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**Governing with God: Religion, Resistance, and the State in Nigeria's
Counter-Trafficking Programs**

Over the past fifteen years, the Nigerian government has stopped many young migrant women from trying to leave the country, identifying them as victims of human trafficking and referring them to a federal antitrafficking agency for protection and rehabilitation. Relatively few women accept these interventions outright, due in part to ingrained suspicion of state officials and institutions. This article uses ethnographic research from one state-run shelter where these would-be migrant women were detained to examine how state counselors there justified their actions and how migrant women interpreted them. Where the moral authority of the state has been depleted, it shows how shelter staff urged residents to find trust in government through trust in God, and how women in turn made claims on the state through religious idioms of conversion and salvation. Ultimately, it demonstrates how ad hoc relationships of governance are forged in one fervently contested encounter between citizens and the state in Nigeria.

[human trafficking, governance, Nigeria]

Like most of the women she knew, Florence¹ did not take her decision to leave Nigeria lightly. She apprenticed for hairdressers in her neighborhood for two years and tried to find steady work in a salon for two more. She spent most days helping her mother run a small provisions shop from the front of their home on the city periphery, but lived off relationships she maintained with older, more established men. By age twenty-five, Florence felt bored and stagnant with “nothing going” for herself (Fioratta 2015). She began to pray for direction. Soon, she received an offer to go to Italy from a sponsor—a family friend who would front the travel costs and make arrangements on the condition that she repay him with significant interest.

Over the last two decades, Florence’s hometown of Benin City, in Edo State, Nigeria, has become a notorious hub of migrant sex work, sending waves of young women like her to Europe (Achebe 2004; Carling 2006). Women from the region were first recruited in the 1980s to do agricultural work in Italy, but many quickly found more lucrative work in prostitution. They sent their profits home, supporting their extended families, building new homes, and inspiring more to follow (Adesina 2005). Then, in 1999, Italy began deporting masses of Nigerian women by the planeload, sparking a national panic over the volume of Nigerian women in sex work abroad, rumored to be tens of thousands in Italy alone. Nigerian police detained deported women on arrival and paraded them through

the streets of Benin City in shame (Plambech 2011). This panic coincided with Nigeria's fourth democratic transition, as the newly inaugurated President Olusegun Obasanjo promised to renew Nigeria's global reputation. Within a year, wife to then vice president Titi Abubakar reclaimed the deportees as victims of human trafficking and committed herself to their cause. She founded a nongovernmental organization and helped develop the national law that would ban human trafficking and create a federal antitrafficking agency, known as NAPTIP.

When NAPTIP was founded in 2003, the exportation of migrant sex workers was still a thriving industry in Benin. Up to 70 percent of women in the area claimed female relatives living in popular destination countries of Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands, and at least 44 percent of women reported knowing someone currently and openly engaged in sex work abroad. Nearly a third had been approached themselves by someone offering assistance to travel out, as Florence had been (Okonofua et al. 2004). Although publicly disparaged, many families begrudgingly accepted the faraway industry that supported their households (Osezua 2011).

Neither Nigeria's antitrafficking legislation nor other federal regulations formally prohibit voluntary commercial sex work in or outside the country (Mgbako

2016).² However, the NAPTIP Act does criminalize associated activities, including the “promotion of foreign travel that promotes prostitution,” and it has been broadly interpreted as a mandate to stop all forms of migrant sex work (Nwogu 2007). Since its founding, NAPTIP has worked with foreign donors and local NGOs on wide-ranging public enlightenment campaigns marking all forms of women’s migration as sex trafficking. As trafficking discourses entered the local lexicon, many poor and ambitious young women appropriated it to describe their own goals, acknowledging the risks involved and yet still insisting that they would “want to be trafficked,” meaning they were willing to travel to enter foreign sex industries (Aborisade and Aderinto 2008; Attoh 2009; Baye and Heumann 2014; Nwogu 2014). By collapsing voluntary and involuntary undertakings, the antitrafficking movement in Nigeria, as in so much of the world, has thus further stigmatized women’s mobility and alienated those it ostensibly seeks to help.

Eager to avoid this stigma of traveling out, as well as any negative wishes that could affect her journey, Florence told me that she preferred not to discuss her decision to leave with family or friends. Unwilling to turn anywhere else, she confided in God. She went to her church, fasted for three days, and left confident in her choice: she would go to Italy. Two months later, Florence was intercepted at Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos, Nigeria. Airport officials

trained in counter-trafficking tactics identified her as a potential victim and demanded a small bribe to let her pass. When she refused, they detained her and referred the case to NAPTIP, but it was a Friday afternoon and their offices were closed, so she spent the weekend in a holding cell at the airport. That Monday, as mandated for all cases under investigation, she was relocated to the state-run shelter for up to six weeks of protection and rehabilitation services. This site, NAPTIP's Lagos shelter, was the base of my fieldwork for twelve months.

