

SEX SLAVERY AS DEHUMANISATION: A CONTEXTUAL APPRAISAL IN MARTIN BUBER'S DIALOGIC APPROACH

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Abstract

Sex slavery is an evil that denigrates the human person. It is a criminal form of enslavement which limits one's autonomy, freedom of movement and power to decide matters relating to one's sexual activity. Unfortunately, this apparent evil has become widespread especially in Nigeria and has reached an alarming rate. Despite modernization and technological advancements, this modern form of slavery has taken another dimension. This paper discusses sex slavery in Nigeria and seeks to demonstrate how it not only denies full humanness to others but is accompanied by cruelty and suffering; the human person is treated as less human and women, who are mostly affected by this evil, are stripped of their dignity. Martin Buber's philosophy of interpersonal relationship as an approach to resolving the dehumanisation of the female gender is the essence of this paper. The fundamental fact of human existence is simply a person with another person, a man with a woman and a human being is a creature capable of entering into living essential relations with others. This paper attempts to show that Buber's philosophy of dialogue serves as a means of resolving sex slavery in Nigeria and beyond. It requires the reorientation of the human mind in seeing the other person as a *Thou* instead of an *It*. This paper, which is basically expository, descriptive and analytic, approaches this issue from an existential perspective using Buber's philosophy in understanding the human person as relational for authentic human relationships.

Keywords: Sex slavery, dehumanisation, sexual activity, Dialogue, Interpersonal, Relationship.

Introduction

Slavery is a practice that militates against the human person because through it, a person or group of persons are subjugated, oppressed, victimized, objectified and discriminated against. It is an evil that goes against man's essential nature which is to be relational and his purpose of existence. Being intensely engaged in a relationship with another person is one of the greatest joys of being human. Human communication is at the core of our existence. It is an indubitable fact that being-with-others fundamentally characterizes our existence. We come into existence and notice other human persons as co-existents, and as persons we must have to deal with in one way or the other. Unfortunately, slavery is a form of cruelty that denigrates an individual and is symptomatic of the inability to fully exist as genuinely human. This negative trend that slavery portends raises questions such as: How may I understand the other person, who is different from me? How may I relate to this other with whom I must have to deal in my concrete everyday existence? What is the philosophical basis for interpersonal relationship? How is person to person relationship different from person to things? To what extent can we enhance respect for human relationships so that we built a society that is more egalitarian, free and healthy? What is at issue here is the question of the relationship between persons. Interpersonal relationship is something we experience daily. That is what keeps us moving forward. That is what makes us human.

This paper, is therefore, an attempt to address the evil of sexual slavery/exploitation using the philosophy of Martin Buber. This paper advocates a reordering of our mindsets and modes of thought in seeing the human person for what he or she really is – a dignified being that is to be respected, loved and treated as an existential subject. This reorientation is to be done and achieved through the lens of the relational existentialist, Martin Buber. For the purpose of this work, the terms, sex slavery and sex trafficking, will be used interchangeably.

Overview of slavery

Slavery could be said to be as old as man. It refers to a condition in which individuals are owned by others who control where they live and what they work; to the legal, economic, political and social rules that allow one group of people to own people belonging to another group for their own benefit. Essentially, slavery involves domination, oppression, control and so on. It existed in many cultures in early human civilizations and has continued to exist in some form for thousands of years in societies around the world. Although, it could be found in almost every society, slavery, as we have studied in our history lessons, has its legacy in colonialism and imperialism which served as fuel to agricultural

industries till end of the of the 19th century. The freedom granted to slaves by governments in Europe and America were not followed up by social, economic and psychological supports. Consequently, slave like conditions and mentalities persisted. According to *The Economist*, October 30, 2016, more than 200,000 adult slaves remained in Africa's Sahel until the 60s. The negative consequences of slavery are obvious when one looks at the uneven social and economic development of nations that were not only victims of slavery but were suppliers of labour to these countries that have now being termed 'developed'. Hence, the compartmentalization of the world into categories of first and third, developed and under-developed, rich and poor. It is very probable that there are probably more slaves now than at any other point in history because, in all its forms, slavery has always existed in modern societies long after the 19th century.¹

