



HOW CULTURAL VALUES FACILITATE TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS IN EDO STATE, NIGERIA

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17340523>

Keywords: trafficking in persons, cultural practices, omonosemhen, ogbomhandia, ogbeloghomon, domestic servitude, sexual slavery

Abstract: Trafficking in Persons, a highly profitable, low risk organised crime, continues to thrive in various regions of the globe including Europe, the Gulf, Africa, and in Nigeria, its exceedingly lucrative in Edo State. The deeply rooted cultural system of the Edo people provide platforms for trafficking in persons activities. Cultural practices such as Omonosemhen (child fostering), Ogbomhandia (domestic helper), and Ogbeloghomon (child caregiver) historically served positive social purposes, including strengthening kinship ties, providing support for households, and ensuring communal responsibility. However, in contemporary times these cultural practices have been weaponised by traffickers, who exploit them to recruit and control vulnerable individuals for purposes of domestic servitude and sexual slavery. Employing the ethnographic research method, this study interrogates these cultural practices. Through interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaires, qualitative data gathered from diverse participants and stakeholders, reveals that cultural practices are manipulated and distorted by traffickers. They are used as mechanisms of control that compels compliance and sustains trafficking networks. The study concludes that although these practices retain social value, their exploitation underscores the urgent need to address the cultural dynamics facilitating trafficking. Incorporating cultural awareness into anti-trafficking strategies is therefore vital for dismantling manipulation and safeguarding vulnerable populations.

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Introduction

Trafficking in persons (TIP) is a highly profitable, yet relatively low risk organised crime that continues to thrive across multiple regions of the globe, including Europe, the Gulf States, and on the African continent. In Nigeria, the phenomenon is particularly acute in Edo State, where it has become exceedingly lucrative (Otoide, 2019; Olubukola, 2020). The West African state, it can be argued, is an epicentre of trafficking activities, with traffickers capitalising on certain socio-cultural practices that encourages migration as a pathway to success. Profitability of trafficking is sustained by deep rooted cultural values that were originally designed to foster kinship and deepen communal responsibilities. Revered cultural practices such as *Omonosemhen* (child fostering), *Ogbomhandia* (domestic helper), and *Ogbelohomon* (child caregiver) occupy a central place in the social fabric of Edo communities. Historically, these practices were deeply rooted in communal life and served constructive purposes that reinforced kinship ties and promoted collective welfare.

However, in contemporary contexts these traditional practices have been significantly distorted and weaponised by traffickers. What once symbolised mutual support and cultural cohesion is now exploited as a means of recruitment, manipulation, and control. Traffickers exploit the trust embedded in these traditions, convincing families that sending their

children to serve as helpers or caregivers will secure better opportunities, education, or financial support. In reality, many of these children and young women are channelled into exploitative networks that subject them to domestic servitude, forced labour, or sexual slavery both within Nigeria and abroad. The social legitimacy of these practices makes them particularly effective tools for traffickers, who cloak their exploitation in cultural acceptance, making it difficult for families and communities to recognise or resist the abuse. Such exploitations makes the state a strategic hub for traffickers who recruit and exploit individuals, especially young women.

Scholarly works abound on culture as a significant factor that shapes the vulnerabilities and mechanisms of TIP. Magesa's (2023) study on northern Tanzania reveals how entrenched gendered domestic violence exposes young women to risk of being trafficked. DiRienzo and Das's article titled "Human Trafficking: The Role of Culture," opine that, cultural values shape TIP, while cultural silence impedes detection. In "Cultural Approaches within Programs Designed to Address Human Trafficking in Native Communities," the authors demonstrate how cultural responsiveness, through the inclusion of traditional healing, language use, and cultural advisors, enhances victim support. While Lagi (2021), highlights the intersectionality of Edo

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cultural practices, and gender-based violence and how they sustain trafficking. Still, existing works within this discourse failed to examine how traffickers manipulate cultural practices as recruitment mechanisms. Therefore, it is this gap that this paper seeks to fill by assessing the ways cultural values are exploited as tools for the recruitment of victims.

Employing ethnographic research design and analysis, this study critically interrogates the practices of *Omonosemhen*, *Ogbomhandia*, and *Ogbeloghomon* to understand the dynamics of TIP in the state. Primary and secondary data were collected through a combination of oral interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaires. It engaged a wide range of participants, including survivors of trafficking whose firsthand accounts shed light on the processes of recruitment and control, as well as community elders and cultural custodians who offered historical and cultural perspectives on the original functions of these practices. Law enforcement officials and anti-trafficking advocates contributed insights into the institutional and legal challenges of addressing trafficking, while ordinary community members provided perspectives on prevailing social attitudes and beliefs. To address these issues, the following research questions are interrogated: How are *Omonosemhen*, *Ogbomhandia*, and *Ogbeloghomon* traditionally understood and practised within Edo society? In what ways do traffickers manipulate or distort these cultural practices to recruit, control, and exploit victims? And how do members of community, cultural custodians, and law enforcement officials,

perceive the relationship between these practices and contemporary trafficking activities in the state?

The objectives of the research are as follows: To examine how traditional cultural practices such as *Omonosemhen*, *Ogbomhandia*, and *Ogbeloghomon* are historically understood and practised within Edo society. To investigate the ways in which traffickers manipulate, distort, and exploit these cultural values and practices as mechanisms for recruitment, control, and concealment in TIP. To analyse the perceptions of community members, cultural custodians, and relevant stakeholders on the relationship between cultural practices and contemporary trafficking activities, with a view to identifying culturally grounded strategies for prevention.

This study was guided by rigorous ethical standards to protect participants' dignity, safety, and rights. All participants were volunteers and gave informed consent obtained either verbally or in writing. Privacy was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage. In addition, reflexivity and cultural responsiveness was central to ensure respectful representation of traditions, avoiding stigmatisation, and guaranteeing findings reflected participants' voices. The study complied with institutional and international ethical frameworks, including the Belmont Report, Declaration of Helsinki, UNESCO's bioethics principles, and the Palermo Protocol. Ethical approval was granted by Harper Adams University (Approval No. 1154-201911-PGMPHD).

