Colonial Systems of Control

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I was arrested on April 17, 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 IPO [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 OCSARS [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 N40,000 [approximately CA$ 400] 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 21, 1994, very early in the morning, I was taken to court by my IPO, Sergeant Otein. When I tried to enquire why I was not being released, he told me that I had given the money to his superior. I should have given him the money, because his boss had eaten the lion’s share of that money; for that reason I will suffer more than Job [the biblical figure]. At court they charged me with stealing 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 up 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 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 N10,000 to be taken to court on September 20, 1994. That was my ticket out of the police cell and into the maximum security prison in Kirikiri. I have been here on a “holding charge” awaiting trial ever since.

At the “reception” of this penal institution, which the guards on duty call “country no vex” (i.e., “Welcome to the country where you cannot get angry”), everybody registered under his family name. After the exercise of recording our identities was complete we were taken to the “solitary blocks.” We were put into cells, eight of us in an eight-by-ten-foot cell. It stunk like hell; the odour was so overwhelming that five of us vomited immediately upon entering it. It was like entering a hole that was
a natural extension of hell. In the cell there were no mattresses, there was no toilet and 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 with crossed iron bars. Worst of all, there was no light, and we had no food. The guard claimed that our number was not included in the rations 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 [small halls filled with people]. 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, and some even had scabs on their palms. My block was another eight-by-ten-foot cell, but this time we were fifteen in number. Now I knew why the first cell was called the “solitary cell.”

That night my journey of exile in this country began. I couldn’t sleep, as we were packed in like sardines. At one point we were told that we would be taking turns sleeping, since there wasn’t enough room for us all to lie down on the floor. When five people were asleep five would mount sentry, while the remaining five would sit down. At about two in the morning I was still standing when one of my new friends, 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 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 or medical care, and we were given half of the mealy rations of the miserable food they give to 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.