The risk is to commit a functionalist fallacy by assuming that the existence of voodoo means it must have a function for the organization. However, previous evidence has already shown that voodoo is used effectively to bind women to the debt they owe their traffickers. The open research question leads to a broader empirical exploration of the role of voodoo in Nigerian human trafficking.

Voodoo as a coercion mechanism certainly emerges from the data as a main category; it forms the core of the *modus operandi* of the organization. Voodoo forms a hostage-taking mechanism through which victims comply out of fear for their own or their family's well being. However, it is not true that voodoo has no meaning for the traffickers apart from this use. Voodoo is used in cooperation to punish cheating parties and to settle disputes by a third-party enforcer. The reality of voodoo is certainly a part of the belief system of all the actors involved, but it can be put to use cynically at the same time. A belief system and its logic are appropriated and adapted to particular needs, in a situation in which institutional enforcement of contracts is lacking. This understanding is crucial in explaining the behaviour of the offenders. A rational actor will act according to their beliefs and will stop gathering information when the cost of doing so is too high (Elster, 2009). Checking the credibility of voodoo threats and the authority of priests is too costly for both human traffickers and their victims. Furthermore, the fear of voodoo may have a foundation if actual killings occasionally follow a voodoo threat. This explains why agreements enforced by voodoo form credible commitments between human traffickers (Campana and Varese, 2013). This contributes to an understanding of what holds human trafficking networks together. The traffickers not only fool the women with magic tricks they invent, but also believe in voodoo as a reality that could influence their own daily lives.

In interviews, victims refer to an elaborate voodoo justice system set against the backdrop of ancient shrines situated in the Edo region of Nigeria. Journalistic sources state that the majority of the cases coming before the voodoo shrines concern human trafficking: traffickers in effect control the priests and provide their *raison d'être* (Hourel, 2006). Nigerian witness testimonies (Larr, 2013) and the findings of this study seem to contradict this. Voodoo priests punish thieves, settle disputes between neighbours and enforce criminal contracts. Although the incentive for the priests' involvement appears to be mostly financial, the data do not reveal any more about the origins and career of a voodoo priest.

### *Limitations*

A limitation to this study is that saturation was not reached during the coding. Parts of the data were distinct from others and required new codes. Therefore, it was not possible to create a coding scheme for a part of the data and to test it for reliability on the rest. Although the variation in voodoo use exceeded current academic knowledge, the conclusion that all variation is found in these data cannot reliably be extrapolated. Reliability of the coding should be tested further on additional data in future research (Krippendorff, 2004: 212). The majority of the intercepted conversations concern the 'trafficking' stage of human trafficking. This is the stage at which the Dutch police recognized what was going on and intervened. The use of voodoo found here may be particular to this stage and may vary further over the 'recruitment' and 'exploitation' stages.

### *Recommendations for future research*

The findings offer additional evidence on the relationship between human traffickers and voodoo priests. In order to explain the persistence of trafficking from Nigeria, a potential

mechanism could be sought in voodoo shrines where priests serve as third-party enforcers to paying clients. Informed by the findings, an online search for the frequently mentioned 'Ayelala' shrine resulted in several articles that indicate that the shrine functions as a coherent court system (Larr, 2013). The temple has gained in popularity since the 1980s and evokes fear related to latently present traditional beliefs. Witnesses confirm that actual casualties occur at the shrine and that thieves are killed there (Larr, 2013). Future research should look into the role of the shrine. Does it function as a Mafia-like organization, governing both legal and illegal transactions (Varese, 2010)? Did voodoo shrines originate because of human trafficking or do they fill a gap in the Nigerian legal system caused by its inefficiency? And what is the interplay between the shrines and corrupt law-enforcers?

Furthermore, the findings generate several hypotheses. Future research could test the following propositions:

- The mention of voodoo in conversations between co-offenders increases the likelihood of cooperation.
- When the use of voodoo increases in a human trafficking network, the use of violence decreases.
- The agency of trafficked women in the use of voodoo is higher in the 'trafficking' stage than in the 'exploitation' stage.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this thesis was to explore the variation in the uses of voodoo in the Nigerian human trafficking ring under investigation, and to make sense of their meaning as a part of the functioning of the organization. The following four categories were elicited from the data:

- Category 1: Voodoo as a coercive mechanism, established by human traffickers and placed on women in vulnerable positions. In combination with debt bondage, the signing of a voodoo contract between trafficker and victim involves elaborate fear-inducing rituals that aim to keep women under control even when they are physically free to choose a course that is more to their advantage.
- Category 2: Voodoo as a cynical tool in cooperation, which has similar features to its use as a coercive mechanism, but plays a different role in the functioning of the organization. It is used to punish cheating parties and as a deterrent for others, and it relates to the third category when a third-party priest is asked to settle disputes.
- Category 3: The non-cynical use of voodoo as a belief system. This category includes the mention of voodoo that does not directly relate to transactions, but rather to the societal relevance of voodoo. It is found that, although a taboo remains on the use of voodoo in Nigerian society, belief in its effects is real and widespread.
- Category 4: The voodoo priest as an independent third-party enforcer – enforcing contracts, settling disputes and performing fear-inducing rituals on victims in exchange for payment. The priest has the reputation of being able to manipulate the daily lives of both traffickers and victims.

The categories contribute new findings to the literature on criminal cooperation. They give insight into how criminals are able to cooperate when no one is to be trusted, the risks are high and regular means of contract enforcement are not available. The findings further support the recommendation that immersion in the social world of both offenders and victims helps detect the weak links in human trafficking rings. In this case, considering voodoo as a coercive mechanism in the prosecution of offenders should be followed by the realization that voodoo is also a means of cooperation between offenders. It forms a potential point of weakness where criminal ties could be broken.

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### Notes

1. Human trafficking is outlawed under Dutch criminal code Art. 237f Sr. Jurisprudence ruling that the use of voodoo can be interpreted as an act of coercion is mentioned in Art. 237f Sr. see: ECLI:NL:RBZUT:2004:AP1883 and ECLI:NL:RBARN:2004:A04798.
2. The 'Ayelala' shrine mentioned in these conversations is an existing place of worship to the Ayelala deity in Benin City, Nigeria. There are some references by Nigerian authors to this shrine in relation to human trafficking (see Larr, 2013).

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