Background

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Nigeria is a major originating country for victims of modern slavery trafficked to European countries like Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, and the UK (Carling, 2006; Ellis, 2016; Ikeora, 2018; Igbinomwanhia and Ugiagbe 2024; Marrocu, 2024). It is also reputed for being a hub for the crime of trafficking in person - flourishing with both internal and cross-border trade in human beings (Okojie, 2005; UNESCO, 2006; Ellis, 2016). The trafficking of young Nigerian women to Europe is generally recognised as one of the most persistent global trafficking flows (Okojie, 2005; Ellis, 2016). Within the country, Edo State ranks first in TIP activities (Ezeh, 2017; NAPTIP, 2022), and many of the women trafficked from the state are aware that the only job opportunity that awaits them is in the sex industry (Cwikel, and Hoban, 2005; Weitzer, 2011). While such awareness might seem like agency, this was hardly the case as they were oblivious to the working conditions that awaited them, and the duration of servitude required of them (Carling, 2006; Igbinomwanhia and Ugiagbe 2024, Ezeh, 2017).

Traffickers lure prospective victims through cultural practices that they ordinarily recognise as harmless, socially accepted and beneficial. Since *Omonosemhen*, *Ogbomhandia*, and *Ogbelohomon* are intricately woven into the fabric of daily life, dictating social norms and expectations, it was not uncommon for prospective victims to embrace such offers without questioning the motives of supposed benefactors. Victims are recruited with promises of better opportunities away from home, only to find themselves trapped in exploitative

conditions (Okojie, 2005; Carling, 2006; Ellis, 2016; Ezeh, 2017).

Conceptual clarification

Two concepts are crucial to the discourse at hand, cultural values and TIP. Cultural values: the significance of cultural values lie in their ability to influence both individual and collective behaviour (Singelis, and Brown, 1995; Melucci, 2013). As Bennett and Frow (2008) observe, culture exerts a powerful force in shaping community life, affecting how people perceive themselves and others, how they form relationships, and how they respond to external pressures. It represents one of the most powerful forces shaping the identity, behaviour, and organisation of any society. They may be understood as the shared principles, beliefs, and ideals that define what is considered right, desirable, or acceptable within a particular community (Singelis, and Brown, 1995; Schwartz, 2012; Melucci, 2013). These values are neither static nor mere abstract ideals. They are embedded in daily practices, rituals, and social institutions, evolve over time while still retaining elements of continuity that give a community its distinct identity. Cultural values provide the framework within which individuals interpret their experiences and make decisions. It is the moral compass that guides social interactions, political structures, and economic relations in communities. It is within this understanding that the concept of cultural value is used in this study. Trafficking in persons: TIP has emerged as one of the most pressing global challenges of the twenty-first century. It is commonly defined as “the recruitment, transportation, harbouring, or

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receipt of persons by means of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power, or manipulation of vulnerability for the purpose of exploitation” (United Nations, 2000). There are two primal forms of TIP: sex trafficking and forced labour. The U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 defines sex trafficking as “a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years” (U.S Department of States, 2025; Sikka, 2019; Nguyen, 2010). It goes further to define forced labour as harbouring or obtaining a person for labour or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion,” and subjecting same to “involuntary servitude,” “bondage, or slavery” (U.S Department of States, 2025). It manipulative nature makes consents of trafficked victims irrelevant (United Nations, 2000). Thus, at its core, trafficking constitutes the commodification of human beings, where individuals are treated as objects to be traded for the financial or economic gain of traffickers (Rahman, 2011; Vogel, 2017; Ezech, 2017). Unlike other forms of organised crime, TIP is unique in that its “commodity” is reusable; victims are often recycled, exploited repeatedly, and resold, which makes the crime exceptionally profitable (Bales, 2007; Patterson, 2012). It is this concept of trafficking that is applied to this paper.

The Practice of *Omonosemhen*, *Ogbomhandia*, and *Ogbeloghomon* in Edo Land

Drawing analysis from the ethnographic study, this work determines that the Edo people hold a profound respect for their culture, a respect that

permeates their daily lives, social interactions, and communal practices (Braimah, 2013). This cultural reverence is particularly evident in traditional childcare systems such as *Omonosemhen*, *Ogbomhandia*, and *Ogbeloghomon*, which reflect the communal philosophy underpinning Edo society. Childcare is never regarded as the exclusive duty of biological parents; rather, it is embedded within a broader kinship and communal framework that emphasises shared responsibility, solidarity, and the continuity of life. These three interrelated practices illustrate how the Edo safeguard child welfare, support mothers, and reinforce intergenerational bonds, while simultaneously transmitting values, knowledge, and cultural identity across generations.

Omonosemhen, literally meaning child fostering, refers to the act of caring for another person’s child by a close relative as if the child were one’s own. In this arrangement, the fostered child is accorded the same honour, respect, and privileges enjoyed by biological children, without discrimination. This system not only strengthens kinship ties but also redistributes responsibilities across extended families, ensuring that no child is left vulnerable in cases of widowhood, economic hardship, or orphanhood. Beyond safeguarding children, *Omonosemhen* functions as a form of social resilience, granting children opportunities to grow in environments where they receive better training, moral guidance, or social connections. The practice highlights the Edo conviction that a child belongs to the wider family, not merely to the nuclear household.

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In Edo land, Omonosemhen provides immense benefits such as expanding opportunities for children, especially in education, sharing childrearing costs, and addressing demographic imbalances. It serves as an adaptive strategy for households to manage economic or social challenges. Hence, it remains a revered practice. In unforeseen circumstances such as the death of a parent, it helps families manage crises by serving as a safety net. With the high rate of poverty in the land, the practice of Omonosemhen allows households to share the financial and practical burdens inherent in raising children. From a demographic perspective, Omonosemhen helps households address imbalances such as childlessness or an unfavourable gender composition among existing children. It enables families to manage demographic adjustments, ensuring continuity and balance within the homes. For host families, this practice brings mutual benefits as they often receive child labour or other services in exchange for care and for addressing the child's social and demographic needs. Furthermore, in high-risk environmental and agricultural cycles, fostering allows children to adapt and develop a broader range of skills outside their homes. This exposure not only prepares them for adult life but also strengthens the resilience of both the children and the households involved. Children fostered by more affluent households improve their human capital and gain diverse skills not available in their birth homes.