I watched as Florence, infuriated by the state's obstruction of her travel plans, returned to her faith. She spent much of her first several days at the shelter visibly upset, her head hung low over her lap, praying in heavy whispers into folded hands. She read aloud carefully marked sections of the King James Bible lain across her lap: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..." In between passages, she looked up and groaned in Nigerian Pidgin English, "I wan go, I wan go" ("I want to go"), over and over again, demanding to be released.

"You will go," staff members assured her. "You will go when God wills it."

Florence's case was typical of the hundred or so women I met that year in NAPTIP's Lagos shelter and others like it. Most women had decided to emigrate

from Nigeria, knowing the many risks it entailed, and arranged a sponsor and travel agent to do so. While traveling, government agents profiled women as victims and detained them against their will at various international airports and border checkpoints, often after the women refused to bribe corrupt officials. From there, they were transferred to the federal counter-trafficking agency NAPTIP, which kept them in a locked and secured shelter for six weeks. There were padlocks on the doors and barbed wire on the fences, and women were allowed out of the building only to collect water, which rarely was pumped up from the wells due to infrequent electrical supply. They had no contact with friends or families, reportedly to keep them safe from traffickers while their cases were investigated.

Intervention tactics like these have been observed in counter-trafficking movements around the world. They stem in part from ambiguous legal definitions of human trafficking, based on different principles of what constitutes consent and exploitation, especially in the sex industry (Agustín 2007; Andrijasevic 2010; Doezema 2010; Kempadoo 2005). Indeed, concepts of victimhood and vulnerability are themselves fraught with expectations of passivity and fragility that can blind actors to the agency of those whose whom they aim to help (Merry 2007). “Closed” or lockdown shelters have been especially critiqued as a patronizing and often counter-productive means of intervention yet remain

common practice worldwide (Bjerkan 2005; Gallagher and Pearson 2010). International pressure to produce quantifiable evidence of state antitrafficking efforts, especially via the United States' annual Trafficking in Persons Report, have exacerbated these problems in Nigeria (Buchbinder 2012; Nwogu 2014) and around the world (Gallagher and Chuang 2012). In total, the global antitrafficking apparatus has been widely criticized for providing only limited support for the rights and well-being of migrants themselves, especially undocumented migrant women in illicit sex industries (McCarthy 2014).

Each of these factors contributed to the involuntary detention of migrant women like Florence. However, if they help explain why these women were targeted for intervention, they do less to explain how that intervention might have proceeded. If migrant women were held merely for protection from traffickers, or, more cynically, to boost numbers of interventions for annual reports, then they might only have been warehoused in these shelters with little further attention. I observed, however, that the shelter was used not only to hold victims of trafficking but also to rehabilitate them in earnest. In practice, this meant that shelter staff used group counseling, weekly worship, and informal conversations to convince women to change their minds about migrating, and thereby reduce their vulnerability to being trafficked again.

These disciplinary efforts are an act of governance, and, as such, they provide the foundation for this research. Like Florence, most residents of the shelter openly protested their detention and defended their reasons for leaving Nigeria, while counselors tried to convince them that it was all for the best. The space was thereby host to sustained debates on the risks people have the right to take and the responsibility the state has to stop them. This article uses the shelter as a site to examine the relationships of citizenship and governance as they are forged in real time, particularly in a context in which the government is otherwise untrusted. It analyzes the politics and poetics of women's resistance to NAPTIP interventions, and of the justifications of the agency's authority that the state-employed counselors offered in reply (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014; Chalfin 2001, 2010; Das and Poole 2004). What it finds, as Florence's case suggests, is that these practices often appropriated religious terms, particularly around faith in God's plan.