The most common form of modern slave trade is referred to as human trafficking. Trafficking in human beings is a "phenomenon that involves a variety of areas and diverse aspects and its multidimensional extensiveness contributes to an often unfocused perspective". Human trafficking is defined as "the recruitment, transport, transfer, harboring or receipt of a person by such means as threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud or deception for the purpose of exploitation."² This definition has three essential constituents: first, the action of trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons; second, the means of trafficking includes threat of or use of force, deception, coercion, abuse of power or position of vulnerability; and third, the purpose of trafficking is geared towards exploitation. Exploitation includes, "at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs."³ In other words, human trafficking has many forms of exploitation. The objective of this essay is to examine the form of exploitation that has to do with a person's sexuality.

Sex-trafficking is said to be the most common form of human-trafficking in the world today. It refers to the "recruitment, harbouring, transportation, provision or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act, in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud or coercion, or in which the person forced to perform such an act is under the age of 18 years."⁴ From the foregoing, sex trafficking is a sub-category within the wider framework of human-trafficking and is for the purpose of sexual exploitation including sexual slavery. So, sex trafficking necessarily includes sexual slavery but not all forms of sexual slavery fall under the umbrella of sex trafficking.

Sex Slavery/Trafficking

Sex slavery, which could also be described as sexual exploitation, is the attachment of the right of ownership over one or more persons with the intention of compelling them to engage in sexual activities. In other words, the victims are deprived of their sexual freedom, choice and rights and are subjected to the sexual manipulations of their enslavers. According to Mark Klamberg:

Sexual slavery is a particular form of enslavement which includes limitations on one's autonomy, freedom of movement and power to decide matters relating to one's sexual activity. Although it is listed as a separate offence in the ICC Statute, it is regarded as a particular form of enslavement. However, whereas enslavement is solely considered a crime against humanity, sexual slavery may constitute either a war crime or a crime against humanity. It is partly based on the definition of enslavement identified as customary international law by the ICTY in the Kunarac case.⁵

From the above, sexual slavery is seen as a form of enslavement with a sexual component. It includes the wielding of any or all of the powers attached to ownership over one or more persons, such as by buying, selling, lending or bartering such a person or persons, or by imposing on them a similar deprivation of liberty. Also, the person would have been made to engage in acts of a sexual nature. The evil also includes forced marriages, domestic servitude or other forced labour that ultimately involves forced sexual activity. In contrast to the crime of rape, which is a completed offence, sexual slavery constitutes a continuing offence.⁶

Sex slavery has its roots in ancient history. In the ancient world, the Greeks and the Romans amongst others made a practice of forcing captured young women to be consigned to a life of servitude as concubines or domestic servants. In the 13th century, African slave trade was not limited to slaves for servants, agriculture, or the labor industry but also extended to women who received a higher price than men, primarily because of the sexual appetites of their owners.⁷ However, in recent times, the rise in the harm and suffering associated with transporting women and children for the purposes of sexual exploitation has taken an alarming rate. The trafficking of women and children for commercial sexual purposes lies in the expansion and ever growing sexual entertainment industry, which is most importantly a demand-driven phenomenon. Unfortunately, women and children are perceived as the most exploitable and controllable and are therefore deemed to be the most in demand to contribute to this expanding and very competitive economic market, driven by maximum profit gaining.⁸

There have been a significant rise in the magnitude of this form of trafficking and it is said to be reaching severe dimensions worldwide in the recent context of globalization despite the laws and sanctions that have been put in place. Several reasons have been adduced for the continued rise in trafficking including gender discrimination, war and armed conflict, poverty, persistent unemployment, lack of education, lack of information, gender discrimination, poverty and deprivation, lack of legislative and policy protection, harmful socio-cultural practices, and economic inequality, which is said to be the most convincing factor because it results in neighbouring cities, regions or countries being attractive destinations for people in poverty stricken cities, regions and countries. These factors in themselves are, however, not regarded as the causes of trafficking in persons; rather, they merely contribute to the vulnerability of victims and render them more prone to a variety of harms.⁹

The likelihood that a country will become a source of trafficking is greatly influenced by the economic and political instability of that country. Internal armed conflict, civil unrest and natural disasters furthermore displace populations and increase their susceptibility to exploitation and abuse. Enslavers and traffickers make false promises of good working conditions and higher wages in foreign countries to lure victims into their traps.¹⁰ The unsuspecting victims, who seek a better life for themselves and their families, are easily deceived by these lies and they fall prey to the enslavers and traffickers and become objects of dehumanization and indignity.

