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Ex-Convicts in a Dilemma of Reintegration: A Study of Uyo, South-South Nigeria

by

Aniekan S. Brown

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

University of Uyo – Nigeria

E-Mail: brown.aniekan@yahoo.com

Abstract

In acknowledgement of the wide range of challenges faced by correctional institutions and the subsequent challenge that ex-convicts experience in their bid to be reintegrated into the mainstream society after the jail terms informed this study. Driven by the need to stem the tide of recidivism, the study utilized secondary data from relevant penal institutions to trace past prisoners, as well as, in-depth semi-structured interviews, including questionnaire tools to draw relevant data. A total of 63 ex-prisoners were contacted through a random process. Emerging data reveal that: most ex-convicts did not take advantage of training programmes while serving their jail terms; imprisonments come with isolating implications; ex-convicts are socially and legislatively not favoured in the labour market; and the correctional facilities are grossly incapable of bettering the lots of ex-convicts. Therefore, it was recommended from this study more correction-based legislations, improvement in penal facilities and personnel, and sensitization of the mainstream society towards positive disposition to the reintegration of ex-convicts.

1. Introduction

The prison system is an aspect of the penal institutions of the State solely responsible for securely housing people who have been convicted or are on awaiting trial. Viewed in a triangular relationship, prison represents the third leg in the criminal justice system of a society (Aboki, 2007). Within this context, prison is responsible for maintaining custody through measures aimed at preventing escape including erecting high walls or chain link, fence, placing guards, constant checks on cell perimeter walls and regular surveillance (Ndukwe and Iroko, 2014). Therefore, imprisonment has emerged as a form of humanitarian system of punishment for different categories of offenders in many societies. From the psychological point of view, prisoners are supposed to be seen as citizens who need corrective measures, which are better achieved through special segregation arrangement from the larger community (Feral, 2002).

Imprisonment poses a wide range of social, economic and personal challenges, which later affect the prisoner capacity for re-integrating into the larger society (Visher,

Winterfield and Coggeshall, 2005). Some of the challenges have been highlighted to be associated with the ex-prisoners' past experiences of social, economic and psychological isolation and or marginalization. Borzycki (2005) argued that imprisonment might have produced some collateral effect on many ex-prisoners, including a loss of livelihood, social network and other personal belongings as well as some mental-psychological defects. In essence, the period of transition from prison to society can be very challenging for ex-prisoners especially when additional social perceptual problems of stigmatization and discrimination are envisaged.

The challenges of reintegration common to ex-convicts are due largely to the internalized view held by communities along with the larger society, which makes it difficult for ex-prisoners to gain employment upon release from prison. Ex-convicts, in most cases, often have to deal with the stereotypes and stigma of being perceived as violent, uneducated and lazy, among several others (Edgar, O'Donnell, and Martin, 2004). This problem is compounded by the inability of the relevant State and social institutions to support the full re-integration of ex-convicts through some enabling processes and platforms. For instance, it passes as standard practice for many employers of labour in Nigeria to discriminate against applicants who had suffered some criminal convictions. A frustration arising from job discrimination is more likely to encourage recidivism.

Re-integrating ex-convicts into the larger society is particularly difficult in Nigeria (Yekini and Salisu, 2013). In the first instance, the Nigerian prisons system is very ill equipped to perform its critical task of reforming citizens convicted of crime. The poor state of the Nigerian prisons system and facilities can hardly prepare convicts for 'life-after-imprisonment' through some forms of mental, intellectual, physical and psychological supports as well as equipping them with requisite skills and competencies for future opportunities (UN, 2006). Using the narratives of ex-convicts, the paper sets out to understand the practical, social, and institutional challenges associated with re-integrating ex-convicts into the larger society. The paper uses Uyo to understand the situations through ex-convicts' institutional mechanisms as well as the perspectives of the larger society. With these sets of issues, the paper aims to engage with some theoretical and practical challenges associated with the re-integration of ex-convicts into the larger society in Nigeria.