In tandem is the practice of Ogbomhandia, which extends the principle of collective responsibility beyond immediate kinship ties. Ogbomhandia

involves the care of a child belonging to a distant relative, a friend, or even a fellow community member. It underscores the depth of communal solidarity in Edo culture, where trust and reciprocity transcend bloodlines. In these arrangements, children are provided with shelter, nourishment, and moral training, while being treated with dignity and belonging within the host household. Ogbomhandia thus reinforces social cohesion, broadens networks of mutual care, and reflects the Edo worldview that the well-being of a child is integral to the stability of the community as a whole.

Among the Edo people, the practice of Ogbomhandia is highly valued as part of the community's social and cultural system. It is not perceived as exploitation, but rather as a means of strengthening kinship ties, sharing responsibilities, and ensuring the well-being of households. One of its main benefits is the relief it provides to families in managing domestic tasks such as childcare, cooking, and other household chores, thereby allowing parents and older members of the family to focus on farming, trading, or other forms of livelihood. In this way, labour is shared across the household, fostering balance between economic productivity and family life.

Beyond this functional role, Ogbomhandia reinforces kinship and social solidarity. Ogbomhandia are often relatives or children from neighbouring households, and their presence in another home deepens communal ties and creates networks of mutual assistance. It

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also serves as a form of training, since helpers acquire essential domestic and social skills, learning discipline, responsibility, and respect for elders. Such experiences prepare them for adulthood, particularly in managing their own households in the future.

The system is mutually beneficial: while helpers offer labour, the host families provide food, shelter, clothing, and in many cases access to schooling or apprenticeships. For children from less privileged backgrounds, this often means greater opportunities for economic and social advancement than they might otherwise have in their natal homes. Over time, these relationships create bonds of reciprocity, with host families continuing to support their helpers in areas such as marriage negotiations or job opportunities, long after their period of service has ended.

Ultimately, Ogbomhandia reflects the Edo cultural values of solidarity, hospitality, and communal responsibility. By enabling the transfer of practical skills, moral values, and cultural traditions across generations, it functions as a mechanism for social integration and cultural continuity. Far from being a system of exploitation, it embodies the Edo understanding of mutual care and shared responsibility within an extended family and community framework.

A third pillar of Edo childcare practice is Ogbeloghomon, which signifies the nurturing role of grandmothers in supporting both mother and child during the delicate postpartum period. Grandmothers not only nurse newborns but also assist mothers with household chores, guidance, and emotional reassurance. This

intergenerational support system eases the burden of motherhood, safeguards maternal health, and ensures that infants receive consistent care. Moreover, Ogbeloghomon serves as a channel for the transmission of indigenous knowledge, such as dietary practices, infant care techniques, and moral instruction, thereby preserving cultural continuity across generations.

Among the Edo people, the practice of Ogbeloghomon is highly valued as an expression of communal responsibility and solidarity in child upbringing. It provides essential support for mothers, especially those engaged in farming, trading, or other forms of economic activity, by ensuring that their children receive attentive care in their absence. This practice not only safeguards the welfare of the child, offering comfort, feeding, and protection, but also contributes to the health and well-being of mothers, who are able to rest, recover, and manage their responsibilities without neglecting childcare.

Ogbeloghomon further serves as an important avenue for socialisation, as caregivers, often older relatives or trusted community members, transmit cultural values, language, and moral lessons to children. In this way, children grow up immersed in the cultural ethos of the Edo people, reinforcing the principle that every child belongs to the wider community. The practice also strengthens kinship bonds and mutual trust, fostering cooperation among families and deepening the sense of interdependence that underpins Edo communal life.

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In addition, Ogbeloghomon functions as a form of informal training for young women, who, by caring for younger children, acquire practical skills in nurturing, home management, and responsibility that prepare them for marriage and motherhood. Beyond the household, the practice indirectly supports economic stability by freeing mothers to engage fully in productive work, thereby contributing to household income and community trade without jeopardising the welfare of their children.

Finally, the system of caregiving provides resilience in times of crisis. In situations where mothers are ill, absent, or deceased, the presence of caregivers ensures continuity of care, love, and cultural upbringing for children, including orphans and the vulnerable. Through Ogbeloghomon, the Edo people embody the conviction that child-rearing is not an individual burden but a shared duty, thus weaving childcare into the very fabric of community life.

Put together, *Omonosemhen*, *Ogbomhandia*, and *Ogbeloghomon* reveal an integrated framework of child welfare in Edo society, rooted in kinship, reciprocity, and communal solidarity. They ensured that children were never isolated, that mothers received essential support, and that knowledge and values were passed down through generations. These practices illustrate the Edo philosophy that childcare is not an individual burden but a collective responsibility, thereby embedding the growth of each child into the broader fabric of community life.

The Manipulation of the Edo Cultural Practices of Omonosemhen,

Ogbomhandia, and Ogbeloghomon by Human Traffickers

Omonosemhen: Ethnographic evidence and testimonies from focus group participants reveal that this once life-affirming practice has, in modern contexts, been significantly distorted, becoming an avenue for neglect, exploitation, and even trafficking.

In contemporary reality, many children fostered under the pretext of *Omonosemhen* are denied their fundamental rights within the relative's household. Instead of being integrated as full members of the family, such children are often relegated to positions of servitude, expected to perform domestic labour disproportionate to their age and status. Participants in the focus group observed that fostered children are frequently utilised as nannies, responsible for caring for younger children and undertaking household chores, while being systematically excluded from educational opportunities. Unlike biological children who are enrolled in school and provided with a pathway to personal development, the fostered child is deprived of formal education, leaving them trapped in cycles of illiteracy and dependency.

This abuse of *Omonosemhen* represents a fundamental inversion of its cultural purpose. Whereas the practice once sought to nurture and empower, in its distorted form it diminishes the dignity of the child and violates both cultural expectations and international human rights standards. More troublingly, the modern perversion of fostering has created fertile ground for child trafficking. Families that accept children under the guise of *Omonosemhen* may

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later transfer them to urban centres or across borders, where they are subjected to forced labour, domestic servitude, or sexual exploitation. In this sense, *Omonosemhen*, stripped of its communal safeguards and moral foundation, has become a convenient cover for exploitative practices that feed into wider trafficking networks.

