Colonial Systems of Control
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I regret that I don’t have the words to express the depth of my gratitude; I would have started to write a heart-felt appreciation long overdue that put “golden tears” on my face even at a dreadful point of emotional and psychological breakdown, when I was eaten up by pessimism and despair, attracting insanity and suicide. There came a turning point, the PRAWA Circle,\(^1\) which introduced prisoners to calculated, sifted, and refined reconciliation, social reformative measures aimed at 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, as well as many others, feel, and we recognize and respect the presence of solidarity, as if it was divinely destined to comfort dejected souls like cold water on a thirsty tongue and like good news about home from a distant land.

Prisoners are 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 the 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 sweat on squeezed faces like those of the Caihdihh Ancestral Shrines.
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 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 of the bitter past of cultural imbalance, yet I still maintain hopes for days of plenty. I must not fail to confess that solidarity here has altered my life for the better, giving me a restoration of identity, dignity, and self-esteem. But I have been emotionally, physically, and psychologically discredited by the judiciary, and my imprisonment has been the result of judicial impropriety through selective distribution under the rich colours of the law.

In light of oppression, solidarity among prisoners and those from the outside world who work with us gives us the strength to deal with the negative public sentiment in regard to prisoners. I continue to believe that something good can come out of all this. The sad reality is that in here there is an overabundance of fertile minds, of vision-oriented and talented people, hidden behind bars. We are unduly isolated because of "unknowns," with derogatory and even deadly security measures meant to put our credibility as human beings in question.

Whom can you believe? The convicted and disreputable 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 law? It is not simple. We refuse to let you believe that it is simple. This is a puzzle that requires considerable scrutiny to solve. There is one standing assurance: our longevity must speak for our survival in moments of severe deprivation and degradation. It is incredible that solidarity can 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. 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.
True solidarity inside prison includes sustained efforts to put out the contemporary penal inferno, which serves 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 social position.

In the end heartfelt smiles from prisoners inside these dungeons go a long way toward repairing deadly emotional and psychological damage inflicted by punitive people and their systems. In here, lingering at the corner of life's destitution, living at the heart of life's wilderness, we are dedicated to putting smiles and optimistic looks on the faces of the poor and helpless victims of this unjust system.

Sincere solidarity among prisoners makes me feel like a human being in the midst of my life's wilderness. Solidarity among 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 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 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 hard 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 and sharing knowledge, we find ourselves instilling a great and versatile presence of mind, defining
success, and getting a sense of accomplishment by 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. 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.

Whatever we have done as people becomes our identities and is instituted as a perpetual reference for recognition—positively or negatively. It is human to respect people from whom we can gain something positive. The giver in us is to be honoured for the wonderful aspect of giving. Recognition of this giver brings a happiness that cannot be wholly reciprocated at the other end of the spectrum.

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

The authorities have tried to subdue the poor in this country to a breaking point where there will be no future available to us. They are wasting the natural resources of my nation, and I along with the others who are less privileged cannot see the light in our lives beneath the walls of this unjust criminal justice system. It does not have a legal agenda; its practical purpose is exploitation and subjugation through constant pressure and threat under the colour of their laws. With this agenda against the poor, the criminal justice system is purposefully aimed at reducing people to a confused social, emotional, and psychological state.

The law that is supposed to uphold, maximize, and update the interpretation of justice does not cast a light that shines on the poor in this nation; the law is an instrument of deliberate 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 have been buried and forgotten. We see rules and regulations and constitutional rights on posters displayed on walls in police stations, prisons, and government houses, and on streetlight 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 say that bail is free, that you should not give or collect bribes, and that the police are your friends. All that took place in those police stations underneath such signs contradicted these messages.

It is painful that, despite all these posters and campaigns, the Nigerian police, judiciary, and prison system can 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 charge and subsequent detention unconstitutional, we continue to sit behind prison walls.

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

I take some satisfaction from knowing that my truth has been told. My power lies in speaking out: while the constitutional justice system is credited permanently to the rich in our 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.

I am a Nigerian, but at times I find myself daydreaming about reasons to doubt my citizenship. If I am a Nigerian, or a citizen of any nation, then where is my access to fundamental human rights as accorded to me through my citizenship? I feel as if I belong to no country in particular. I think that prisoners all over the world
must feel like this. If we do belong to a nation, then we should have access to an embassy for help, a source outside the system that could properly represent our best interests. If I were a true citizen of this nation, then I wouldn't have been "used" to implement colonial injustice. My citizenship has nothing to offer me. I have been used in this "African" experiment with "constitutional and colonial justice," subjected to rules that have been abused by a series of "according to taste" constitutions, meant to subjugate the poor while fulfilling some kind of established "unconditional pledge for national loyalty."

NOTES

1  The PRAWA Circle is a programme that Viviane Saleh-Hanna implemented in several Nigerian prisons to enhance solidarity among prisoners and aid in building survival tactics for those serving time in Nigeria. In addition to community-building, the programme allowed prisoners to identify their own needs and to work toward helping each other meet them. In Kirikiri medium security prison prisoners suggested the implementation of a literacy component to the programme; 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, its circle programme consisted of discussions and debriefing sessions.

2  The distribution of "justice" targets the poor and allows the rich to prosper.