2. The study area

Uyo is the capital of Akwa Ibom State, which was created in 1987, and is one of the 36 states in Nigeria. It is located between latitudes $5^{\circ} 01'$ and longitudes $7^{\circ} 55'$ in South-South Nigeria. Being the administrative capital of the state, Uyo has attracted migrants from diverse areas within Akwa Ibom State, other states in Nigeria, and even the international community. The 2006 population census put Uyo at 436,606 people with the rate of growth at 3.2. As an emerging center of mostly small-scale economic activities, the high population growth for the urban center carries many social, economic, ecological and infrastructural consequences. The quality of housing and other infrastructures are consequently stratified in a manner that reflects income and other socioeconomic characteristics of the residents. High quality houses are mostly occupied by high level public officials and wealthy business class with relative guarantees of stable power and water supplies either as private initiatives or publicly funded. In contrast, individuals with low-income earnings are found in slum areas and squatter settlements with very irregular public power supply and appalling commercial water services.

Given the economic realities of most low income earners and jobless youths, diverse strategies for coping and criminal behaviours have emerged in the city including pick pocketing, armed robbery, kidnapping and other financial and economic crimes including advanced fee fraud, commonly known as the '419' scam. The rise in crime correspondingly should imply a rise in the rate of after crime concerns, including incarceration. However, within the broader Nigerian context, the Penal Reform International (PRI, APA, ACHPR, MoJ, and MPHRoBF, 2003) notes that Nigeria has the lowest prison population rate of any country in Africa, at 34 prisoners per 100,000 in population. Estimates of total numbers vary, ranging from 40,000 (PRI, et al., 2003; Walmsley, 2003) to 70,000 or more (Enuku, 2001). While numbers are relatively low, the reality is that conditions are deplorable. Nigerian prisons are chronically underfunded, with dilapidated infrastructures which were mostly built during the colonial era. There is massive overcrowding (see Aduba, 1993), food shortages, poor or nonexistent plumbing, insufficient medical care, poor waste management, and concerns about physical abuse, disease, and deaths in custody (PRI and Uganda Prisons Service, 2000; see also PRI, et al., 2003; and Agomoh, 1998). Most of those kept in custody wait between 2 and 10 years for their trials, and the wait can take even longer. The majority of Nigerian prisoners are awaiting trial (Agomoh, 2000; see Aduba, 1993) – up to 90% in some urban prisons (Okwuosah, 2003).

The concern here is how ex-prisoners secure reintegration when they emerge from such deplorable condition. Research into ex-convicts' reintegration strategies in developed countries (e.g., Cohen and Taylor, 1972; DeRosia, 1998; FBI, 2004, and Mohino, Kirchner, & Forns, 2004) might not be applicable in different socio-cultural contexts. The deplorable state of the Nigerian prison system and facilities, as discussed in the literature, can hardly prepare convicts for 'life-after-imprisonment' through some forms of mental, intellectual, physical and psychological supports as well as equipping them with new skills and competences for future opportunities (UN, 2006).

2. Data and Method

This study attempts to understand the realities and dilemma of ex-convicts and the available routes to reintegration in the larger society through a tracer study of ex-convicts from the Uyo Prison. The study utilizes secondary data from the relevant penal institutions to trace past prisoners, their occupations and other relevant socio-economic characteristics. In-depth and semi-structured interviews were later utilized, including questionnaire tools (where necessary) to subsequently collect relevant data and compare previous and current data on socio-economic background related to education, occupation and other livelihood activities as well as other personal experiences on the necessary structural and institutional supports. A total of 63 ex-prisoners were contacted at a random process through the records provided by the Nigerian Prisons Service spanning between 1999 and 2010.

Ethical checks were pursued through relevant social science authorities in the University of Uyo and the Nigerian prisons authorities before the study was conducted. One particular challenge to this study was that a typical Nigerian Prisons staff seems relatively unaccustomed to research, which can lead to misunderstandings about privacy and confidentiality if the project is not carefully explained. Meanwhile, ex-prisoners are given to thinking that a study of this nature would intervene on their behalf. In line with standard practice in research, there was serious guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality during discussion on the purpose of the study and the role of the

researcher. Informed consent was crucial, as part of a collaborative process emphasizing accessible explanations and responses, regardless of literacy level. Ex-prisoners could refuse to participate, or stop an interview at any time, with no consequences. Cultural differences in explanation were not much of a problem because of the status of the researcher as an indigene of the state. At the same time, there were inabilities to communicate with some ex-prisoners who were not very conversant with English. These and other ethical issues were addressed fully during the research process.