Counselors at the shelter regularly urged the women there to see unwelcome state intervention as ordained by God. While Florence prayed over her frustrations, a counselor, for example, assured her that she would go when God wills it. Most of the women at the shelter—as well as most of the staff—identified as Christians and regularly prayed for direction in their lives. This particular approach to prayer was especially popularized in Pentecostal churches in Nigeria but is increasingly

prevalent throughout different faith practices across the country. Even the few Muslim staff members shared in similar practices and likewise conversed with residents about God's plan in ecumenical terms. Like most Nigerians, shelter staff and residents alike sought religious guidance, especially in situations of hardship and conflict, just as Florence fasted at the church before traveling. Indeed, according to local reports on the original migrant women deported from Italy, "ninety percent of them [were] from new generation churches who have actually prayed and believe that God will grant them success in their sojourn as cross border sex traders" (Osezua 2014, 31). Likewise, the leaders of Nigeria's early antitrafficking advocates described specific religious callings to intervene in this cause. Although herself a Muslim, Titi Abubakar described the founding of her NGO in similar terms: fulfilling a covenant she had made with God to help the Nigerian sex workers she once saw while traveling through Italy (Buchbinder 2012). Both the migrant women and those seeking to help them saw their choices as guided by the hand of God.

Assumptions that such migrant sex workers necessarily need help—and that they can be categorically reclaimed as human trafficking victims—reflect a moral framework against prostitution that has strong ties to conservative Christianity (Soderlund 2005; Zimmerman 2010). Certainly, NAPTIP's rehabilitation program reflected this model, prioritizing interventions seen to protect women's dignity

while releasing male laborers identified as trafficking victims without any semblance of therapy. “Men just want to hustle,” one counselor told me. To my surprise, then, direct conversations about sex and sexual virtue were almost entirely absent inside the shelter itself. While a conservative moral agenda helped animate Nigeria’s antitrafficking movement, it did not lead to sanctimonious lectures about sex work and other forms of nonprocreative sex that one might expect in a religiously conservative cultural context. Counselors and residents instead invoked religion in a more abstract sense of destined paths and signs from God. Like Titi Abubakar, they used faith not to enforce strict codes of moral behavior but to talk about life choices and their meaning more broadly. These were not simple questions of right and wrong but more dynamic explorations of ethical decision making, in service of God’s plan. Florence, too, first prayed in church, and thereby understood her path abroad as destined by God; then staff inside the shelter offered a different interpretation, promising her that she would be released once God willed it.

This article argues that these culturally common acts of religious inquiry take on new significance inside the shelter as practices of state governance. It examines specifically how shelter staff and residents debated trust in government through trust in God. It first describes general expectations of government in Nigeria, situating the shelter as a unique site of encounter between citizens and the state.

Next, it considers how religion provided an alternate source of authority for counselors at the shelter, engaging resistant women through debates on God's plan for their lives. Finally, it describes how residents turned these discourses onto shelter staff themselves, making claims on the state in religious language. Ultimately, it argues that these exchanges demonstrate the ad hoc forging of relationships of governance in which faith in state institutions is otherwise lacking.

Counseling, Corruption, and Capitulation

In Nigeria, people expect very little from their government; if anything, they expect graft, obfuscation, and gross negligence. There is an entire literature on postcolonial African states, in particular, that elaborates their function as an empty sign, a mere fetish, a nothingness (Bayart 2009; Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999; Mbembe 2001). People in Nigeria tend to experience the state in the same light. As author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes, "Ours is a country in which the individual is abused and made to feel helpless by the state" (quoted in Adebani 2005). This section analyzes how that often well-founded distrust of government shaped women's experiences at the shelter and the staff members' efforts to counsel them.

I am not suggesting that NAPTIP itself was corrupt, but that it faced the challenges of governing while associated with a system so often assumed to be corrupt, akin to the widespread resistance to polio vaccines in the region (Masquelier 2012; Obadare 2006a). In fact, NAPTIP has been relatively well-regarded in the international community of governmental organizations and NGOs that work with it. It has been described as a “pocket of effectiveness” in an otherwise ineffective state system, demonstrating basic operational competencies and relatively little fiscal corruption (Roll 2014a, 2014b). Though it has since fallen, NAPTIP had earned a top-tier ranking in the US government’s annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report during the time I was conducting primary fieldwork (US Department of State 2010, 2011, 2015). The TIP Report rankings rely on reported data, interviews with high-ranking officers, and brief site visits, but the reports have been widely criticized as an inconsistent index of state antitrafficking efforts (Gallagher and Chuang 2012). Still, accolades for NAPTIP are consistent with the generally strong international reception it has enjoyed. Indeed, I believe the access I was allowed was due to pride and confidence the agency held in the services it provided, regularly showcased for a steady stream of international visitors from the media, donor governments, and NGOs.

