

ANOTHER FACE OF SLAVERY Osadolor Eribo

Osa Eribo wrote “Another Face of Slavery” while imprisoned in Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison in Lagos State. He was a soldier in the Nigerian military and upon demanding proper medical attention after sustaining injuries during peacekeeping missions in Sierra Leone and Liberia, he was brought back to Nigeria, charged with mutiny, and imprisoned. He has since been released from prison due to interest in his case by several human rights activists and lawyers. He is currently in Italy seeking political asylum. He hopes to have the chance to enrol in a criminology program in university one day.

After the abolition of slavery and the slave trade towards the end of the 18th century, people around the world, particularly the black race, were gladdened in body and in mind because it marked the beginning of the end of a savage and barbaric era. But little did the people of Africa and Nigeria in particular know that in less than a century will come a period of decadence, a society that is reminiscent of the era of slavery. The “elites” in the Nigerian society returned to the continent and came to see themselves as our messiahs, sent here to guide and take us safely to the Promised Land — an epic of civilization; instead, they have led the larger society astray with their selfish and uncompromising attitude. The attitudes of the political bigots in this country have created a riotous environment, an unparalleled state of insecurity. There are less moral values now than ever before. Nigerians now see vices as virtues. We live in a society that has legalized tribalism⁸ by calling it “the quota system.” We live in a society that only sees “crimes” as actions committed by armed robbers while those actions committed by bureaucrats and the powerful people in this society such as forgery, 419 (fraud), looting of the government’s treasury and land resources, misappropriation of funds, and dissemination of false information to the general public are not regarded as crimes.

This is a society that openly and readily denies its citizens “justice.” There is always one sort of governmental interference or the other in the court of law — the court of law that is *supposed* to symbolize truth is now

⁸ Discrimination according to tribal ethnicity.

a vehicle of violence. Nigerian society is one that is openly ruled by a particular class of people and it has been that way since the beginning of the post-colonial, so-called African independence era. This has become a nation that refuses to give youths a chance. A society that has leaders who are over seventy years of age, who were once military dictators but now are “democratically” elected “presidents” wearing the best fabric, in the newest designs, owning and flaunting brand new Rolex watches, estates, and fleets of cars both in Nigeria and abroad: these are men who live gluttonous lives in fabulous houses. They have become models of fashion and design, often appearing on the front pages of this country’s national newspapers and magazines. All this they have achieved with taxpayers’ money and with this country’s rich resources. Strangely enough, they do not seem to make the link between their lifestyles and poverty in Nigeria. They do not make it their responsibility to alleviate the suffering of the masses, most of whom are suffering in abject poverty. The attitude of “monkey dey work; baboon dey chop” is rampant.⁹ Socio-political and economic insecurity, social injustice, unprecedented rates of violent crime, and mass human rights violations are an epoch of another face of slavery in this African society.

The rulers of our present day society have been able to achieve such a remarkable feat in their pursuance of oppression by capitalizing on the weakness of the people. Poverty and illiteracy are the tools they use to keep the masses oppressed and their own bellies full. The Nigerian Prison Services’ role in this oppression is instrumental. A Nigerian prison yard is where I am presently held captive. Ninety-five percent of the prisoners who are currently behind bars are from poor homes and are illiterate. They are people who have been pushed to the edge of a cliff by life’s frustrating factors created by the elites of this nation. Most of the victims of this society got involved in crime as a result of their frustrations and lack of opportunity to survive through “legitimate” means. Many felt dejected and hopeless without shelter and food, pushing and engulfing them into the “other side of life”: the side of life people called “criminal.” Worse still, upon arrival in prison, these people are shown cruelty, depravity, inequality, and sheer wickedness. All basic rights are denied: food, clean drinking water, and medical attention are the ones that come to mind immediately. Food that the

⁹ Translation: one person works while another eats from the fruits of that labour.

government sets aside for prisoners is almost always “diverted elsewhere.” Prisoners here are being subjected to physical and mental torture — starting in the police stations and continuing inside the prisons. Some prisoners arrive here half crippled from the torture they endured inside police stations, or as a result of a hard life on the streets, the unavailability of affordable polio vaccinations, lack of nutrition, or “accidents” along the way. Upon being brought to prison, they are subjected to mental and psychological torture as a result of their disability.

One question that keeps pondering in my mind over and over is: are these people the most dangerous offenders in our society? If they are not, why are they treated in this inhuman manner? Every time I ponder I find myself reaching the same conclusion: they treat us like this because they can — because we are among the poorest, most uneducated, and underprivileged people in Nigeria. My pondering also helps me reach a second conclusion: the prison in the Nigerian context is not an instrument of reformation but rather an instrument of perpetual slavery and persecution employed by the privileged against the underprivileged. It is a dumping ground for police “suspects,” it is a place to keep those people whom society has rendered worthless, and it is a place to incapacitate the poorest masses. This incapacitation is not only achieved through imprisonment, it is achieved through use of gunshots and chains under the pretence of interrogation: too many prisoners have been physically crippled through such brutalities.

