After the abolition of slavery and the slave trade towards the end of the eighteenth 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 would come a period of decadence, a society that is reminiscent of the era of slavery. The “elites” in 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 led the larger society astray with their selfish and uncompromising attitudes. The attitudes of the political bigots in this country have created a riotous environment, an unparalleled state of insecurity. There are fewer moral values now than ever before. Nigerians now see vices as virtues. We live in a society that has legalized tribalism by calling it “the quota system.” We live in a society that sees “crimes” only as actions committed by armed robbers, while 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, which is supposed to symbolize truth but is now a vehicle of violence. Nigerian society is openly ruled by a particular class of people, and it has been that way since the beginning of the postcolonial era, the so-called era of African independence. Nigeria has become a nation that refuses to give youths a chance. It has become a society with leaders who are over seventy years of age, who were once military dictators but now are “democratically” elected “presidents” wearing the best fabrics, showing off 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 live in abject poverty. The attitude of “monkey dey work; baboon de y chop” is rampant.

Sociopolitical and economic insecurity, social injustice, unprecedented rates of violent crime, and mass human rights violations are another epoch of slavery in this African society.

The rulers of our present 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 Service’s role in this oppression is instrumental. A Nigerian prison yard is where I am currently 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 the lack of opportunities to survive through “legitimate” means. Many felt dejected and hopeless without
shelter and food, pushing them into the “other side of life” and engulfing them in it: the side of life people call “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 come to mind immediately. Food that the government sets aside for prisoners is almost always “diverted elsewhere.” Prisoners here are being subjected to physical and mental torture, which starts in the police stations and continues 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, the lack of nutrition, or “accidents” along the way. On being brought to prison they are subjected to psychological torture as a result of their disability.

One question I keep pondering over is this: are these people the most dangerous offenders in our society? If they are not, why are they treated in this inhumane manner? Every time I ponder over these questions, 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 to reach a second conclusion: the prison in the Nigerian context is not an instrument of reformation but 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 achieved not only through imprisonment but also through gunshots and chains under the pretense 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 themselves for the social ills in this society. It is a place where innocent citizens are held captive to cover up the misdeeds of the government. It is no surprise to most people in this country that their “government” and police
“force” have not been able to crack down on any assassination cases here. So many protesters 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 Minister of Justice Chief Bola Ige; these are but a few of the cases.

The Nigerian prison is like an ugly monster created 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 Nigerian society, where cruelty, depravity, hunger, inequality, social injustice, and basic wickedness are 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.

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 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 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 ECOWAS3 monitoring group ECOMOG,4 with various 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 received and the non-payment of their estacode (“allowances”). Some are still waiting for medical treatment and are in need of surgery, which they will likely never receive.
The cases I list here are but a 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 haunted 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 sent back into society without any incentive or hope for the future, and many have been maimed from torture. When they leave prison they become "savagely wicked and cruel" in the eyes of 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 reinforce this capability: irrespective of the traumatic experiences both inside this Nigerian prison and outside within the harsh Nigerian society, there are those of us who continue to take back the power of choice. We choose to resist corruption and oppression; surprisingly and unrepentantly, we choose to remain patriotic to the nation that has robbed us of our lives. There are some of us who still look forward to the day when positive changes will occur within our society.

"And the moon's fine to look at when the sun isn't there." So says the tale of Shakespeare "Treason". 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 programmes 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 ever-green landscape of our geographical setting, the fertile soil, and the brilliant men and women who live in this African nation, alongside the corrupt and selfish ones, I tend to have 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. The key to achieving these dreams lies in revolutionizing the entire social structure, in refocusing on education, in reorienting 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.

NOTES

1 Tribalism is discrimination according to tribal ethnicity.
2 “Monkey dey work; baboon dey chop”: That is, one person works, while another eats the fruits of that labour.
3 The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was formed in 1975 by several West African nations to strengthen the West African region's economic structures.
4 ECOMOG (Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group) or ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) is an armed monitoring unit set up by ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) in 1990 to implement peacekeeping missions in West African countries experiencing civil wars and other violent internal conflicts.