Even though victims of sex trafficking crime are encouraged to leave the economic struggles of their home countries in search of better opportunities, movement itself is not what constitutes the crime of trafficking. The force, fraud or coercion that is exercised on a victim by another person to perform sexual activities and remain in the service of that person, are the determining and defining elements of this crime of trafficking. Sex slavery involves a variety of crimes and exploitation including violence, cruelty and ill-treatment of victims. The exploitation of victims for profit through the use of force, fraud or coercion remains the common denominator of this crime and the trade of human beings continues to evolve into new and more multifaceted forms of exploitation, using debt contracts and other means to coerce people for the purpose of profit gain.¹¹ The victim's human rights are taken away and the person is stripped of dignity and is reduced to a level below that of animals. This is what constitutes dehumanization and objectifies the human person.

The concept of human rights is based on the belief in the dignity of the human person. It recognizes that the human person requires

certain minimum standards in order to fulfill a basic life of dignity. Furthermore, as they are derived from the dignity of a human being as such, these rights belong to all human beings and cannot be removed by any authority, under any circumstances. Human rights are held by every human being, simply because one is a human being and for no other reason.¹² In other words, no one, for whatsoever reason, has the 'right' to take away the rights of another human being. Unfortunately, the human rights of the victims of sex slavery are trampled upon, taken away and made to perform indignifying acts. This is what criminalizes the actions of sex enslavers and traffickers and renders their actions evil in itself.

The cost of the sex slavery industry is most difficult to measure. The cost is more than just dollars being spent on sex. It also includes the damage done to individuals. There is also the cost in both physical and mental health with sex slavery. The self-esteem of the unfortunate victims is usually extremely low. It only takes a few days to break a woman; it takes many years to help her to rebuild her life. Victims of sex slavery/trafficking go through physical, psychological and emotional trauma associated with the exploitation. Those who are trafficked face violence that may occur during various stages of the trafficking process – from recruitment to destination which has a profound impact on the health of the victim. The physical, sexual and psychological abuse experienced by victims of sexual exploitation, combined with the forced or coerced use of alcohol and drugs, isolation and manipulation has long-term implications for victims' overall well-being and present a challenge for rehabilitation. The psychological harm experienced by victims exposed to severe and persistent trauma and abuse are similar to those observed in victims of torture and repeated sexual abuse. Escaping from the slavish or trafficking situation does not free the victim from the consequences of the period of exploitation, which she or he has endured. Chronic physical, psychological and social issues often affect sex-trafficked victims throughout their lives, whether they are free or enslaved.¹³

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle developed the concept of human flourishing or eudemonia. For him, the aim of ethics and politics is to show people how to achieve eudemonia, which can be interpreted as well-being. The well-being of an individual is to be achieved by living a life in society and living a life concerned with the society. Aristotle's consideration of well-being, human flourishing and fulfillment is firmly situated in the context of society.¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, like Aristotle, situated his consideration of harm and liberty in a social context. The frustration of basic needs or potentialities of human beings is perceived to be morally bad and harmful, for it reduces the ability of a person to be fully actualised as a human being. Thus, harm consists in not just the

absence of physical injury but also obstacles or lack of resources that prevent us living fully human lives. Harm, then does not just occur at the one to one level, which is often easily visible, but at the institutional and systemic level whereby human flourishing is constrained.¹⁵ Thus, sex slavery militates against the flourishing and fulfillment of the human person. Where the human person is not allowed to flourish, dehumanization takes place. And as such, sex slavery, trafficking, and every form of exploitation are evil *per se* that is, they are intrinsic evils.