Thus, while *Omonosemhen* historically embodied Edo values of solidarity and collective responsibility, its distortion in the modern socio-economic climate underscores the vulnerability of cultural practices to abuse. What was once a protective institution has, in certain cases, been reconfigured into a mechanism of exploitation, highlighting the urgent need for cultural renewal, legal safeguards, and community awareness to reclaim its original purpose.

Ogbomhandia: In contemporary practice, *Ogbomhandia* has been significantly distorted and stripped of its cultural ethos of dignity and care. Ethnographic findings and testimonies from focus group participants indicate that children placed in these arrangements are frequently denied their basic needs, particularly access to formal education. Instead of being nurtured and guided, they are subjected to exploitative roles within the household, functioning primarily as domestic servants. Their daily lives often revolve around household chores, childcare responsibilities, and menial labour, leaving little or no room for personal growth or schooling.

This distortion has further exposed such children to different forms of abuse, ranging from verbal and emotional maltreatment to physical and, in

some cases, sexual abuse. By being reduced to the status of servants, children in *Ogbomhandia* arrangements are robbed of their childhood, their dignity, and their future prospects. Focus group participants observed that these children are not treated with the same respect as biological children of the household, creating a system of exclusion and marginalisation that directly contradicts the original purpose of the practice.

The modern corruption of *Ogbomhandia* has also become a breeding ground for TIP and organised exploitation. Under the guise of offering help, children are often transferred from rural areas to urban centres, where they are further subjected to forced domestic labour, street hawking, or sexual exploitation. In such cases, what began as a culturally sanctioned act of communal responsibility is manipulated into a channel for servitude and trafficking.

This trajectory demonstrates the fragility of cultural institutions when uprooted from their ethical foundations. Whereas *Ogbomhandia* once symbolised mutual trust and communal solidarity, in today's context it has, in many instances, become a mechanism of systemic abuse and exploitation. The challenge, therefore, lies in disentangling authentic cultural practices from their distorted forms and in creating legal and cultural safeguards to reclaim *Ogbomhandia's* original purpose as a protective and empowering tradition for children.

Ogbelohomon: In modern contexts, this once life-affirming tradition has been distorted and co-opted into exploitative practices. Ethnographic evidence, drawn from both

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interviews and focus group discussions, reveals that traffickers have appropriated the cultural symbolism of *Ogbeloghomon* as a deceptive recruitment strategy. They convince unsuspecting families and young women that they are being taken to “care for a child” or assist a relative, echoing the traditional nurturing role of grandmothers or trusted caregivers. Yet, instead of fulfilling these responsibilities, victims often find themselves denied their basic rights and subjected to abuse, servitude, or forced labour.

Participants noted with concern that this deception frequently leads to the exploitation of individuals in the sex trade. Under the guise of a culturally familiar practice, traffickers manipulate trust within families and communities, exposing women and girls to situations of profound vulnerability. Once removed from their protective environments, these individuals are stripped of agency, exploited sexually, and denied the care and respect that *Ogbeloghomon* was originally designed to embody.

This distortion underscores the dangerous ways in which cultural values can be manipulated when uprooted from their ethical foundations. *Ogbeloghomon*, which once represented compassion, solidarity, and the continuity of life, is now in certain contexts twisted into a mechanism of abuse and trafficking. The appropriation of such practices by traffickers illustrates not only the erosion of cultural integrity but also the urgent need for education, awareness, and legal protections to prevent the

exploitation of vulnerable individuals under the guise of tradition.

Social Perceptions of Omonosemhen, Ogbomhandia, and Ogbeloghomon as Tools for TIP

Community members often express ambivalence. On one hand, they acknowledge that practices such as *Omonosemhen*, *Ogbomhandia*, and *Ogbeloghomon* were historically noble traditions that safeguarded children, promoted solidarity, and reinforced family networks. On the other hand, many recognise that these practices have been distorted in contemporary contexts. Focus group discussions reveal that community members see a direct link between these cultural practices and modern trafficking, as children are now denied education, subjected to servitude, and in some cases lured into exploitative labour or sex work under the pretext of fostering or caregiving. They perceive traffickers as manipulating cultural trust to entrap victims.

Cultural custodians typically defend the original integrity of these practices, emphasising that their purpose was protective and not exploitative. They lament that economic hardship, urbanisation, and moral decline have eroded cultural safeguards, allowing traffickers to exploit what were once communal safety nets. For them, the link between these childcare practices and trafficking lies not in the traditions themselves but in their misuse and corruption. Some custodians also feel that modern legal frameworks and external influences have undermined communal authority, making it

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more difficult to regulate fostering practices and protect children.

Law enforcement officials often view these cultural practices through a more critical lens, seeing them as potential enablers of trafficking. From their perspective, *Omonosemhen*, *Ogbomhandia*, and *Ogbelohomon* create grey areas that traffickers exploit. Since these practices traditionally involved the movement of children within or outside families, traffickers use them as cultural cover to legitimise recruitment, transportation, or harbouring of victims. Police and anti-trafficking officers frequently report that cases of trafficking are concealed within the language of fostering or caregiving, making investigations difficult. They therefore perceive a need for cultural sensitisation and stronger legal frameworks to distinguish between authentic caregiving practices and exploitative arrangements.

Therefore, the practices of *Omonosemhen*, *Ogbomhandia*, and *Ogbelohomon*, once protective, now serve as entry points for the crime of TIP, or tools for traffickers to exploit cultural legitimacy to entrap victims. Still, less attention has been paid to the perceptions of community members, cultural custodians, and law enforcement officials regarding these distortions, and how such perceptions shape prevention, intervention, and policy responses.

The Fieldwork

The fieldwork engaged eighty-nine participants across its three stages in six endemic communities. During the first stage, seventeen individuals were interviewed, comprising community elders, teachers, students, victims of

TIP, market women, and law enforcement agencies, while thirty-two completed questionnaires were returned. The second stage involved three focus group discussions with thirty-five participants. The third stage consisted of eight selected days of interviews with five non-governmental organisations (NGOs), conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Collectively, this yielded a research population of eighty-nine participants. All participants in the interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires were aged twenty-one years and above. Through this ethnographic study, the researcher sought to contribute to a broader understanding of the Edo people's cultural patterns and how traffickers use them to recruit their victims.