Though not perfect, NAPTIP’s rehabilitation shelters are also relatively consistent with international standards for victim care and protection promoted by the US

TIP Report (Surtees 2008). These programs are designed first and foremost to provide support to victims of trafficking who have been directly extracted from situations of abuse. To this end, NAPTIP's shelter staff received intermittent training in trauma counseling through internationally funded workshops and university programs. A few also had Bachelors degrees in social work, psychology, and related fields. They boasted a broad conception of what counseling entailed: an opportunity to help people find their way to a better life. The national rehabilitation policy also reflected some of these goals, listing among other purposes: sheltering; knowledge enhancement; cultural, spiritual, and vocational guidance; and personal development (see Brunovskis and Surtees 2008.³ Indeed, most women at the shelter had been stopped early enough in their journeys that they were not actually considered traumatized. Counseling was thereby used not to treat past trauma but to reduce women's vulnerability to be trafficked again.

Officially, both national law and policy also forbade the involuntary detention of women like Florence. In practice, however, most women entered the shelter under protest. Indeed, shelter staff often read their resistance as further evidence that they required counseling. In interviews with me, counselors were evasive on the topic of detention, insisting that NAPTIP would not "force" anyone to stay, but explained that the purpose of counseling is instead to "convince" them that it is

for the best. In the agency's own public relations materials, National Director of Counseling and Rehabilitation Lily Oguejiofor described a similar approach:

Most of the victims that we receive think we are meddling into their lives. Just a handful of them come back sober. So, what you experience is that you are working for people who [you] think you are trying to help but they end up fighting with you. ... We thank God that we put in an effort and that is why we insist that victims that come back must stay for at least six weeks in our shelters whether they like or not in order for us to condition their behaviors and to prepare them for their expected new life. (NAPTIP 2010)

The glossy, internally produced magazine that printed this interview is distributed among donors and other stakeholders to advertise NAPTIP's achievements each quarter. Rather than indicating corruption, she and the editors appear proud of the extra initiative these efforts reflect, even as they may contradict formal law and policy.

Such open ambivalences around law and regulation strongly resonate with other state encounters in Nigeria and directly shaped how women reacted to the unwanted state intervention, with a characteristic mix of outrage and resignation.

To be certain, women at the shelter protested their detention, loudly and persistently. They were angry to be stopped from traveling, and they quickly grew bored of sitting idle in confinement. Many argued, shouted, and complained, insisting in Pidgin English that they “wan go” throughout the day, everyday, to staff and visitors alike. I worked diligently to dissuade residents from assuming I could influence release decisions and, for ethical reasons, let residents approach me for conversation. Still, those conversations were often prompted by their desire to vent frustrations to any willing listener. They readily expressed outrage at their detention in the shelter, often declaring it a prison.

By the same token, women held at the shelter ultimately knew that, in practice, such severe forms of intervention were quite within the state’s prerogative, however unfair (see Gupta 2012; Obadare and Adebaniwi 2010; Olivier De Sardan 2014). As Marshall describes:

The lawless arbitrariness of a state where policeman are thieves, legislators are criminal predators, and the common man has no hope for any form of redress renders overwhelming the urge to move from the plane of immanence to transcendence in the quest for certainty and understanding. (2009, 209)

For all their protests, no one ever demanded to see a lawyer, judge, or even a parent. They certainly did not invoke a language of rights or due process that one might expect, for example, in the United States; there were no such cries of dismay, of “You can’t do this to me,” or “I have rights.”

In short, Nigerians take for granted that the state will not only neglect but also abuse its citizens—from bribe-seeking airport officials to seemingly indefinite detention policies of the shelter itself—and the women at the shelter navigated NAPTIP intervention through these expectations. On the one hand, this made women at the shelter at least partly acquiesce to their detention there, biding their time until release, even as they remained suspicious of the agency itself. Shelter staff, on the other hand, remained earnestly committed to helping these women as they saw fit, especially those who resisted most. From that perspective, the shelter was not a site of corruption or negligence but rather a challenge of good (or at least well-intentioned) governance—a microcosm experiment of *how* to govern, in the face of this mass distrust of the state.

The State of Religion

To move forward with the rehabilitative goals of counseling, shelter staff tried to defend their own moral and political authority, as individuals and as agents of the state alike. This section examines how they managed this challenge.

One strategy was to concede the bureaucratic and institutional shortcomings of the state while still urging women not to lose faith. For example, after a particularly adamant round of demands to be released, Prudence, a counselor, acknowledged the agency's unreliable return procedures, but insisted the residents should not be so unappreciative of her own personal goodwill. Mary, who had led the demands, insisted that she "wan go," and Prudence replied:

By the grace of God, you will go. Even you, Mary, your papers are ready, it is just money that is keeping you here. Do you think the counselor who took those other eight girls on Saturday did not actually pay for the fuel? Do you know how long it will be for her to be reimbursed? Me, if I could just buy a plane ticket to get you home, I would.

