Colonial Systems of Control

Saleh-Hanna, Viviane

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Game hunting is a jungle sport, but in this inside world known as maximum security prison men are still being hunted like game. It is a cruel, dehumanizing mechanism they call rehabilitation; it is a system that is nothing more than a refined method of slavery—all the ethics of enslavement are very much alive, mostly in the blood of the colonial slave drivers known as wardens or prison guards.

I have been in this prison for nine years now, but something that I cannot forget until they put me inside a grave took place on May 20, 1995. On that fateful day there was a slaughter like I have never experienced before or read about. Forty-three men were murdered; that is, they were executed while on death row, and their executions were meant to appease the then military governor of Lagos State, Colonel Oyinlola. He ordered the killing of men who, by legal rights, still had their appeals or the rest of their trials to go through. They were killed in cold blood by the blood-thirsty men who rule the affairs or dictate the events inside this prison and the society in which this prison functions.

On that day the yard was peculiarly cool and deserted. Even the officer in charge of morning feeding and the checker who confirmed prisoner numbers each day never performed their routine activities. It was not a usual morning. At about 9 a.m. there were sounds of chains, as if a gang of slaves were being led from one section of the yard to the other to be taken out for
They started firing at 10 a.m., but by 1 p.m. there was a break, as a quarrel had erupted between the state governor and some radical lawyers who were protesting the deaths of their clients, people whose cases were pending in the Court of Appeal. Surprisingly, at 1:30 they continued their slaughter, and by 4 p.m. they had killed forty-three men. The prison yard became a mortuary that day, and it was an experience I can never forget. The next day we saw thick blood on clothes and watched human meat being chopped off the bullets that had just executed many men.

Years later, on May 5, 2003, my lawyer filed a suit at the Federal High Court on fundamental human rights challenges, asking the court if they intended for me to perpetually remain in prison. All efforts to secure freedom had been thwarted by that court for so many years. In most cases the Nigerian court uses long adjournments and bureaucratic jargon to frustrate lawyers who actually try to help prisoners.

But I must keep persevering, I cannot languish in this place. Lately, I once again filed a third motion at the Ikeja High Court, asking for information on the standing status of my case, only to learn once again that the Directorate of Public Prosecution (DPP), the police, and the court have yet to locate a case file for me. They do not even have a charge sheet, and, worst of all, my name did not appear in the computer in the Ministry of Justice. The judge ruled that, since she does not know what they are charging me with, she cannot give me bail. When I read that judgment I became physically ill.

The warders [prison guards] here don’t want us to leave. It is clear in their actions and their attitudes. They cannot help us, and when we try to help ourselves they try their best to frustrate us. There are minimal prisoner welfare facilities. Most help comes from Nigerian non-governmental human rights organizations. Some provide us with written materials, but few provide medical care, which is most needed since so many prisoners are sick, and the few who manage to go to the prison hospital seldom get checkups and too often are told that there is no medication
available. If medication is available, they ask us to buy it from them. Those who cannot afford it die. The federal government does supply some medication for prisoners, but too often prison guards take it home for personal use or for resale—it’s their “Christmas bonus.” This year (2002) so far, eight people have died in the prison hospital due to the unavailability of drugs or neglect by the nurses, who come to “work” to sell clothes, shoes, and wristwatches to prisoners and staff, not to take care of sick prisoners.

In a phrase, in here it is about survival of the fittest, and the fittest are defined through monetary wealth. The richest of the poor people in prison are the ones who have a chance. If you do not have money, you cannot survive, as the food in here is minimal and horrible. The government does supply prison staff with some soap, mattresses, slippers, insecticides, and so on for the maintenance of prisoners, but all these things seem to belong to the prison guards. They continually tell prisoners to just use what we have and to buy what we need or want. Extortion is a way of life here. Prison guards tell us that the government has not paid them salaries for months, and, if we the prisoners have some money somewhere in our possession, they will find it. When they don’t get paid we get searched, and family members get harassed for money if they come to visit. In order to see us they always have to pay the guards for access anyway. This is one of the reasons there was a riot on April 13, 2003, at Kirikiri medium security prison. Prisoners are sick and tired of such harassments. The situation is tough for us, and what keeps some of us alive is the hope that it will end some day: one way or the other, it will have to end some day.

Sadly, Motivating Monday, as the prisoners and community organizers and activists used to call him, passed away in 2004 inside the maximum security prison hospital. Prisoners have confirmed that he was told before he died that he had earlier been diagnosed with AIDS. Prison officials failed to inform him of that diagnosis until shortly before his death. They did not provide him with any medication; in fact, medication
made available to prisoners has been consistently sold by the prison guards who work in the Kirikiri maximum security prison hospital. May Motivating Monday’s soul rest in peace. His smiles will always be remembered. His positive attitude, despite all the hardship, oppression, and injustice, prevails in the minds of those of us who met him, got to know him, and were inspired by his strength.

NOTES

1. Outside the walls of Kirikiri maximum security prison there is a wall of metal barrels between the wall and a long line of poles that have been dug into the ground. This is the shooting range set aside for executions. While the barrels prevent most of the bullets from hitting the prison wall, the sounds of death echo throughout the prison yard while the executions are taking place.