Data Collection and Findings

The researcher undertook an ethnographic study to understand the traditional cultural norms of the people and how traffickers manipulate them to traffic their victims. By immersing himself in the daily lives of the community, the researcher gathered in-depth insights into the cultural practices that traffickers exploit for their nefarious purposes. The study involved participant observation, where the researcher actively engaged in the community's activities, engaging the community in a focus group discussion, in-depth interviews and informal conversations with various members. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the traditional cultural value system that shapes the community's way of life.

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For example, the researcher observed that elders in the Edo community are highly respected and often serve as custodians of cultural knowledge and traditions. Their approval and blessings are sought for major decisions and events. However, the researcher discovered that the traffickers exploit the deep-seated trust and respect for elders by positioning themselves as trustworthy figures or collaborating with unscrupulous community leaders. They gain the confidence of families by promising better opportunities for their children.

Understanding Omonosemhen, Ogbomhandia, and Ogbeloghomon in Traditional Edo Society

Data collected from interviews with community elders, teachers, students, market women, and questionnaire respondents illustrate the deep cultural significance of *Omonosemhen* (child fostering), *Ogbomhandia* (domestic helper), and *Ogbeloghomon* (caregiving) within Edo society. These practices are historically rooted in kinship and communal responsibility, operating as mechanisms of solidarity, cultural continuity, and social integration.

Community elders emphasised that *Omonosemhen* allowed kinship groups to share the responsibility of raising children, often ensuring their welfare when parents faced economic or personal hardship. One elder explained: “A child does not belong only to the mother or father; he belongs to all of us. If I cannot feed my child, my brother or sister can help, and the child will still grow well.” Similarly, *Ogbomhandia* was described not as exploitation but as a structured form of domestic

assistance that enabled households to function while transmitting practical skills. *Ogbeloghomon*, centred on the nurturing role of grandmothers, was viewed as indispensable for safeguarding maternal health and transmitting intergenerational knowledge.

Teachers and students added further perspectives. Teachers observed that fostering and caregiving influenced school attendance, sometimes positively, but also creating challenges when children were drawn into household duties. As one teacher noted: “Some children come late or miss school because they have responsibilities at home. It is part of our tradition, but it affects their education.” Students acknowledged the cultural importance of these practices yet admitted that younger people increasingly see them as outdated. A student remarked: “We hear the stories from our parents, but many of us think things are different now. We are not sure these practices still work the way they used to.”

Market women stressed the economic role of these systems, particularly in enabling them to trade while ensuring children were cared for. “When I go to the market, my mother or another woman will look after my baby. Without this, I cannot sell or survive,” one trader explained. Questionnaire data confirmed that these practices remain valued, though respondents expressed concern about their decline under the pressures of poverty and migration.

Manipulation and Distortion of Traditional Practices by Traffickers

The second research question examined how traffickers manipulate these cultural practices to

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recruit, control, and exploit victims. Findings reveal that traffickers cloak their activities in the legitimacy of tradition, exploiting the trust and authority embedded in Edo cultural norms.

Community elders noted that traffickers frequently pose as relatives or patrons, invoking the tradition of fostering. As one elder observed: *“They come and say, ‘Let me take your child to the city, I will train him in school.’ In our culture, this sounds good. But later, the child suffers.”* What was once a system of kin-based solidarity is thus transformed into a pathway for exploitation?

Teachers and students highlighted the consequences of such manipulation for education. A teacher recounted: *“We had a girl who stopped coming to school. Her uncle said he was taking her to Lagos for studies. We later heard she was working in a house as a maid.”* Students admitted being aware of peers who disappeared under similar circumstances. *“We know when someone leaves suddenly. The parents say it is for opportunity, but we suspect it is something else,”* one student remarked.

Market women revealed how *Ogbomhandia* has been distorted. Traditionally a mutual support system, it is now used to channel young girls into exploitative domestic labour. *“People say it is Ogbomhandia, but the girl is not treated like family. She is working too hard, and no one is watching,”* a market woman explained.

NGO representatives also drew attention to the manipulation of *Ogbelohomon*. One officer shared: *“Some traffickers pretend to be caregivers. They tell the family, ‘We will take care of this orphan,’ but then they move the child*

to another state or abroad. The family believes they are helping, but it is exploitation.”

Across all groups, a common theme emerged: traffickers reconfigure cultural practices rather than dismissing them. This manipulation secures parental consent, silences community suspicion, and shields criminal activity.

Community, Cultural Custodian, and Law Enforcement Perceptions

The third research question considered perceptions of these practices in relation to trafficking. Responses reveal a complex interplay of cultural pride, generational change, and law enforcement realities.

Community elders defended the integrity of the practices. *“In our time, these things were never evil. We cared for each other’s children. Trafficking is something new, something foreign, that uses our good customs for bad,”* one elder insisted. For them, trafficking is a corruption born of poverty and declining communal safeguards.

Teachers and students expressed mixed views. A teacher explained: *“The culture is good, but today it is risky. Families believe they are helping, but sometimes they are giving their children to traffickers.”* Students echoed this unease. *“We respect our traditions, but we also hear stories of girls taken to Europe. So, we are afraid,”* one student shared. These voices illustrate generational ambivalence about whether cultural practices can still function safely.

Market women acknowledged both the benefits and risks. *“Before, we sent children to relatives, and they grew up fine. Now, we fear. Sometimes*

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the child does not come back,” one trader observed. For them, poverty and unemployment increase the likelihood of families accepting traffickers’ promises.

Law enforcement officials emphasised how cultural legitimacy complicates detection. *“When we investigate, families say, ‘This is our tradition.’ They do not see it as crime until it is too late,”* one officer explained. They stressed the importance of engaging with cultural custodians to distinguish genuine practices from exploitation. *“We cannot fight trafficking without the cooperation of the community. If they trust us, we can protect their culture and stop the crime,”* another officer noted.

Together, these perspectives highlight a layered understanding: elders defend cultural integrity, younger generation’s voice uncertainty, market women stress economic vulnerability, and law enforcement officials warn of exploitation masked by culture.

Synthesis

Findings across the three research questions demonstrate both the enduring value and the contemporary fragility of Edo cultural practices. *Omonosemhen*, *Ogbomhandia*, and *Ogbelohomon* remain rooted in solidarity, interdependence, and cultural transmission, but traffickers exploit the trust inherent in these systems for recruitment and control. Perceptions vary: elders uphold cultural pride, students and teachers express ambivalence, market women highlight precarious economic realities, and law enforcement underscores vulnerability to organised crime.