We are all just trying to make you happy, so we will do things even government would not be doing. Like those three days I spent

to return those girls to Enugu. It could be June before I see that ₦30,000 [US\$200] reimbursement, or even December next year.

We all will make that sacrifice, just to see you happy, but you don't appreciate it. You just say, "Me I wan go, me I wan go."

In recognition of the agency's own shortfalls, and in the presence of much more nefarious expectations for state authorities in general, these more personal declarations seemed to be among the most inspiring to the women at the shelter.

These relationships between shelter staff and residents continued to build over weeks and months. Many women would later recall particular counselors fondly in follow-up interviews years after their release. While they protested the initial basis and conditions of their detention wholeheartedly, most women slowly came to respect individual staff, occasionally calling after returning home to greet them and even to ask for advice. The extent to which each woman listened to counseling, "opened up" to other aspects of rehabilitation, or in any way accepted the governing message of the agency, was thereby largely thanks to the affective and charismatic authority of creative state agents, in many ways despite their state affiliation, not due to it (Chalfin 2001, 2010).

Given the importance of religion in Nigeria, this tactic was even more effective when counselors mentioned God. For example, during one afternoon group worship session, Benjamin, another counselor, offered a sermon inspired by popular American pastor Rick Warren's book, *A Purpose Driven Life* (2008):

Do you know what it means—a purpose-driven life? It means knowing the reason you are here and then living for that reason. If you tried to travel, and you were stopped by immigration, and you were made to come to NAPTIP, are you asking, why did this happen, why am I here?

Well, the answer is in Romans 8:28. "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." It means all that happens will come together in God. It's good for you that you were stopped when you tried to travel. ... All things are for good.

You must see any problems as challenges, not as barriers. Don't see us as wicked. Government is trying to help you, trying to help you out of this problem. You may not see it as problem, but by the time you do it may be too late. Don't let people deceive you,

because I am not God, but he will judge you. Remember that you are here because it was destined by God. Nothing happens that is not under God's plan. ... And God wants you to learn something from being here.

In this homily, Benjamin again acknowledged the most fundamental contradiction of their rescue mission: that the shelter residents may not see their previous circumstances as a problem, and in fact see their current detention at the shelter as a much bigger one. He claimed authority first based on God, though, and then, through trust in God, encouraged the residents to also trust in government. In saying that the government was trying to help, Benjamin directly confronted the women's deeply ingrained and often well-placed distrust of Nigerian government—"Don't see us as wicked," he had implored. Thus, instead of invoking the authority of government, the counselor invoked the authority of God.

Interestingly, to do this, he moved beyond the virtue of individual righteousness, the way Prudence had. He did not merely assure his own faith, as politicians solicit confidence with declarations of personal devotion (Obadare 2006b). Instead, he asked for faith in the whole system: that of God's plan and government's role within it. In the end, he suggested, no one had to trust government directly to find reason to accept their time in the shelter; it was not

government alone who brought them there. Really, it was God's plan, each woman's own destiny, and the state agents working there who were only doing God's work. Residents could no more be angry with the government than they could be angry with God, he argued.

Achille Mbembe describes how religion in Africa—particularly its manifestations in Pentecostal Christianity—has become the primary “means of psychic negotiation, self-styling, and engagement with the world at large” (2002, 269). By naming this shift in *l' état de religion*, he calls forth a contrast with Michel Foucault's (1977) original *l' état du droit*, or governmentality by rule of law. In places like Nigeria, it is religious institutions that provide structure, meaning, and accountability to daily life. As members of this culture, Benjamin, Prudence, and the rest of the shelter staff also subscribed to these ways of thinking. While counseling was not designed to be religious in nature, these shared systems of belief, especially around life choices and suffering, naturally informed their work. In so doing, they appropriated religious discourses of suffering and God's plan, working as agents of the state in the ad hoc, day-to-day, face-to-face tasks of governing.

Discerning God's Plan

Invocations of God's plan can strike secular audiences as all-too-easy dismissals of protest and discontent. That interpretation, however, misses what is important to women in these moments. Particularly in the Pentecostal tradition that prevails in southern Nigeria, such references do not silence a conversation but rather provide new grounds for debate: one built on common hermeneutics of Christian religious practice. This section assesses how women responded to these assertions, evaluating and countering counselors' claims.

As Ruth Marshall (2009) describes, in this context, the continued discernment of and submission to God's plan comprise the primary practice of an ethical life. This is an active and participatory process. People constantly search for these signs, especially in moments of suffering and despair. Upon witnessing the frustrations of the women at the shelter, it was entirely appropriate for the shelter staff to encourage residents to reflect on their circumstances in this way, which was consistent with commonly shared theologies of suffering.