Nigerian prisons are also an instrument for silencing patriots who refuse to compromise for the social ills in this society. It is a place where innocent citizens are held captives to cover up the misdeeds of government. It is of no surprise to the majority of the people in this country that the “government” and their police “force” have not been able to crack down on any assassination cases in this country. So many protestors have been assassinated and not one case has been brought to “justice.” The murder of Dele Giwa, editor of *News Watch* magazine, the assassination of the defunct National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) Chairman Pa Alfred Rewane, the recent killing of the Minister of Justice Chief Bola Ige, to mention but a few.

The Nigerian prison is like an ugly monster created and bred by those in powerful positions to destabilize (physically and mentally) the youth and underprivileged of this nation. The penal system’s work is ensuring that

this nation is left with a future too similar to its violent past. The Nigerian prison is a mirror of the Nigerian society, where cruelty, depravity, hunger, inequality, social injustice, and sheer wickedness is the order of the day. I have seen no clearer picture of mass inhumanity than that of the Nigerian prison environment, and I have been a soldier at war in several nations in my life.

It is a fact that prisoners given sentences ranging from ten years to life in prison for Indian hemp (marijuana) related cases are still languishing behind bars; even though the laws that put them behind bars have been amended by the Nigerian “democratic” government as one of the implemented changes from military to civilian rule. Are such sentences not at variance with our present day constitution and law? Why are these people still in prison? It is a shame that innocent men charged with the murder of Pa Alfred Rewane are still in jail *even after* countless revelations and confessional statements by government agents confirm that the government itself is responsible for his death. It is even more disheartening to know that veteran soldiers, who served as Nigerian contingents under the ECOWAS¹⁰ Monitoring Group ECOMOG¹¹ with various forms of physical disabilities as a result of gunshot and bomb blast wounds sustained while on peacekeeping missions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, are still languishing in jail simply because they spoke out against the poor medical care they were receiving and the non-payment of their estacode (allowances). Some are still pending medical treatment and are in need of surgeries that they will most likely never receive.

The cases I list here are but few among so many appalling ones I come across every day inside this prison. The typical Nigerian prison is a place where mortal beings are metamorphosed into lesser beings. Prisoners are stripped of the natural power of choice endowed upon humanity, they are shown hatred and violence. They are hunted by stigmatization both within and outside the prison. They begin to feel dejected and hopeless. After spending most of the productive years of one’s life in prison, one is

¹⁰ The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was formed in 1975 by several West African nations in order to strengthen the West African region’s economic structures.

¹¹ ECOMOG is an armed monitoring unit set up by ECOWAS in 1990 to implement peacekeeping missions in West African countries experiencing civil wars and violent internal conflicts.

sent back into society without any incentive or hope for the future: many have been physically maimed from torture. When they leave prison they become “savagely wicked and cruel” in the eyes of the Nigerian society. It is shocking that so many people know of the inhumanities and the cruelties that take place here yet are puzzled at the inability of ex-prisoners to become “better citizens” of this corrupt and lethal society.

In light of all this, I find it necessary to re-enforce this capability: irrespective of the traumatic experiences both inside this Nigerian prison and outside within the harsh Nigerian society, there are those of us here who still continue to take back the power of choice — we choose the power to resist corruption and oppression, we surprisingly and unrepentantly choose to remain patriotic to the nation that has robbed us of our lives. There are some of us who still look forward to one day impacting positive changes upon *our* society.

“And the moon’s fine to look at when the sun isn’t there.” So says the tale of Shakespeare. At this crucial point in time, I wish to commend the efforts of the humanitarian minded people and the various human rights organizations nationwide; the non-governmental organizations, the religious bodies and of course the international communities for their awareness programs and immense contributions morally and financially toward the attainment of a just society and more so, for the level of love you have been able to give to those who feel dejected inside these prisons. Your networks have been our only source of love, hope, inspiration, and “moon” to look at when the sun is conspicuously absent.

When I look at the good and wonderful handiwork of nature around me, the evergreen landscape of our geographical setting, the rich friendly and fertile soil and the brilliant men and women of great intelligence who live in this African nation, alongside the corrupt and selfish ones, I tend to have a dream and a vision of truth: one where inequality and perversion of truth will be replaced by equal rights and true justice; where the looting of Nigerian resources and government treasuries will be replaced by pride and nation-building; where old and egocentric political bigots will be replaced by young, dynamic, and invigorating leaders; where economic depression will be replaced by industrial revolution and above all, where hatred and political violence will be replaced by peace, serenity, and equal rights.

I think the only key to achieving these dreams lies in a revolutionizing of the entire social structure; in the re-focusing upon education and a re-orientation of this nation's people through the use of intelligible and relevant African methods with a logic that can penetrate deeply into the fabric of Nigerians and break the shackles of this continued colonial slavery.