

BOOK REVIEW

1. Chukwuma Innocent. *Above the Law. A Report on Torture and Extra-judicial Killings by the Police in Lagos State, Nigeria*. Lagos: Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), 1994. vi + 197 pages.

Incredible and chilling story! A horror trip! This is the feeling one gets from reading *Above the Law*. And yet it is an account of what is happening in the Police Stations of Lagos. It reflects what happens in most police cells in Nigeria. The horror stories recounted take place within the precincts of that agency whose primary task is the defence and protection of the life of Nigerian citizens. From the account of Chukwuma, the Nigerian police turn their guns and their instruments of torture on innocent citizens or on those awaiting trial who have not been proven guilty. Some of these they maim, physically and psychologically, for life; some others they simply kill.

What one reads in *Above the Law* compares well with the accounts of the golgotha which African slaves passed through in the Americas. The Lagos police routinely torture detainees by letting them hang in the air for hours, shooting them in the limbs, or simply by attacking any part of their body with glowing cigarette ends. Our law enforcement agents may inflict pain by inserting broom sticks or pins into male genitals and bottle necks into female genitals. They beat detainees with horsewhips or with live electric cables and batons; they administer electric shocks, perform mock executions, remove finger nails and cuticles with pliers, and deny food and medical attention to detained Nigerians in order to get confessional statements from them. According to Chukwuma:

As you are reading this report, some detainees in Lagos Police Stations are crying out in pains and anguish as their bodies are being severely lacerated with horse whips and electric cables. Their eyes and anus are probably being shot at with canisters of irritant gas.

Not a few others are hung in the air for hours with the aid of ropes tied to ceiling fan hooks. This is usually done in the police torture chambers with the torturers shooting indiscriminately at the walls and threatening to kill the suspects if they don't "confess".

The resistance of many is weakened by "shock batons" and chairs which are periodically plugged to electricity thereby compelling victims to sign or write "Confessionals"...torture is usually inflicted at the early stage of detention when suspects are required to make statements. (P. 54)

Slaves are understandably human beasts of burden. But Chukwuma is recounting lived experiences of Nigerian citizens who may or may not be guilty of the crimes for which they are detained. They have a right to legal advice,

which they normally do not get; they have a right to a fair trial, but more often than not they are not charged to court for months and even years. Those who are bailed or released have to bribe the police. The detention rooms in Lagos and other Nigerian police stations are simply hell on earth. The congestion is better seen than described. More than twelve suspects may be routinely locked up in a room that is supposed to accommodate four bed spaces. A detainee at the Federal Intelligence and Investigation Bureau, Alagbon (the premier police station in Nigeria), where twenty people may share a room space, told the CLO,

We don't sleep well. There is no room for that comfort! What we do is sit down in rows and open our laps so that others could sit in. If you must close your eyes for some minutes, you would rest your head on the shoulder of the person sitting in front of you. You would not even be allowed to stand up as you would be breathing down on other inmates. (P. 28).

Many die from torture, lack of medical care and congestion. The police dump them routinely at the Ikeja General Hospital. In Appendix I (pp. 131-153) Chukwuma gives a list of corpses of people suspected to have died under extra-judicial circumstances, which the Police in Lagos State deposited at the Ikeja General Hospital mortuary between January and September 1992. They number 423 corpses. The CLO accuses the Lagos State Police for being responsible for many of these deaths.

From the narration of Chukwuma and from an experience of police cells in Nigeria, it appears that the prison is a more secure and humane place than the police detention rooms. According to the account, the worst thing that may happen to a suspect is to be accused of armed robbery. One may even be framed by the police as armed robber. Many irresponsible killings by the police are simply reported as killings which happened at shoot-outs with armed robbers. But innocent citizens at detention rooms and check-points are routinely killed by our law enforcement agents and "protectors of our citizenry". The culprits are hardly brought to book; unless the victim happens to be an "important" person. The highest the police command may do to dismiss incessant complaints by aggrieved relatives is to order an "in-house probe". According to the CLO, the in-house probe is a euphemism for "cover-ups".

The aim of this book of horror is to create awareness among Nigerians and the world community about the inhumanity lived by Nigerian citizens. The cover and title page is arresting - it is the revolting colour picture of an amputee holding a freshly amputated leg to the eye of the camera. This book is written to remind Nigerians and her law enforcement agents of the gross devaluation of human life which the agents are paid to protect. It is to challenge ourselves to ensure that each and all have access to justice and human rights. In part two of the book, appendix iv to appendix vii, the author reproduces the relevant United

Nations code for law enforcement officers, the UN basic principles on the use of force and firearms by law enforcement agents, the UN declaration on the protection of all persons from torture..., and the UN principles on the effective prevention and investigation of extra-legal, arbitrary and summary execution. These indicate for all how the police and other law agents should comport themselves. Chukwuma sees a ray of hope in the declaration of a newly appointed Inspector General of Police, Alhaji Ibrahim Coomassie that he would address the weaknesses of the Police Force. But it is a hope that may be short-lived, for there appears to be no firm commitment to reform the police force and other law enforcement agencies.

Above the Law is a book that should be read by all Nigerian citizens. It is a great contribution to our struggle to free our citizens from all manner of indignities and to create a society where the life of each and all is respected.

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