Marshall (2009, 10) further contrasts Pentecostal- and Enlightenment-based logics of evaluation in life choices. Translated to the point of view of the women at the shelter, in place of the residents "making" their own histories—weighing options, choosing to travel, accepting the risks—women like Florence instead defend themselves as having taken responsible action through practices of prayer and

religious reflection. By the same token, events leading to their detention are not directly credited to the motives and choices of the individuals involved but to God's will. This is how Florence saw the world long before she reached the shelter, fasting and praying for days in her church as she contemplated leaving and fashioned plans for a prosperous future. At the shelter, however, the counselors offered a counter-interpretation, challenging the righteousness of her decision and urging a reconsideration of her plans.

"I wan go," Florence demanded another day, weeks into her stay. She asked for her passport and promised that she just wanted go back to her mother's house, not to travel any further.

Prudence exclaimed, "Your passport!?! Why do you need your passport if you don't need to travel?"

"OK, I want to go to Libya. Not Gambia, now it's Libya," Florence teased, smiling, testing the counselors' reactions. They were not amused.

"Look, if travel is what is in your mind," Benjamin finally conceded, "then it doesn't matter what you say, that you don't want to travel. God will let you go because he has already rescued you once."

“God wants me to go,” Florence insisted, her brow lowering as the humor dropped from her voice. “I prayed for direction before traveling. God wants me to go.”

“Everyone who tells you not to travel, you hate,” Prudence interjected, “so that is why God let you go so far. But when you got to the airport, he rescued you ... but he may not do it again.”

In this conversation, more important than Florence’s own intentions, or her sponsor’s, or even NAPTIP’s, was what God wanted for her. The counselors contended that God actually was guiding the whole process, both when he “let” her go in the beginning, and when he later intervened to keep her from completing the trip and sending her to NAPTIP instead. Florence, too, believed God was guiding her, but out of Nigeria and not toward the shelter. The mention of God’s plan here neither silences nor resolves the disagreements at hand. Instead, faith in God and divine providence provide a way to argue everything else. Prudence and Benjamin demand that she defend her own trajectory, examine her own experiences, and, as Marshall (2009) describes it, give an account of herself. These interpretive practices are offered as a part of the state’s shelter rehabilitation program, explicitly invoked in religious terms.

A few weeks later, Florence found herself spending the fiftieth anniversary of Nigeria's independence still inside the shelter. In honor of the occasion, the staff led a group counseling session to encourage patriotism and love for Nigeria. That most of the residents of the shelter had been trying to leave Nigeria and now considered themselves prisoners of the government was not lost on the counselors—instead, it lent weight to the exercise. Each counselor took turns describing what they liked about Nigeria, listing things like a survivor's spirit, increased accountability in politics, and the mobile phone revolution. Then they turned the floor over to the residents and asked them to do the same. Florence refused. She shook her head with a sort of indignant dismay and insisted that Nigeria did nothing for her. In good spirits, the counselors together egged her on, saying Nigeria must have done something good.

“But Nigeria rescued you-*o!*” Benjamin suggested, smiling, almost joking.

A pause. “God rescued me,” Florence whispered carefully.

“Through NAPTIP, he did,” Prudence called back. The other counselors nodded in agreement.

Florence rolled her eyes and slumped back in the couch. Even if she had accepted God's change of plans for her, it would be difficult to reconcile that submission with the more immediate sense of injustice she still expressed at being held there. While she refused to recognize the state's hand in God's plan, the counselors specifically interjected that NAPTIP deserved credit. To recognize God's plan, therefore, was also to recognize the government's beneficent role in their lives.

Testimonies and Salvation

Just as counselors often made claims on women in the shelter through religious idioms, residents also made claims on the state through religious terms as well. Women could do little to convince the staff to release them early, but demonstrating cooperation was still important for "empowerment" decisions: the provision of educational and entrepreneurial funding available to select women upon reintegration. While all rehabilitated victims were promised some form of support in the course of rehabilitation, available funds limited disbursement to only 40 percent of those eligible. These decisions were again far from transparent. This section examines how women made claims on these materials with religious language.

Counselors pointed out to me early on that Florence likely never would receive support, having consistently failed to impress the shelter staff because she remained outspokenly skeptical of NAPTIP and still talked about trying to travel again. Other women, however, were more compliant, even eagerly so. Marshall (2009) emphasizes how accepting God's plan for one's future required one to take action in achieving it. Women at the shelter, therefore, actively sought material support for their new goals. They performed their own worthiness for support in a manner akin to religious testimony, as was the case with Rose.