3. Results

Social and economic characteristics form important variables for gauging the dynamics of crime and the frequency of imprisonment in any society. The 63 respondents displayed diverse socio-economic backgrounds spanning across gender, age, marital status, education, religion and occupation before and after imprisonment. A significant proportion of the interviewees were male (94%), while 6% were female. 38% of the respondents in the age range of 30-34 dominated those sampled and interviewed. Given the fact that most respondents may have served different years of imprisonment terms, it is more likely that the youths are the bulk of those serving imprisonment terms, majority of the interviewees were single (60%). In terms of occupation before and after imprisonments, unemployment was the most common and shared experience. p;M=54% of the respondents were unemployed before imprisonment. This, however, jumped to 73% after imprisonment (See Table 1).

Table 1: Socio-economic characteristics of respondents

Socio-economic Characteristics	Description
Gender	Male (94%); Female (6%)
Age (in years)	Under 18 (0%); 18-23 (6%); 24-29 (27%); 30-34 (38%) 35-39(19%); 40-44(8%); 45 & above (2%)
Marital status	Married (17%); Single (60%); Separated (8%); Widowed (5%)
Occupation before imprisonment	Self-employed (19%); Wage-employed (13%); Unemployed (54%); Students (14%)
Occupation after imprisonment	Self-employed (6%); Wage-employed (8%); Unemployed (73%); Students (13%)
Educational background	No formal education (13%); Primary (19%); Secondary (62%); Tertiary (6%)
Religion	Christianity (19%); Islam (3%); Traditional religion (7%)

Source: Field work, 2016

Available statistics from the Prisons State Headquarters, Uyo, list out different skills acquired by the ex-convicts as at completion of their imprisonment terms to include welding, tailoring, carpentry, information and communication technology (ICT), art craft, barbing, farming, laundry and mason. The summary of the overall statistics shows majority of the ex-convicts did not take advantage of the various training programmes while serving their jail terms. Table 2 specifically shows over 62% of the ex-convicts were not involved in any skill acquisition scheme during their prison terms.

Table 2: Ex-convicts and vocation while in prison (1999-2010)

Year	No released	Handicraft learnt while in prison (1999-2010)									
		Welding	Tailoring	Carpentry	ICT	Art Craft	Barbing	Farming	Laundry	Mason	No Training
1999	81	2	17	5	-	1	9	8	1	-	38
2000	75	5	6	2	-	-	6	2	-	-	54
2001	131	6	10	1	-	-	12	3	2	3	94
2002	142	1	24	7	-	-	13	2	3	1	91
2003	156	8	16	3	-	1	10	7	4	2	105
2004	146	3	11	2	-	2	8	9	1	1	109
2005	151	4	21	8	-	-	6	3	3	3	103
2006	63	6	7	2	-	3	4	5	-	-	26
2007	70	4	8	2	-	-	7	4	1	-	44
2008	77	3	9	4	-	-	5	6	-	2	17
2009	183	2	18	8	-	-	12	10	-	4	129
2010	107	6	14	1	34	2	10	4	3	3	30
Total	1382	50	171	45	34	9	102	63	18	19	870

Source: State Prisons Headquarters, Uyo

The impact of imprisonment terms on ex-convicts' capacity for reintegration in the larger society was also discussed. Imprisonment generally carries isolating implications, producing some psychological, emotional, social and mental effects on the wellbeing of prisoners, which ultimately affect their adjustment and reintegration prospects. Most respondents reported some social-psychological adjustments problems. For instance, 87% of the interviewees said they felt that spending so many years in prison affect their ability to reintegrate. A male respondent aged 38 who had spent up to 11 years in prison had this to say:

"...not really easy...people hardly accept you fully... and you would not also feel comfortable...it is like you are sinner and they are saints...so the whole idea of adjustment becomes difficult at that point..."

The reintegration prospect of ex-convicts generally depends on the general societal attitudes and internalized notions about prisoners and ex-prisoners. Being imprisoned conveys automatic verdict of guilt with far reaching implications on individual reputations and social relations. Ex-prisoners face difficult problems negotiating existence and gaining social acceptance.

"Suspicion and rejection are everywhere... no one wants to listen to your story...and no one is interested if you have turned a new leave...,even in the church";

stated a 43 year old male respondent. The general societal attitude is negative. Eighty one percent of the respondents corroborated this claim. Societal attitudes toward ex-prisoners also depend on the nature of crime for which prison term was served. Crimes of robbery, murder and rape were reported to attract the severest of negative attitudes:

'...if you were convicted of robbery, no one would want to see you around in the society... even your immediate family members...', argued a female Prisons official.

