

THE SYSTEM I HAVE COME TO KNOW

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Sylvester Monday Anagaba wrote "The System I Have Come to Know" and "Man's Inhumanity to Man" while serving time on "awaiting trial" holding charges in Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison in Lagos State, Nigeria.

I was arrested on the 17th of April 1992. I was taken to the Lagos State Police Command in Ikeja where I was hung like a monkey from the ceiling, with my hands holding up the rest of my body. This was done to me twice for long periods of time in one night, all in the name of "investigation." The second time they strung me up to the ceiling, I passed out, only to wake up the next morning with my hands and legs paralyzed from the hanging and my whole body covered with bruises and blood. I was ordered at gun point to sign a statement. I do not know who wrote it, or what it entailed. I refused but was hit with a police baton. My I.P.O. (investigating police officer) Sergeant Otein was the man beating me, he even threatened to kill me if I refused to sign the statement. I did sign it later. That same day the leader of the team of men (police) handling my case came into our cell (there were many of us in one cell that night). They chose thirty people and sent them out to be killed by the O.C.S.A.R.S. (Officer in Charge of Special Anti Robbery Squad) in the Lagos State Police Branch. Since they believed I was innocent, they told me that they did not want to kill me, but at the same time, could not release me "free of charge" as bail is not free in *their* police station. They asked me to contact my family and to ask them to bring forty thousand naira (approximately \$400 Canadian dollars) for bail. I did contact my family and they did manage to collect the money, and my family did pay the "king" of the other policemen in that station.

On April 21st, 1994 very early in the morning I was taken to court by my I.P.O. Sergeant Otein. When I tried to enquire from him why I was not being released, he told me that I gave the money to his superior. I should have given him the money because his boss had "ate the lion share of that money"; for that reason, I will suffer more than Job (the biblical figure). At court, they charged me with robbing a necklace from a woman. I have been remanded, by the magistrate, to Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison on a holding charge.

I was taken to Area F police station at Ikeja on court order because I raised my hand at the court to demand my adjournment. At Area F police station I was put inside cells with hardened armed robbers. It was like hell because I have never in my life had cause to be behind a police counter. I was pushed into a cell that afternoon. The police had informed the suspects inside that cell that that I had refused to give them money. I was mocked by the other prisoners and told what the future had in store for me. I was eventually able to make an impression upon the hearts of that hungry mob, and we had a conversation. They had been deprived of their freedom, most for years ranging from one year to four years. They had been in police custody, warehoused inside police cells the whole time. I spent five months and two weeks in that police cell. I paid ten thousand naira to be taken to court on September 20th, 1994. That was my ticket out of the police cell and into Maximum Security Prison in Kirikiri. I have been here on a “holding charge” awaiting trial ever since.

At the “reception” of this penal institute, which the guards on duty call “country no vex,”¹⁸ everybody registered under his family name. After the exercise of recording our identity was complete, we were taken to the “solitary blocks.” We were put in cells, eight of us in an eight by ten foot cell. It stunk like hell, the odour was so overwhelming, five of us vomited immediately upon entering. It was like entering a hole that was a natural extension of hell. In the cell there were no mattresses, there was no toilet, no means of getting water, the floors were littered with cigarette butts, ash, and spider webs covered with dust and sweat from the prisoners who had used the cell before we arrived. The place was hot, there was no ventilation except the door that was laden with crossed iron bars. Worst of all, there was no light and we had no food. The guard claimed our number is not included in the ration for that day. They took all the money any of us had, and made it clear to us that ownership of money is not allowed in prison.

The next day we were put in blocks.¹⁹ The sight of my roommates was sickening. I remember one man in particular who was not dead, but decaying. Scabs covered many people, from head to toe, some even had scabs on their palms. My block was another eight by ten foot, but this time

¹⁸ Country don't get angry.

¹⁹ Small halls filled with people.

we were fifteen in number. Now I knew why the first cell was called the “solitary cell.”

That night my journey in exile in this country began. I couldn't sleep as we were packed in like sardines. At a point, we were awoken and told that we will be taking turns to sleep since there wasn't enough room for us all to lie down on the floor. When five people are asleep, five will mount sentry while the remaining five will sit down. At about two in the morning, I was still standing when one of my new friends, Mr. Felix Okoedion, fell over. All efforts to revive him were fruitless. We shouted for the guards to come and they asked us to “handle the situation” until daybreak. Felix finally gave up at 3:00 a.m. We rang the iron door with our feeding pans but to no avail. The next morning we were beaten with batons, gang chained with shackles, and taken to solitary confinement, where we spent three months without questions, without medical care and we were given half the measly ration of the miserable food they give the rest of the prisoners. These are just some of the experiences I have had with the penal system in Nigeria; they are the ones that come to mind when I reflect upon my time here. It has been difficult.