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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

2015 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

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Research Panel: Sexual Violence and Human Trafficking

Presenter: Robin P. Chapdelaine, Ph.D., Denison University

Title: Linking History to Practice: Mapping the History of Nigeria as a Tool to Combat Human Trafficking Today

Abstract: The international community that concerned itself with the welfare of children, protecting childhood and eventually with the wellbeing of the African child found itself with an overwhelming project in during the colonial era. The League of Nations Advisory Committees on the Traffic of Women and Children and the Protection and Welfare of Children and Young People recognized Nigerian children to be a protected group as a local expression of an international movement that targeted women and children during the 1920s and 1930s. As a result of the increased international attention and pressure, colonial officials began to investigate specific practices involving the pawning, marriage and domestic slavery. This paper examines the status of domestic servants, slaves ‘for sale’, pawns, apprentices, prostitutes and child wives in the Bight of Biafra during the colonial era and the consequences of the continued trade in children during the twentieth century.

Child trafficking is still going on and it is useful to look at West Africa’s past in order to understand this contemporary phenomenon. Benjamin N. Lawrance and Richard L. Roberts suggest that child trafficking must be considered in relation to how colonization related to the global economy.¹ The Igbo, Ibibio, Ijaw (Ijo) and Efik had many methods of appropriating child labor as economic shifts dictated. Child trafficking seemed to increase as Nigeria’s economy became absorbed by the international economy.² My thesis is that scholars and policy makers can best understand the contemporary problems of child trafficking in West Africa (and abroad) by tracing its historical development from the transatlantic slave trade to colonial forms of servitude and beyond.

Keywords: child trafficking, human rights, Nigeria, pawns, slaves, child brides

Biography: Robin P. Chapdelaine is a visiting assistant professor in Women’s Studies and International Studies at Denison University. She holds an MA and PhD in Women’s and Gender history and African history from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Her research interests are in West African history, juvenile labor, child pawning, slavery, human rights and human trafficking. She is currently preparing a manuscript on the history of child trafficking in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900s-1930s.

¹ Benjamin N. Lawrance and Richard L. Roberts, eds., "Introduction," in *Trafficking in Slavery’s Wake: Law and the Experience of Women and Children in Africa*, 1st ed. (Ohio University Press, 2012), 3.

² A. J. H. Latham, "Currency, Credit and Capitalism on the Cross River in the Pre-Colonial Era," *The Journal of African History* 12, no. 4 (January 1, 1971): 599–605.