

A TRIBUTE TO SOLIDARITY: MY OASIS

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It is unfortunate that I am not gifted with better use of words, expressive enough to describe the depth of my gratitude. I would have started to write a “Heart-felt Appreciation” long overdue, which placed “Golden Tears” on my face even at a dreadful point of emotional and psychological breakdown, eaten up by emptiness and pessimistic despair, attracting insanity and suicide. There came a turning point — The PRAWA Circle¹⁶ — introducing prisoners to calculated, shifted, and refined reconciliation, social reformative measures, aimed towards diluting tension, anger, depression, and raw desire for vengeance. We prisoners, together, have learned to survive as one. Words do not come close to describing how happy I personally feel, as well as many others, who recognize and respect the graced and seasoned presence of solidarity. So prompt, as if it is divinely destined to comfort dejected souls like “Cold Water” on a thirsty tongue and encouraging like “Good News” about home from a distant land.

Prisoners are the “rejected people,” abandoned by society and ignored by the world as a whole. Social discomfort with “the unknown” leaves those “tagged” as prisoners to become a representation of deadly character descriptions, meant for beasts. As a prisoner in Nigeria, I feel enslaved by events and life circumstances, so unfavourable that humiliation and dejection are evident enough to form liquids appearing as sweat on squeezed faces like those of the Caihdihh Ancestral Shrines. Those of us who are young, with breathtaking stress and agony produce uneven beards resembling an old brush, much like those found in the Egyptian museum, serving as a souvenir in memory of an African Empire that once reigned God knows when.

It is not possible to interpret this experience through words or facts, for when one is not free, true expression of the self and of experiences

¹⁶ The PRAWA Circle is a program Viviane Saleh-Hanna implemented in several Nigerian prisons to enhance solidarity amongst prisoners and aid in building survival tactics for those serving time in Nigeria. In addition to community building, the program allowed prisoners to identify their own needs and work towards helping each other meet them. In Kirikiri Medium Security Prison, prisoners suggested the implementation of a literacy component to the program; as a result, prisoners who had literary skills began to teach others who did not. In the Maximum Security prison, literacy was not a concern; community building was considered to be the main priority; thus, their Circle program consisted of discussions and debriefing sessions.

is tantamount to crossing an ocean in your own room. Those who have travelled along this particular road can better tell the story, for my life has left a mark on my palm, a constant reminder and unconditional reflection of the bitter past of cultural unbalancing and adjustment while still maintaining hopes for days of plenty. I must not fail to confess that solidarity in here has altered my life for the better, giving me a restoration of identity, dignity, and self-esteem. Having been emotionally, physically, and psychologically discredited by the judiciary, the consequences of my imprisonment are a result of a misappropriated criminal justice victimization and subsequent judicial impropriety through raw and deliberate selective distribution¹⁷ and an uneven application of justice under the rich colours of the law.

In light of oppression, solidarity amongst prisoners and those from the “outside world” who work with us allows strength to deal with the negative public sentiment in regards to prisoners. I continue to believe that something good could come out of all this. The sad reality is that in here, there is an overabundance of fertile minds, vision-oriented and talented people hidden behind the bars, covered with a deadly stigma that could frighten a lion. We are unduly isolated by reason of misguided “unknowns” with maximum, derogatory, deadly security measures meant to put our credibility as human beings into question.

Who shall you believe? The convicted and disreputed fellow with more than substantial evidence to attract a position behind bars, or a respected public servant with a standing reputation in the court of the law? It is not simple. We refuse to let you believe that it is simple. This is a puzzle that requires a considerable degree of close scrutiny to decode. There is one standing assurance: our longevity must speak for our survival in moments of severe deprivation, degradation, and subsequent scenarios. It is incredible that solidarity could accomplish something real inside the walls, bringing support to prisoners to survive psychologically, physically, socially, and emotionally, constantly giving prisoners new energy to keep fighting back in the war for power and control. Just in recognizing our present state as pawns in the hands of our criminal justice predators, we gain power. Always less than satisfied with the “Barter Criminal Justice System” (the perpetrators’ choice), we remain aware.

¹⁷ With the distribution of “justice” favouring the poor while allowing the rich to prosper.

True solidarity inside prison is something more than “a friend in search of friends in life’s wilderness in this circumstantial psychological desert.” It is an epitome of stability on refined, sifted social, moral, and psychological rebuilding efforts with every intention and enthusiasm to dilute the contemporary penal inferno that is dedicated to the ruling class, the political predators: those few individuals who have privatized the seat of power, representing their interests while misrepresenting the poor and the decency of all people regardless of their social position.

In the end, heartfelt smiles from prisoners inside these dungeons go a long way in repairing deadly emotional and psychological damage inflicted by punitive people and systems. In here, lingering at the corner of life’s destitution, living right in the heart of life’s wilderness, we are dedicatedly enthusiastic to put smiles and optimistic tendencies on the faces of poor and helpless victims of this unreformable system.

Solidarity between prisoners gives a sincere candour that makes me feel like a human being in the midst of my life’s wilderness. Solidarity between prisoners and members of our human rights community is proof that walls cannot distance us from society for long, and every time community members sit with us, every time they do not distance themselves from us, every time they fail to show signs of distaste or disgust in our presence, every time they are comfortable in our company, so lively that they seem to have forgotten that we are prisoners, we are reminded that we continue to be human beings.

