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KEN SARO-WIWA
(1941-1995)

'My Lord I have heard your verdict. I have been found guilty even before my trial. During the trial, an official of the Federal Government pronounced me guilty at a conference in far away Geneva. And now these verdicts have been confirmed.'

SOCRATES
(469 - ？ B.C)

'There are a great many reasons, gentlemen, why I am not distressed by this result - I mean your condemnation of me - but the chief reason is that the result was not unexpected...'
manuscript has gotten to either Methuen or Pen....

‘What,’ the guard exclaimed in shock, ‘don’t you ever think of committing suicide, setting yourself ablaze with methane!’

‘It’s alright,’ Ken replied knowingly, with a sense of pathos. ‘God, another simple mind deprived of education, he reflected. ‘So how is your family, you talked about the children’s school fees,’ Ken asked again.

‘Oh, thank you so much, I cashed the cheque, God bless you and others like you in the country helping yonder man to survive,’ the guard replied and took a quick exit before the arrival of the ‘hawks’, a term used for hardline prison officials.

Since the confiscation of his writing materials, Ken had undergone the agony of imaginary scribbling, a process by which he either mentally constructed events and narratives or backed them up by tracing imaginary lines on his thigh or the floor. A day before his hanging (of which he was yet to be informed had been confirmed by the PRC), he got into his prolific element and scribbled to one of his wives:

MUSING

‘I am presently holed in a six by six feet cell. Must be just about ten feet in height. No window, no toilet, no illumination at all. A ray of light pierces in through the key hole of the iron door - its indeed my ray of hope. Mind you, not necessarily the hope of getting out of here alive but my only contact with the living world. And for hours, these past few days I’ve held my body against this ray of hope. It’s warmth has been more of the mind than physical. Even my lips, I’ve also held against it, in the hope of re-enacting those supple warm lips of yours I’ll forever miss. Oh! If my plans do come true, indeed, I intend to plant a flower, a shrub, no, a tree - just any testimony of life, at that point where the ray hits the floor. It would grow, and blossom. It would be the expression of a people’s will. It will be a testimony to all those of our country men in quest of human liberty.

Here in my hole the floor is damp, and we are supposed to be bare-feet. Not even when the doctor alarms the risk to health. But really, what does it matter? What difference does it make in a Coffin? By the way, have you ever reflected on what will become of this flesh - same flesh that held you in warm embrace? That cuddled you. Lips that wiped your tears. Hands that bedecked your sleepy head.

Now, I am losing my mind and I know. Wasn’t I giving an overview of the dilapidation called a cell? Being damp, it oozes a stenchy odour. Permanent rancid odour that hits the nose at every turn. What else do you expect, when you are made to dine in the same air-tight enclosure? I hear all these are security measures to prevent our escape. Even if there was to be an escape bid, I wonder how I could manage without a meal in my belly! You probably have heard that they’ve stopped my colleagues’ wives too from bringing their meals directly to them. But then I know they cook up stories in the Press, and the public gets a feeling they are observing human rights. Well, perhaps the Public knows better.

And when night falls? Of course there is a sturdy plank screwed to the floor - just on the same damp floor at the corner opposite the iron door. When its dinner time, your meal is pushed through a hole in the iron door, usually opened only for such purposes. It’s also through this hole you are expected to pass off your inconveniences.

Just last night as I was about going to bed, Long Antena, Ireti, peeped in. In the absence of a companion, I urged her on. So she came in, looked me up and probably concluded, this one doesn’t amount to much - I’ll soon square up with him in the grave. ‘Those tough-looking muscles of yours are only illusions of strength’, she seemed to have said, and darted across the cell room, sniffing with her antenna.

‘But I am fighting a just cause, and it shouldn’t bother me whether I live or die’, I protested.

‘Well, it all comes to that, the ego of your race is incredible. Every local, little indulgence of yours must find some false universal reference.’

‘You talk like a “Cynic,”’ I charged. ‘Cynic? What does that imply? Sounds like cynade,’ she asked. ‘Now, not exactly - its this feeling of tending to trivialise the most urgent concerns.’

Again she looked me up and down, twitched
Umahi, seemed to have been aware of this final hour. But not even their Chief Jailor, Major Obi Hakim, and his Fate of rubbing his eyes. Then he surveyed the Governor, who mumbled something to the effect of praying to commit his soul to the bosom of Jesus the Christ. The fact that this preacher man couldn’t be praying against flea-infected mattresses in the cell to be allocated, downed on Ken. ‘So this is the idea,’ he finally found his voice. No response. He looked the priest straight in the eye, but the latter made a gesture of rubbing his eyes. Then he surveyed the Governor, other military and para-military personnel, and members of the tribunal, both the executive and judicial arms of the State joined hands, as had been dutifully done all through the mock trial, to watch the exciting, extirpation scene of minority rights activists.

Meanwhile, the activists were still oblivious of these developments, even as they sat on a bench in the corridor of the condemned convicts (CC) cell. Indeed they were living on borrowed time, since two days earlier instructions of their hanging had been given. But there was no death warrant and Prison officials had to remind the Governor that it was all about human lives.

A warrant was quickly rustled up but, again, prison officials pointed to the fact that the signatories were incomplete. And as reports have it, a harassed Governor Komo had to inform Abuja, which flew in a brand new warrant signed by the Head of the PRC, which is confirming authority.

Then, Ken was called in, and he thought it was about being allocated a cell. But then he met a priest who mumbled something to the effect of praying to commit his soul to the bosom of Jesus the Christ. The fact that this preacher man couldn’t be praying against flea-infected mattresses in the cell to be allocated, downed on Ken. ‘So this is the idea,’ he finally found his voice. No response. He looked the priest straight in the eye, but the latter made a gesture of rubbing his eyes. Then he surveyed the Governor, other military and para-military personnel, and members of the tribunal, but his adversaries had no courage to respond, they couldn’t look at him eyeball to eyeball.

They asked if he had any requests, and he expressed willingness to give a parting message to his wife. They refused. ‘Then, could you kindly hand over this pipe to my 91-year dad?’ Again, they refused.

Ken felt a pang of a pity for them and wasn’t
sure if he should console them for their loss of manhood. Two
hundred metres away, his younger wife, Hauwa, was still
wondering why they had not allowed her to deliver her
husband’s breakfast. She was bothered that the meal might get
cold.

Then in the silence of the gallow hall, came a thunderous
clap, and the horde of conquistadors scampered in commotion,
but it was only a walking stick that fell. Embarrassed by this turn
of event, a top military brass was said to have yelled: ‘get it done
with’, sweat dripping down his nose. And Ken added, laughing,
‘get ahead.’

So the priest again, the charge-reading Sheriff, the hood
and the noose. But there were a number of false starts. In spite of
the fact that the equipment had been put in good condition, the
lever was pulled, but somehow the trapdoor refused to snap. By
now there was utter confoundment and for a while the Governor’s
mind might have wondered and regretted the absence of private,
commercial gallow in the country.

Reports have it that Ken had to be let off for a while and
the others were quickly dispensed with. Somehow when he
returned, there was one false start, and Ken was said to have
pleaded: ‘the Spirit of Ogoni, let me go,’ exuding the ambience
of Socrates’ last hour when he proclaimed: ‘... I tell you, my
executioners, that as soon as I am dead, vengeance shall fall
upon you with a punishment far more painful than your killing of
me.’ GR

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