Societal attitudes towards ex-prisoners affect every sphere of activities including the labour market. Table 3 summarizes the extent to which employers of labour are ready to engage ex-convicts in their organizations.

Table 3: The extent to which employers of labour are ready to engage ex-prisoners

Issues	Response		Percentage response	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Upon release from prison, my former employer welcomed me back without malice	0	8	0%	100%
I had difficulty getting a job after release	50	0	100%	0%
Those who have been jailed more than once have more serious barriers to formal employment	63	0	100%	0

Source: Field work, 2016

All the respondents claimed they faced difficulties getting employed after prison term. Ex-convicts with record of repeat offence face harder prospects. In a country with very high employment rate, job discrimination is more likely tending to the disfavor of candidates with bad reputational records. Ex-convicts are most likely to suffer within such contexts. The prospect of not being able to secure a job with 'imprisonment record' encourages none disclosure of such vital information by any ex-convicts seeking for employment, particularly in Nigeria where proper record keeping, storage and retrieval values are not readily customary. As one female interviewee hinted: *I will never disclose such information...that surely would not work for me...better to hide...* Indeed such trick of non-disclosure of vital personal record pays off especially in a country where social and vital statistics of individual criminal records are hardly maintained.

In another perspective, the study also found out the difficult challenges of acceptance suffered at places of work by employees who were convicted while on their occupation and job places. Normally an employee convicted of crime stands automatically dismissed by conventional practice, but difficult to secure re-absorption upon release. Table 4 presents the results of findings in relation to employer attitudes to ex-prisoners. The results look a bit contradictory. In the first instance, 96% of the respondents claimed they had no ex-prisoner employees in their organization. On a positive note, 66% of same set of respondents claimed they would employ ex-prisoners in their organization as opposed to 34% who responded in the negative (Table 4).

Table 4: Employer attitudes to ex-prisoners

Questions	Response		Percentage response	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Have you any ex-prisoner in your organization?	4	96	4%	96%
Would you employ ex-prisoners in your organization?	63	32	66%	34%

Source: Field work, 2016

Respondents' responsibilities and interest to protect the corporate image of their organization may have been responsible for the observable pattern of contradiction in employment attitudes to ex-prisoners. The larger societal image and worldviews on ex-convicts equally echo on every aspect of business and social relations. As one Company manager rightly argued:

'...we always try (sic) our best but we may not have detailed personal records of those we intend to hire...but also note that it would make no sense to think of employing someone you know had been convicted when many other well qualified candidates are struggling to be employed...'

A chief executive of an organization, however, added that even legislative realities in Nigeria guard against proper integration of ex-convicts as employment opportunities at the public sector for ex-convicts are simply dismissed for illicit option.

Given the numerous challenges working against the re-integration of ex-convicts into every sphere of the larger society, several coping measures were discussed to achieve what one ex-convict (aged 32) mentioned as: *'...man must survive at all costs...'* Survival in this context is narrowed to economic and livelihood issues. They dominate every domain of menial and blue-collar jobs including masonry, pushing of heavy goods in wheelbarrows and trucks, soil digging, motor parks touting, as well as thugs for politicians, among several others. Over 80% of the respondents earned their living through these means. Very few of the respondents were able to run some businesses involving some skills acquired while serving their prison terms. These include welding, carpentry, tailoring, laundry, barbing, etc. Such respondents got their supports from families, charity and religious organizations, or some network of non-governmental organizations. About 11% of the ex-prisoners earned their post-prison term living by deploying the skill they gained either before or after their prison terms. A female respondent, a seamstress in her middle age, gave a little insight on how her business started:

'...I thank God I have what sustains my life and my family...I learnt this trade while in the prison...and after my prison term, the government and some organizations including my parents supported me to set up this place...some of my friends are suffering but I thank God I have what to earn a living with...'