Rose celebrated her twentieth birthday inside the shelter just a few days before she was released. She too had been stopped while traveling. However, aside from a couple of turbulent days after arrival, which was expected, she rarely complained the way Florence did. Slowly, Rose earned a reputation as an arbitrator of resident disputes and did small errands for the counselors, fetching water for their bathroom and cold beverages from the provisions stand across the lot; that is, acts of cooperation that the staff found encouraging. As she gained their favor, Prudence invited her to compose a special letter to the higher NAPTIP officials to help "advance her case." Rose showed me the final copy and allowed me to photograph it before turning it in. Hand written on sheets torn from a donated composition notebook, it read:

WITH ALL DUE RESPECT TO THE HEAD OF
MANAGEMENT AND STAFFS OF NAPTIP ORGANISATION

U all have been so nice to me and U all have been treating me so kind. Just the way U all have done to me the Most High God will do the same to you all, the blessings of the Lord in your life shall be so much that you all will have to cry for stop. God bless you all for your hospitality toward me, remain bless.

My coming to the NAPTIP was not a mistake and I know it's all planned by God. During my stay at the shelter I discover that very step a man takes is ordered by the Lord so I wasn't surprise when I found myself here in the shelter. From the day I step into the shelter I kept on praying and reading Bibles, Novels and there is this portion of the Bible I read that says "IN ANY SITUATION YOU FIND YOURSELF GIVE THANKS." So I keep thanking God from that very moment and till the day I will leave.

I want to use this Opportunity to beg all staff and the Head Management of NAPTIP that I want to go back to school, I want to

see myself as a great person, and I want to say that I am very sorry for my sinful past and I want to look forward to a brighter future.

After my Secondary School here in Lagos state, I went to my State, Bayelsa hoping there will be somebody to assist me farther my education but there wasn't anybody. I kept on praying and believing because there is a saying wish they use to say "IF THE LORD IS FOR YOU NOBODY CAN BE AGAINST YOU." In this world I have nobody but God and finally God has ordered my step to the NAPTIP.

To the NAPTIP I see my helpers, my Fathers, Mothers, Brothers, Sisters and my Everything. I have come to notice that I adour most staffs and I learn from them and they also change my life: You people are my saviour. Please assist me and make my dead mother proud, don't disappoint my dead mother dream. It means a lot to me.

I love all staffs of NAPTIP Organisation. Please God and help me.

Miss Rose

This letter articulates a sentiment that many women at the shelter expressed. Although they resisted at first, with time they often took seriously the messages that the staff presented. They described feeling God's hand dramatically intervening to stop them from an earlier path, and many told me that they found the advice of the counselors to be valuable in the end. Indeed, in a nonrandom survey of 148 women rehabilitated in NAPTIP shelters, the vast majority reported improved emotional well-being, and more than two-thirds indicated relative satisfaction with the program (Adejumo, Olu-Owolabi, and Fayomi 2015). I suspect that these figures may have been influenced by surveyed women's ongoing pursuit for further agency support, which was ensured by the snowball sampling strategy via service organizations. To that end, Rose's own letter is useful as a performance of submission, both to God and to NAPTIP, even more than it might be used as evidence of her sincerity. It reveals how she understood the agency's vision of rehabilitation success and their expectations of victims to qualify for further support.

Adopting an identity based on victimhood or suffering is a well-documented path to obtaining resources in anthropological studies of aid, governance, and citizenship. For example, Nguyen (2010) describes how expression of a positive identity shaped access to rare antiretrovirals in the early days of West Africa's

HIV epidemic. Similar accounts from Europe document the utility of such narratives of victimhood in which immigration rights are tied to experiences of trauma in refugee cases (Fassin and Rechtman 2009; McKinley 1997; Ticktin 1999) and for victims of human trafficking in particular (Giordano 2008; see also Dasgupta 2014). Here, though, in this very purposeful display of gratitude, there is little hint of any sort of victim identity. Rose describes feeling saved, and even praises the NAPTIP staff explicitly as her saviors, but she does so in a religious idiom, not the raid-and-rescue narrative common to trafficking stories (Buchbinder 2012; Plambech 2014). In terms of the latter, she concedes that her “coming to NAPTIP was not a mistake,” but she says nothing of any dangers from which the agency might have protected her. If anything, she shows contrition for her own sins, apologizing for her past rather than lamenting her suffering (Brunovskis and Surtees 2008). In this sense, the letter suggests Rose sees herself as saved—not from human traffickers but from a journey God did not intend for her to pursue.