Martin Buber's Philosophy of inter-personal relationship

Martin Buber was a Jewish-German existential philosopher; and as a theologian and a Biblical translator, he was said to be one of the most influential figures in the twentieth century intellectual- spiritual life. His ontology or theory of existence revolves around a concept of relation. Persons and things are seen to exist only in relation to other things and persons. The word, *relation* implies a state of affairs which connects two separate entities. The very essence of any existence is this connecting state of relation which Buber calls the *between*.¹⁶ Relation, as an event or action, occurs between two entities, that is, between a person, whose attention is completely turned toward someone or something other than himself, and another person or thing who confronts him. Buber says that essence of man which is special to him can be directly known only in a living relation. The individual is a fact of existence in so far as he enters into relation with other individuals.¹⁷ He defines man as a creature capable of entering into living essential relations with the world and things. The fundamental fact of human existence is that an individual steps into a living relation with other individuals. The essence of man which is special to him can be directly known only in a living relation.¹⁸

According to Buber, the principle of human life is not simple but twofold, being built up in a twofold movement which is of such kind that one movement is the presupposition of the other. He calls the first movement the primal setting at a distance and the second, entering into relation.¹⁹ So, man is man in virtue of his sense of distance and relation. It is obvious that entering into relation presupposes the primal setting at a distance. Man can only enter into relation with a being that has been set at a distance which has become an independent opposite. Only man can perform this act of setting at a distance because only man has a world - an unbroken continuum which includes not only all that he and other individuals know and experience but all that is knowable now and in the future.²⁰ In other words, one can only enter into relation with that which is not himself - an independent other, a being which has been set at a distance. The primal setting at a distance involves the self understanding itself as being separate and apart from the being which is

not the self: the self identifies the other as an Other. Identifying the other as an Other allows the self to enter into a relationship with it. This setting at a distance which makes entering into relation possible is proper to the human category.²¹

Man's Two Basic Relations to the World

From the foregoing, entering into relation means entering into an I-Thou relation, and at the same time one cannot identify distance with I-It. When an individual fails to enter into relation, however, the distance thickens and solidifies, so that instead of being that which makes room for relation it becomes that which obstructs it. This failure to enter into relation corresponds to I-It, and distance thus becomes the presupposition for both I-Thou and I-It.²²

The underlying principle in Buber's philosophy is the idea that man has two modes available to him through which he can engage the world. The first mode (I-It) is that of experience, while the other mode (I-Thou) is that of relation/encounter.²³ According to him, there is no I taken in itself but only the I of the primary word I-Thou and the I of the primary word I-It; and when a man says I, he refers to one or other of these. The I to which man refers is present when he says I. The existence of I and the speaking of I are one and the same thing. The I of man is both the I of the I-It and the I of the I-Thou and thus the I of man is twofold. Man's two basic relations to the world are fundamentally different modes of self-expression and so the 'I' in these relations has different meanings. The I of the I-It is spoken where and when the beings around are observed and treated as mere objects of observation; and the I of the I-Thou relationship is spoken where and when one stands with the whole of one's being over against another and enters into essential relationship with him.

Buber opines that the I-Thou precedes I-It, both logically and in the history of the human consciousness. Through the Thou a man becomes I, and this implies that man's I-consciousness develops only gradually from relational events. This means too that the abstracted I, which is the prerequisite for the primary word I-It, is inextricably embedded in the web of relation, in the relation to the Thou. The first primary word can be resolved, certainly, into I and Thou, but it did not arise from their being set together; by its nature it precedes I. The second word arose from the setting together of I and It; by nature it comes after I. This is why Buber declares that in the beginning is relation.²⁴

Buber makes a distinction between the person and the individual. The person is the man who has become truly or authentically human, that is, attained being or spiritual existence as the I of the I-Thou relation, through his encounter of the other as Thou. The individual,

however, is the I who has only experienced or used the other as his It, the object of his intent or purpose.²⁵

The Life of Dialogue

The heart of Buber's philosophy might be considered to be in his conception of dialogue.

