

rites undone

A film by
Naomi Richman
Eddie Bolger

Documentary Short – 29m 57s – 16:9 – Digital – UK, 2021

‘We cannot put the shrine out of our sight’. These are not the words of a shaman or a priest. They are spoken by Filippo, a psychoanalyst and anthropologist working with victims of human trafficking in Palermo.

Among the patients who are referred to Filippo, and his colleague Maria Chiara, are a growing number of Nigerian women who have been trafficked to Italy as sex workers. Very often these women, who have suffered under conditions of physical violence and coercion, have also been victims of psychological and spiritual abuse.

In the process of making RITES UNDONE, we spoke with many women who had similar stories. Their journey to Europe began at a local shrine, often in Nigeria’s Edo state, where their traffickers forced them to swear an oath of loyalty to them. These trafficking practices deliberately exploit the African religious and

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cultural systems that hold beliefs in ‘juju’ or native medicine as sacred, to enforce a monopoly of power over those women. Juju beliefs and practices are manipulated and channelled to coerce them into sex work.

The resulting picture is of a situation that is not only urgent, but also extremely complex. One of our aims in making this film was to contribute some much needed nuance to what is often an overly simplistic discussion about migration from western Africa to Europe.

The need to grasp this complexity is evident in Filippo’s psychological practice. The women who he and Maria Chiara treat often suffer from a variety of symptoms that can be interpreted in various ways, from PTSD to depression or even psychosis. But these western terms and diagnoses, as Filippo explains during the film, do not always map onto the kinds of mental experiences his clients report: what may look like delusion from one cultural perspective can constitute a socially accepted interpretation from another. Filippo and his colleagues therefore find themselves at the forefront of efforts to combine the insights of anthropology – a discipline concerned with how concepts and experiences are culturally determined – with the tools of psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis.

Even for those women who manage to escape their traffickers, the fear associated with breaking their oath can remain present. And so, the shrine remains in sight – not only for those who find themselves reluctant sex workers in a foreign land, but also for those who seek to offer help across cultural and religious divides.



About the Filmmakers:

RITES UNDONE is a filmic collaboration between anthropologist Naomi Richman and filmmaker Eddie Bolger.

Naomi’s research and writing explores themes of religion, sexuality and abuse. She is currently a Junior Research Fellow in Anthropology at the University of Cambridge.

Eddie is a producer, editor and cinematographer at the Derek Jarman Lab. Among other projects he has worked on the Lab’s 2016 feature documentary *The Seasons in Quincy: Four Portraits of John Berger*.

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