This evidence underscores the need for culturally grounded counter-trafficking strategies. Protecting the integrity of these traditions while instituting safeguards against manipulation is essential to addressing modern slavery in Edo State. As one NGO officer concluded: *“Culture is not the enemy. It is our strength. But if we do not protect it, traffickers will continue to use it against us.”*

Overall, the study provides empirical evidence of how traffickers exploit the basic cultural practices in the State to traffic victims. The findings also reveal that culture is not only used to manipulate victims but has become a means of exploitation due to poverty and unemployment.

Results

The key findings from the researcher’s ethnographic study indicate that traffickers skilfully manipulate cultural norms of respect and trust to their advantage. They often present themselves as benefactors, leveraging cultural ceremonies and community gatherings to mask their true intentions. It was also discovered that economic challenges make some families more susceptible to traffickers’ promises of financial support or job opportunities abroad. The cultural expectation of providing for one’s family is often exploited by traffickers. Largely, the researcher discovered that there is a general lack of awareness among community members about the tactics used by traffickers, especially when the traffickers operate under the guise of cultural and economic support for needy families.

The results from the focus group and interviews with the NGOs reveal that traffickers manipulate the culture of the people to traffic their victims.

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The findings indicate that this is possible out of the people's reverend for their culture. The researcher discovered that traffickers recruit both males and females as their victims, but females are trafficked more than males. Females within the bracket age of 16 and 30 years are the majority of those trafficked. The findings from the field work also revealed that one of the main ideologies that contribute to having more females as victims of TIP is that culturally, women are seen as material and relegated to socially assigned feminine roles while males occupy the lucrative businesses in society. The feminisation of poverty and unemployment is another factor facilitating the trafficking of women. The findings from the focus group interviews also indicate that most youths are aware that they are being trafficked but are not aware of the imminent danger awaiting them along the route and at their destination. The researcher found out that many of the youth think that they are cleverer, stronger, and more resilient than those caught in the web of trafficking. The focus group interviews again revealed that many of the youth are under the impression that once the traffickers help them to get to their point of destination, the traffickers will only hold them bound for a short period of two to three years, after which they will gain their freedom.

Discussion and Contribution to Knowledge

The findings of this research demonstrate that cultural values, while historically rooted in solidarity, communal responsibility, and interdependence, are increasingly manipulated

by traffickers in Edo State to sustain TIP. The exploitation of these cultural norms is compounded by systemic poverty, weak governance, and corruption, which provide fertile ground for traffickers to distort traditions for criminal gain.

Poverty, Governance Failure, and the Exploitation of Trust

A central theme that emerged from both interviews and focus group discussions is the pervasive effect of poverty and the inability of government to address it adequately. Participants emphasised that traffickers exploit economic hardship by promising victims lucrative jobs abroad. This promise, when combined with declining state capacity and widespread unemployment, positions traffickers as seemingly credible alternatives to state provision.

Cultural values of trust and kinship further amplify vulnerability. Trust, as a deeply embedded Edo cultural element, normally sustains family and community cohesion. However, traffickers manipulate this trust to gain legitimacy within communities. As one of the Interviewee remarked, traffickers exploit family and community networks, presenting themselves as benefactors who offer better opportunities. The high premium placed on trust within Edo society thus becomes a cultural vulnerability that traffickers exploit to access victims.

Child Fostering and Domestic Helping as Sites of Manipulation

The research highlights the way traffickers distort *Omonosemhen* and *Ogbomhandia*.

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Traditionally, *Omonosemhen* ensured the upbringing of children within the extended family, providing education, discipline, and socialisation. Similarly, *Ogbomhandia* allowed children to assist households while acquiring life skills. These practices were framed as reciprocal and beneficial.

However, the interviews and focus groups reveal that traffickers adopt these customs as facades for exploitation. Parents are promised that their children will receive education and care, yet the children are frequently subjected to abuse and forced labour. NGO representatives observed that such manipulation corrupts a cultural system designed to nurture children, converting it into a mechanism of exploitation. In this way, trafficking syndicates pervert the dignity of the human person by replacing reciprocity with coercion.

Corruption, Cabalism, and Political Culture

The culture of corruption within Nigerian governance structures emerged as a recurrent theme. Participants argued that traffickers exploit bribery, weak law enforcement, and political patronage to shield their operations. One of the Interviewee noted that traffickers understand and exploit cultural and political norms, including cabalism, the dominance of personal networks and favour over accountability. This allows traffickers to protect their operations while communities rationalise these practices as culturally legitimate.

Gender inequality was also highlighted as a cultural norm that traffickers exploit. Patriarchal attitudes marginalise women and children,

limiting their rights and protections. Traffickers prey on this vulnerability, particularly targeting young women, while cultural stigma around trafficking discourages victims from speaking out. Thus, cultural and political systems intersect to reinforce silence and complicity.

Ritual Practices and Spiritual Control

The research also uncovers the manipulation of spiritual traditions. Rituals, shrines, and the authority of juju priests, traditionally consulted for healing and protection, are co-opted by traffickers to enforce compliance. Victims are compelled to take oaths at shrines, binding them through fear of spiritual retribution if they disobey or reveal traffickers' operations. As Onuzulike (2014) notes, oral traditions and rituals, once protective, are reimagined as instruments of psychological control. Focus group discussions confirmed that traffickers use these spiritual practices not as cultural heritage but as mechanisms of coercion, reinforcing their power over victims.

Cultural Familiarity and Insider Knowledge

Another significant finding is that traffickers are often insiders, members of the same communities they exploit. This insider status provides cultural familiarity, allowing traffickers to manipulate practices with legitimacy and evade suspicion. Families perceive their involvement as consistent with cultural obligations, thereby lowering resistance and scrutiny.

Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the findings indicate that cultural values in Edo State serve a dual role: as

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systems of communal care and as sites of vulnerability. Practices such as child fostering and ritual oaths, once protective, have been appropriated by traffickers to recruit, control, and exploit. Poverty, corruption, and systemic governance failures exacerbate these vulnerabilities, ensuring that traffickers can thrive by embedding themselves within cultural traditions.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes several important contributions to scholarship on TIP, cultural studies, and criminology.