In the Buberian conceptual scheme, then, genuine dialogue is not simply a conversation, a way of communication, a means towards other goals. Dialogue becomes the goal in itself, the central purpose of human life. It is quite obvious that dialogue typifies, in a superlative way, what Buber has described as an I-Thou attitude towards an other. A dialogic relationship is one where genuine dialogue occurs between partners.²⁶

Buber identifies certain defining features of the life of dialogue which are the constituents of the structure of I-thou relationship. The absence of any of these will mean the absence of relationship. These features include accepting and confirming the otherness of the Other. Such confirmation does not mean approval; but no matter what the person has against the other, by accepting that person as a partner in dialogue, the person has been affirmed.²⁷ The act of acceptance and confirmation belongs to the very structure and actualization of real human existence of I-Thou relationship. Another feature Buber identifies is mutuality or reciprocity of relationship. Only in the mutual or reciprocal saying of Thou, relationship comes into being and I and Thou become co-partners. The mutuality is the mutual participation of both the partners in each other's existence. The mutual conditioned nature of relationship is not one sided; and I-It is unilateral.²⁸ A third feature Buber highlights is opening up and making present of everything, that is, not investigating the other but courageously and intensively stirring one's own being to enter into other's life. The exclusiveness of relationship is another feature which refers to total and unlimited *presentness*. The other (Thou) in relationship is not more a Thou beside other Thous' but he becomes a Thou who cannot be replaced or exchanged.²⁹ The encompassing or inclusion of everything is the last feature Buber highlights which means living or experiencing through what the other is living or experiencing through.

Application of Buber's Philosophy to Sex Slavery and Trafficking

Buber's philosophy of inter-personal relationship is a salient panacea to the evil of sex slavery and sex trafficking in Nigeria and by extension, the entire human society. Buber promotes a philosophy of mutuality, reciprocity, genuine relationship and genuine dialogue. It is a philosophy that generates peace through mutual interaction and conversation, that is,

'I-Thou' relationship. The concept of dialogue perceives the human person as 'thou'.

In a society where genuine relations that ought to exist between individuals has been largely obliterated by the objectification of the human person through sex slavery and trafficking, Buber proclaims that man can achieve authentic human existence only by turning to one another as a whole being in the posture of I-Thou, in which the other is made really present in his concrete wholeness and uniqueness and where there is a genuine response to the irreducible claim of the encounter itself. At a time when mutual understanding and intimacy of communion are threatened by sexual exploitation, Buber has with earnest insistence appealed to those healing powers which may be awakened by man meeting his fellow man and woman. Buber's central message and insight is, therefore, that human beings are ordained to find fulfillment and authentic selfhood by living with each other in a relationship of genuine life of dialogue.³⁰

It is important to note that underlying the practice of sex slavery and sex trafficking is the objectification of the human person where an individual is seen as tool to be used. So, the evil of sex slavery, sex trafficking and other forms of sexual exploitation persists because the human person and probably the female sex are not perceived as 'thou'; instead, they are perceived as 'it.' According to Buber, the I-It relationship is a subject-object relationship which does not possess genuine dialogue, listening and response. In this relationship, an individual is regarded as an 'It' that is tossed around as a mere thing other than thou. Buber's philosophy would orientate individuals in upholding human dignity and foster respect for human rights and by inclusion, women and children.³¹

Buber's concept of confirmation which can be described as acknowledgement and recognition of the other would go a long way in curtailing sexist tendencies. In confirmation one meets, chooses and recognizes the other as a subject with the capacity to actualize one's own potential. In order for confirmation to be complete one must know that he/she is being made present to the other. There must be this re-orientation by individuals that recognizing other including women and children as subjects actualizes their own potentials and is a tonic for positive growth as an individual and the life is not about greed, money, making profit while disregarding the dignity of fellow human beings. Unfortunately, they may exist this fear that confirming others may lead to poverty or a lack. This is a problem of mistrust which Buber considers mistrust as one of the hindrances of dialogue. Mistrust leads to oppression, discrimination and criminality. The issue of mistrust can be resolved with mutual dialogue which brings trust and love.

Furthermore, the notion of I-Thou relationship stems from mutuality, reciprocity, relation and genuine dialogue. It is a concrete encounter, because individuals meet one another in their authentic existence, without any qualification or objectification of one another. Buber's I-Thou relationship opens an avenue for encounter in which people could engage with each other fully through dialogue. In other words, human beings – both enslaver/traffickers and victims can encounter each other authentically without objectifying one another. When such occurs, the victims and every individual would be treated with utmost respect as fellow Thous who have the right to experience life and contribute to it. Buber's notion of inclusion and relation becomes relevant here. Inclusion, according to Buber, means the ability to develop a dual sensation among those engaged in dialogue: experiencing oneself and simultaneously perceiving the 'other' in its singularity. The inclusion of a person causes one to experience and know one's fellow human being. That quality of inclusion will help those involved in sexual exploitation to experience and understand themselves as well as experience and understand what their fellow existents go through in their situation and experiences. Accordingly, relation is mutual. My 'thou' affects me as I affect it.³² There is deep sense of reciprocity and mutuality in relation.