Next, Rose turns these claims on the state itself. Just as counselors at the shelter base their own authority on God’s plan, she legitimates her own requests for state support through religious means, expressing submission and gratitude to God and NAPTIP alike. She admits to a “sinful past” and states plans to pursue “a brighter future.” She gives thanks and insists she is on a new path to righteousness. This

conversion is the ultimate purpose of rehabilitation: counselors aim to convince women to adopt a new narrative of their past and future, and Rose expressly insists they “change my life.”

Rose thereby makes claims on the state outside ideas of governance or citizenship, exactly because those values are so debauched in Nigeria. As Obadare and Adebaniwi describe, like most ordinary Nigerians, she “lacks the modalities and social instrumentalities [to demand] egalitarian intervention from the state” (2010, 10). Indeed, she notes explicitly that the government failed to help her advance her education, so she instead prayed to God. Opening the letter by showering God’s praise and well wishes on the NAPTIP staff, she frames their kindness as generous beyond expectation. Even her reference to their “hospitality” at the shelter implies a more personal rather than institutional relationship between her and the staff, while also displaying her own obsequiousness. Mentioning her deceased mother’s wishes and insisting it would “mean a lot to me” emphasize again a more affective connection to the staff and organization. Then, as she makes explicit claims on the NAPTIP organization, she also uses the language of religion. After weeks of being told that she was held as God’s plan, and that she would go when it was God’s plan, she now turns the table, asking NAPTIP staff and organization to honor God and his new plan for her by materially supporting her revised ambitions. She compels them to “please

God and help [her].” Just as counselors at the shelter invoked a vision of divine providence to justify their own actions of intervention, so does Rose take up the same frame to make claims on the state in return.

Conclusion

Accounts from the shelter allow for an ethnographic examination of how women negotiated unwanted state action in their own lives, and how the state agents charged with this task understood and defended their own authority.

Unsurprisingly, most women at the shelter did not trust the counseling staff simply because they worked for the government; indeed, that association was only further grounds for suspicion. Instead, both residents and staff at the shelter found a different justification for their detention, with most engaging the invocation of God and divine intervention in their lives.

Rather than a case of state failure or corruption, these programs in many ways have been regarded as a successful case of “good governance.” To make those relationships possible, however, shelter staff and residents must supplant expectations of the state that have otherwise been corrupted. When Florence, Rose, and the counselors alike invoke the common language of God’s plan instead of discourses of citizenship and the state, I argue that they are forging ad hoc relationships of governance. Because the Nigerian government is largely

perceived to be absent from the daily lives of its residents, these links between state authorities and citizens must be made anew in places such as the rehabilitation shelter. State ambivalence and neglect may be the norm in Nigeria, but these women were granted an exception, targeted by state intervention programs and invited to make claims on the state for further resources. Together with the shelter staff, they then crafted narratives that both justified the need for state intervention and their worthiness to receive its support. What makes these claims remarkable is that they were made through distinctly religious terms.

It is in these moments that it can be seen how the *l'état de religion* that Mbembe describes not only permeates the lives of ordinary Nigerians but also, as a result, shapes the way NAPTIP counselors carry out their tasks of governing migrant women in service of the state. Such displays of empathy through God are commonplace outside the shelter, but they take on new significance within it, as they articulate with disciplinary assertions of state power in these women's lives, where vulnerability reduction requires "convincing" them of the legitimacy of the NAPTIP agenda altogether.

In sum, these shelter programs are effective insofar as state officials there can relate to women beyond the immediate authority of the state itself. They reveal alternative ways citizens and the state interact in day-to-day practices of

discipline, resistance, and claims making. These relationships fracture and fail in a number of ways, but ultimately prove effective by co-opting a means of governmentality—via religion—otherwise imagined to supplant it.

NOTES

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¹ All names are pseudonyms.

² At the time of primary fieldwork, trafficking in Nigeria was legally defined as “all acts and attempted acts involved in the recruitment, transportation within or across Nigerian borders, purchase, sale, transfer, receipt or harbouring of a person involving the use of deception, coercion or debt bondage for the purpose of placing or holding the person whether for or not in involuntary servitude (domestic, sexual or reproductive), in force or bonded labour, or in slavery-like conditions.” This definition is based on the UN Palermo Protocol and likewise does not offer a clear definition of sexual exploitation. This law was replaced in 2015 with a legal framework emphasizing a broader range of exploitation.

³ National Policy on Protection and Assistance to Trafficked Persons in Nigeria,
<http://www.naptip.gov.ng/documents/Downloads/National%20Policy%20-%20June%202008.pdf>

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