Solidarity does not allow us to feel like lesser people. In a prison yard, inside the grasp of the law, meant to humiliate the less privileged, we look upon solidarity with community human rights activists as the closest thing we have to brothers and sisters. Solidarity gives us a certain degree of confirmation, reminders of our humanity, touching our spirits. It is special, and now, deeply engrained in my heart.

My Oasis comes through my recognition of the humanity around me. No matter how the prison works to dehumanize us, when I look at the *people* in prison with me, I experience humanity. As we sit inside this prison yard, hungry, but in discussion with each other, sharing and discussing knowledge, we find ourselves instilling a great and versatile presence of mind, defining success and getting a sense of accomplishment through helping each other. Presenting each other with the fact that knowledge is

power and realizing that power cannot be circumvented by circumstantial disasters and tribulations, we learn that the light of knowledge knows no failure. I begin to see something close to a genuine idea and achieve great triumphs in that. Life is a stormy career from creation until death, but the gift of unconditional planting is the mother of unconditional harvest. Solidarity inside this prison is the “unconditional planting” of life. The universal human heart is vulnerable to its neighbours, with a due sense of belonging and oneness in unity displayed in times of despair, which by reason of knowledge attracts the perceiving and discerning presence of one’s blessings burned into the hearts of our life events.

Whatever we have done as people becomes our identity and becomes instituted as a perpetual reference for recognition — positively or negatively. The fact remains that it is human to respect people from whom we could gain something real. The giver in us is to be honoured for the wonderful identity of giving. The recognition of this giver brings a happiness that cannot ever be wholly reciprocated at the other end of receiving spectrum.

How I wish I was gifted with better use of words to express more, to decode my experiences and the power I have seen in solidarity. For now, I continue to refuse to be broken to submission emotionally and psychologically. I am covered by this Oasis and have found immunity.

My Power: they have tried to subdue the poor in this country to a breaking point whereby there will be no future available for us. They are wasting the natural potentials and resources of my nation, and I along with the others who are less privileged cannot see the light in our lives underneath the walls of this unjustified criminal justice system. It does not have a legal agenda, the purpose is practical exploitation and subjugating submission through constant pressure and threat under the colors of *their* law. With this dedicated agenda against the poor, the criminal justice system is purposefully aimed at reducing people to a confused social, emotional, and psychological state.

The law is *supposed* to uphold, maximize, and update the interpretation of justice with constant awareness of every dark spot in society that requires light. That light does not find the poor in this nation; the law is an extraordinary instrument, deliberating in injustice and practical corruption. The judge’s gavel has been sold for a cut of the “national cake.” The truth is now for sale with a price tag that only the wealthy can afford. You need to be a millionaire to contend for your rights in a country where no one cares.

The “fundamental human rights” of people who do not have money has been buried and forgotten. We see rules and regulations and constitutional rights on posters, displayed on walls in police stations, prisons, government houses, and street light poles, paid for by foreign funders in another “awareness raising” campaign. Some of these “fundamental human rights” are pasted on the walls in several police stations I sat in. Those posters read: (1) Bail is free, (2) do not give or collect bribes, and (3) the police is your friend. All that took place in those police stations underneath such signs contradicted these messages.

It is painful that despite all these “posters” and “campaigns” that the Nigerian police, judiciary, and prison systems could keep a suspect in prison for ten years without trial and no means of earning bail. In the name of a “holding charge,” even after the court of appeal has declared such a “holding charge” repealed and subsequent detention as “unconstitutional,” we continue to sit behind prison walls.

If some of us succeed in raising our heads above these waters of injustice, and finding a way to leave this prison yard, after all the years our families and friends (those of us who have them) spend raising fortunes to get us out, there is no compensation for wrongful imprisonment, for years lost in prison without trial. At the hands of the police, prosecutors, lawyers, and the judges in question lay our unfortunate fortunes.

I feel a sense of satisfaction in knowing that my truth has been told. *My power* lies in speaking out: while the “constitutional” justice system is credited permanently to the rich and the wealthy in society, the poor remain voiceless because they have nothing to “offer.” I know I have something to offer. My experiences speak volumes about the nature of the law and how it functions to oppress the underprivileged.

Is it true that I am a Nigerian but at times, I find myself daydreaming about reasons to doubt my citizenship. If I am a Nigerian, or citizen of any nation, where is my access to “fundamental human rights” as accorded to me through my citizenship, and not according to my experiences with the application of “justice” in my life? I feel like I belong to no country in particular. I think prisoners all over the world must feel this. If we did belong to a nation, we would have had an Embassy to turn to for help — a source outside the system that could properly represent *our* best interests. *If* I was a true citizen of this nation, I would *not* have been “used” to implement colonial injustice. My citizenship has nothing to offer me. I

have been used in this “African” experiment with “constituted and colonial justice,” subjected to *their* “tailor made rules” that have been abused by a series of “according to taste” type of constitutions, meant to subjugate the poor and the less privileged to total submission while fulfilling some kind of established “unconditional pledge for national loyalty.”