It is only when people overcome their self-centredness, greed and lust and see one another as thou that mutual, inclusive, reciprocal, relational and genuine dialogue in love would occur which would promote peaceful harmonious co-existence and human beings to flower, flourish and contribute uniquely in a no small measure to the development of the entire human society. To have a genuine relationship of dialogue, both men and women must recognize the "Thou" of the other: Only persons who are capable of truly saying *Thou* to one another can truly say *We* with one another.

Conclusion

This essay has been concerned with the application of Buber's philosophy of interpersonal relationship to the evil of sex slavery and trafficking with a view to resolving it. The basic foundation on which Buber's whole project is built is his insight that man has two distinct ways of engaging the world - I-Thou and I-It. Modern society largely ignores the I-Thou mode of encounter through which man enters into relation with the other; and canonizes the I-It mode of experience through which man treats the other as an object to be analyzed and utilized. Buber's contention is that inasmuch as the latter (mode of experience) is important and indispensable for human survival, it is not

sufficient. As a matter of fact, a human being is not fully human unless he also opens himself up to the mode of relation (I-Thou).

In Buber's philosophy, men and women are essentially relational beings. All true living is meeting, and dialogue is the ridge on which we meet. In dialogue, men and women penetrate the polite superficialities and defenses with which they habitually armor themselves; they listen to one another with an authenticity that forges a bond between and among both sexes. Upholding and respecting the human person and entering into a living and essential relation with another is an act of incredible bravery. This is because it requires leaving behind false notions of selfishness, dominance, superiority and arrogance in a realm of experience in which we can understand and predict and master and enter into a realm that cannot easily be predicted and manipulated, and which exposes us to grave risks such as betrayal and exploitation. Man becomes what he essentially is in relation to others.

A pragmatic application of Buber's concept of dialogue would definitely go a long way in curbing sexual exploitation of different forms. It will encourage a spirit of mutual togetherness, genuine conversation, genuine wholeness, and genuine connection between individuals - men and women. There is need for confirmation and inclusion of one another through dialogue which brings closeness, mutuality and reciprocity. There is emphatic need for recognition of the dignity of women and children who are mostly victims of sex slavery and trafficking. Thus, the human person should be seen as an end in itself and never as a means to an end.

Buber's philosophy does not in any way suggest that there would not be failures, errors and mistakes considering the fact that it is human nature that is being dealt with but it simply entails that in the midst of friction and tension, there could be need to understand one another as persons with dignity and essence. Sex slavery and trafficking is difficult to curb. Despite the numerous laws and attempts to stop it which are commendable, it still thrives. While appreciating the efforts of the government, non-governmental organizations, religious institutions and individuals, there is a need to go back to the source; the education of the young which Buber emphasized greatly in his works. While individuals in the society need a reorientation in seeing one another as 'Thous' the young one - the future of the society - need to be educated and taught to build up a society where mutual respect is upheld, the dignity of the human person is held holy and fellow existents treat one another as Thous. That would mean introducing the young to philosophical ideas especially what we may refer to as relational existentialism and inculcating in them the values of the I-Thou relationship.

In the “I-it” relation, the individual deals with the world and other persons functionally, manipulatively as things to be investigated and used. This type of relation is wrong as it has been a major cause of many problems in modern life as reflected in the educational systems of nations that see schooling as a production factory. In the I-Thou relationship, the individual encounters other persons and God as Thou (You). This involves interpersonal dialogue, an encounter which opens up the true depths of reality that engenders direct connection and a sense of unity for the individuals and the community with the necessary ethical underpinnings. To Buber, education is relational between the teacher and the learner on one hand between the educational system and the community on the other. Education is subjective. The active role of the learner in selecting and building his/her own knowledge as to be effective in his relations or encounter with people. Education should generally be seen as a relation based enterprise in that the nature and the direction of the society determines the essence of its educational system.³³

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