Illuminating Cultural Vulnerabilities

The research advances knowledge by showing how cultural values, particularly trust, fostering, caregiving, and ritual practices, can function as double-edged swords. While traditionally intended to uphold solidarity and mutual care, these values now facilitate exploitation when appropriated by traffickers. This important insight adds depth to existing trafficking literature, which often emphasises economic and political drivers while neglecting cultural dynamics.

Expanding the Discourse on Trafficking in Nigeria

Previous studies have highlighted the role of poverty and migration in sustaining trafficking. This study extends the discussion by demonstrating how specific Edo cultural practices are distorted in contemporary contexts, thereby linking trafficking not only to structural poverty but also to cultural continuity and transformation.

Theoretical Contribution

By situating trafficking within the framework of cultural manipulation, this study provides a cultural criminological lens for understanding TIP. It contributes to theory by illustrating how organised crime adapts cultural practices for exploitative purposes, reinforcing the concept that culture is both a protective and exploitable resource.

Practical Implications for Policy and Intervention

The findings also contribute to knowledge relevant to policymakers and practitioners. They highlight the necessity of engaging cultural custodians and community elders in anti-trafficking strategies. Policies that ignore the cultural embeddedness of trafficking risk failure, whereas culturally informed interventions hold potential for greater effectiveness.

Challenging Simplistic Narratives

Finally, the study challenges simplistic narratives that frame culture either as protective or as regressive. Instead, it demonstrates that culture is dynamic, capable of being reinterpreted and reappropriated by both communities and criminal actors. This insight contributes to a more sophisticated understanding of how culture operates within global trafficking networks.

Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that trafficking syndicates in Edo State strategically exploit cultural values such as trust in child fostering (*Omonosemhen*), domestic helping (*Ogbomhandia*), and caregiving (*Ogbelohomon*) to recruit, control, and exploit victims. Addressing this challenge requires a

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comprehensive set of interventions that combine legal, institutional, cultural, and socio-economic strategies.

First, strengthening law enforcement and judicial infrastructure is paramount. Specialised anti-trafficking units with well-trained personnel should be established and adequately resourced to investigate and prosecute trafficking cases. Dedicated courts and judicial officers familiar with TIP laws are essential to ensure swift and victim-sensitive trials. Legal processes must prioritise the protection and dignity of victims through measures such as witness protection and trauma-informed procedures.

Second, community education and awareness campaigns are vital in countering traffickers' manipulation of cultural practices. Public sensitisation programmes, particularly within schools and community centres, should highlight the risks of trafficking and the deceptive tactics used by syndicates. Elders, religious leaders, and traditional custodians must be involved in these campaigns, as their cultural authority can reinforce protective norms and challenge distorted practices. Migrants should also be educated on safe migration pathways, reducing their vulnerability to deception.

Third, border management and migration controls need to be enhanced to prevent illegal movements and transnational exploitation. Measures should include transparent immigration systems, anti-corruption safeguards, and collaboration with neighbouring countries to strengthen cross-border interventions.

Fourth, the socio-economic roots of trafficking must be addressed by creating sustainable economic and labour infrastructures. Investment in job creation, vocational training, microfinance schemes, and educational scholarships can provide alternatives to irregular migration and reduce susceptibility to traffickers' promises.

Fifth, social services infrastructure for victims should be prioritised. Survivors require comprehensive support, including shelters, healthcare, counselling, legal aid, and reintegration programmes. These services not only restore dignity but also prevent cycles of re-trafficking.

Finally, cultural engagement and leadership involvement are necessary. Traffickers' familiarity with cultural systems underscores the need to mobilise respected elders and community leaders as advocates in anti-trafficking efforts. By reclaiming fostering and caregiving practices in their original protective sense, communities can resist traffickers' distortions.

Generally, combating trafficking in Edo State demands a multi-sectoral strategy that integrates institutional reforms, socio-economic empowerment, cultural engagement, and international cooperation. Such an approach not only disrupts trafficking networks but also restores the dignity and protective functions inherent in Edo cultural practices.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that while the Edo people traditionally uphold *Omonosemhen*, *Ogbomhandia*, and *Ogbeloghomon* as practices

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rooted in solidarity, care, and communal responsibility, traffickers have strategically distorted these cultural systems to recruit, control, and exploit victims. The findings highlight how cultural heritage, when manipulated, can facilitate trafficking, thereby underscoring the urgent need for cultural reclamation and the reinforcement of protective mechanisms.

This study has demonstrated that while Edo cultural values traditionally uphold the dignity and development of women and children, these same values have been increasingly manipulated by traffickers to sustain TIP. Historically, Edo society values women as central to the family's survival and continuity, with high expectations placed upon them to contribute both economically and socially. However, in the face of worsening economic hardship in Nigeria, particularly in Edo State, such expectations have translated into heightened pressure on women and girls to provide for their families. This pressure renders them vulnerable to the promises of traffickers, who offer seemingly attractive opportunities abroad. Compounding this vulnerability are widespread parental materialism, the pervasive get-rich-quick mentality, and the prioritisation of wealth over children's dignity, factors that have made Edo State a notorious hub for recruitment into trafficking.

Furthermore, the study establishes that Edo cultural values, which historically uphold the dignity and development of women and children, have been increasingly manipulated to sustain TIP. Within Edo society, women are traditionally

regarded as central to family survival and continuity, with significant expectations placed on them to contribute both socially and economically. However, under the strain of worsening economic hardship in Nigeria, and particularly in Edo State, these expectations have translated into heightened pressures on women and girls to provide for their families. This has rendered them especially vulnerable to the deceptive promises of traffickers, who present seemingly attractive opportunities abroad. Such vulnerability is further compounded by parental materialism, a pervasive get-rich-quick mentality, and the prioritisation of wealth over the dignity of children, factors that have made Edo State a notorious hub for recruitment into trafficking.

Trafficking syndicates have proven highly adaptive, exploiting cultural systems for their advantage. By employing familiar cultural elements, such as kinship networks, trust, child fostering, and communal responsibility, they are able to mask exploitative practices within socially accepted frameworks. Syndicates also utilise language, coded communication, and media manipulation to conceal their operations, downplay the severity of trafficking, and misrepresent victims as willing participants. Such strategies enable traffickers not only to deceive families and communities but also to shape public perceptions in ways that obstruct anti-trafficking initiatives and legislative reforms.

The findings emphasise that understanding the dynamics of trafficking in Edo State requires a Nigeria-to-Europe perspective, rather than a

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Eurocentric lens. The structures within which Nigerian society functions, marked by economic precarity, corruption, weak governance, and systemic inequality, must be examined as the enabling environment that traffickers exploit. Edo people's profound respect for culture provides traffickers with a powerful entry point: they co-opt cultural practices and values to accelerate recruitment, control, and exploitation. Among the structural drivers of trafficking, conflict, climate change, and poverty, culture emerges as a powerful connector, shaping the methods by which these vulnerabilities are operationalised.

The analysis of interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires reveals that women are disproportionately targeted compared to men, largely due to cultural expectations and gender inequalities. Moreover, lack of education, unemployment, poverty, and ignorance significantly heighten young people's susceptibility to traffickers' manipulation. A deeper appreciation of cultural contexts is therefore indispensable in understanding the methods of organised crime groups in perpetuating TIP in Edo State.

The study also highlights the failure of governance in Nigeria as a key enabler of trafficking. Corruption, insecurity, and the absence of functional systems to address systemic risks create opportunities for traffickers to thrive. The inability of political leaders to anticipate or mitigate these risks has become, in effect, the "glory" that traffickers enjoy.

This research demonstrates that cultural values in Edo State, while historically protective,

communal, and socially significant, have increasingly been distorted and weaponised by traffickers as mechanisms of recruitment, control, and concealment. The study establishes that these traditional practices, once designed to uphold solidarity and human dignity, now influence migration patterns and facilitate trafficking when co-opted by organised criminal networks. By uncovering these dynamics, the research contributes to academic understanding of TIP as a phenomenon embedded not only in poverty, gender inequality, and weak governance, but also in the deliberate manipulation of cultural heritage.

Addressing trafficking in Edo State therefore requires a dual approach: on one hand, structural reforms and socio-economic interventions that reduce vulnerabilities; and on the other, a reclamation of cultural values in their authentic, protective forms. Restoring these traditions to their original purpose can counter traffickers' distortions and reassert culture as a force for community resilience rather than exploitation.

The data analysis is a work in progress. However, the findings so far indicate that female are more likely to be trafficked than their male counterpart. It also reveals that lack of education, high levels of poverty, unemployment, and ignorance make the youth vulnerable to the manipulation of the traffickers. The findings also demonstrate that a deep dive understanding of culture is essential in determining the methods and actions of organised crime groups in facilitating TIP in the State. The failure of governance in Nigeria

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reveals the declining state of politicians to recognize systemic risks such as corruption, bad governance, unsafe environment, and their failure to put in place the compulsory systems to circumnavigate the problems. Their failure is the 'glory' that human traffickers enjoy. Therefore, this research concludes that the traditional cultural practices in Edo State hold a significant social value that influences the migration patterns of trafficking victims.

Limitations

As with all scholarly inquiries, this study is subject to certain limitations that must be acknowledged in order to situate its findings within a broader academic and practical context. First, the methodological approach relied primarily on qualitative data collection through interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires. While this strategy provided rich, context-sensitive insights into the lived realities of trafficking and cultural practices in Edo State, it inevitably limits the generalisability of the findings. The participant pool, though diverse in terms of age, gender, and social roles, does not capture the full demographic or geographic spectrum of Edo State, nor can it fully represent Nigeria as a whole.

Second, the sensitive nature of TIP constrained the openness of some respondents. Survivors and victims may have withheld details due to trauma, fear of reprisals, or social stigma. Similarly, law enforcement agents and community leaders may have exercised caution in discussing systemic failures such as corruption or complicity, thereby shaping the depth and scope of the information provided.

Third, the cultural practices at the centre of this study, *Omonosemhen*, *Ogbomhandia*, and *Ogbeloghomon*, are rooted in oral traditions and vary in meaning and application across different communities. As such, interpretations gathered through fieldwork were not always uniform. This diversity complicates efforts to produce definitive conclusions but also underscores the complexity of culture as a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon.

Finally, the research was conducted within a specific timeframe, reflecting socio-political realities at a given moment. Trafficking networks, migration patterns, and cultural practices are continually evolving in response to economic crises, global migration policies, and local governance challenges. Therefore, while the findings are robust, they must be understood as provisional rather than exhaustive.

Future Research Directions

These limitations open up important opportunities for further investigation. Future research should employ mixed methods approaches that combine qualitative insights with quantitative data, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the scale and scope of trafficking in Edo State. Larger samples across multiple local government areas would enhance representativeness and provide broader patterns.

Moreover, longitudinal studies are needed to track how cultural practices evolve over time, particularly as traffickers adapt their strategies to changing socio-economic and political conditions. Such studies could reveal how resilience mechanisms develop within

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communities and whether cultural reclamation efforts successfully deter trafficking.

Another area for development lies in comparative research. Examining similar cultural dynamics in other Nigerian states or across West Africa would illuminate whether the manipulation of traditions in Edo State is unique or part of a wider regional phenomenon.

Finally, further inquiry should deepen engagement with survivors, not only as sources of data but as co-researchers. Survivor-led perspectives are invaluable for shaping interventions that are both culturally sensitive and practically effective.

Reflective Note

Despite these limitations, this study makes an original contribution to knowledge by situating

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TIP in Edo State within the cultural logics of *Omonosemhen*, *Ogbomhandia*, and *Ogbeloghomon*. Whereas much of the existing scholarship on trafficking focuses on economic deprivation, governance failure, or migration dynamics, this work highlights the centrality of cultural values, both as protective mechanisms and as tools susceptible to manipulation by traffickers. By exposing how traffickers distort these practices, the study not only advances scholarly debate but also provides actionable insights for policy-makers, faith leaders, and community stakeholders seeking to reclaim cultural heritage as a force for protection rather than exploitation.

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Advance Journal of Management and Social Sciences

Adv. J. Man. Soc. Sci

Volume: 9; Issue: 05,

September-October, 2025

ISSN: 2383 – 6355

Impact Factor: 6.76

Advance Scholars Publication

Published by International Institute of Advance Scholars Development

<https://aspjournals.org/Journals/index.php/ajmss/index>



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Criminal Law and Criminology, 101(4),
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