Within this context, most ex-convicts who are not involved in some livelihood activities are most likely to fall back on crime.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The challenges of re-integration common to ex-convicts are due largely to the internalized view held by communities along with the larger society as well as absence of necessary institutional support. These make it difficult for ex-prisoners to gain employment, social acceptance and meaningfully re-engage

themselves upon release from prison. Gaining employment or securing decent means of livelihood constitute the first entry point for re-integrating ex-convicts in the larger society. Graffam, Shinkfield, Lavelle, and Macpherson (2004) have argued that:

'Employment provides more than the income necessary to support adequate material conditions. It also provides opportunities to expand one's social network to include other productive members of society. In addition to all this, employment can contribute to enhanced self esteem and other psychological health (cited in Ajala & Oguntuase 2011:186)

Absence of a means of livelihood after prison terms raises the most important question of coping in relation to addressing personal needs or tending to the family welfare especially for ex-convicts with family obligations. The fact that ex-prisoners find it hard to be fully accepted in the family makes it equally difficult to secure social acceptance at any level of the society. In the study area, the stigma of having suffered from criminal conviction conveys the implication of a "lost child" (an unrepentant child) at least in the Christian context (Luke 15:11-32). This attitude is reinforced by the social notion and perception of correctional centres, including the Prison institution. Generally, most respondents' perception of the Prison institution in the study area is culturally and socially negative. To be imprisoned presupposes having committed the worst crime known to man. It is the case between the saint and the villain, no middle way. With this attitude, the fear of the risk of accepting an ex-convict pervades every layer of the society. Ex-convicts often find it difficult to adjust to the realities of occupational, social, economic and existential engagements. For instance, the reality of job discrimination forces ex-prisoners in a perpetual cycle of dependence on unwelcoming family and relationship networks. Findings demonstrate that most ex-convicts face very poor prospects of livelihood security due to some social and cultural challenges bordering on stereotypes, stigmatization and rejection in their immediate and larger society.

Ex-convicts, in most cases, often have to deal with the stereotypes and stigma of being perceived as violent, uneducated, lazy, and social misfits, among several others. These labels only serve to provide justifications for social, economic and occupational exclusions. *'These people are not willing to work, but would want some supports...they are lazy'*, screamed one male respondents in his early 40s. This was, however, countered by female ex-prisoners, who noted as follows:

'...leave that kind of talk...they would always say it, but none of them would tell you of any clear incident to support his or her claims'.

The argument boils down to the fact that ex-convicts are hardly given the chance of service due to internalized social perception and cultural beliefs. This problem is compounded by the inability of the relevant State and social institutions to support the full re-integration of ex-convicts through some enabling processes and platforms. For instance, it passes as standard informal practice that many public agencies and institutions in Nigeria equally discriminate against applicants who had suffered some criminal convictions. A frustration arising from job discrimination is more likely to encourage recidivism. On paper, Nigeria has the Prisoners Rehabilitation and Welfare Action (PRAWA), but the functions and operations of this institution remain practically unclear. For instance, their scope of activities seems to traverse across diverse incarceration experiences of prisoners and ex-prisoners. However, the institution has no clearly laid out procedures for following up cases. Given a very poor and low integration rates for ex-

prisoners in Uyo, one can argue that PRAWA only exists on paper whose impact is hardly felt. Some insinuate that the PRAWA membership only constitute a group to access livelihood from government agencies and unsuspecting corporate citizens.

Reintegrating ex-convicts into the larger society is particularly difficult in Nigeria. In the first instance, the Nigerian prison system is very ill equipped to perform its critical tasks of reforming and rehabilitating citizens convicted of crime. The poor state of the Nigerian prison system and facilities (in terms of infrastructure and personnel) can hardly prepare convicts for 'life-after-imprisonment' through some forms of mental, intellectual, physical and psychological supports as well as equipping them with new skills and competences for future opportunities (UN, 2006). After-care demands are, therefore, not a priority; rather, ex-convicts merely survive at the mercy of the unplanned and unorganized realities of the society. Little wonder recidivism rate is on the rise (Nkwocha, 2008). The picture of the challenges faced by ex-convicts in relation to the larger Nigerian society has been captured in the opening note by Ogbozor (2006):

'It is paradoxical that the difference between prison life and living in 'free' Nigeria society of today is fast closing up as the inmates in some instances feel better off in prison than outside prison. Ex-prisoners move from a life of hell typical by overcrowded cells, poor feeding, poor health care, maltreatment by prison officers, life full of denials to another life outside the prison walls that tend to have some similarities with what they had gone through in prison. Since the society decides to shut the doors of positive living against the ex-prisoners then they feel justified to force the doors open even if it has to do it by returning to the same crime that took them to prison in the first instance'

It is absolutely the responsibility of the State to address every aspect related to the welfare of the citizens including those who have had to pass through imprisonment term. This study has demonstrated that the State's impact and contribution in this perspective is less than optimal. Where the State interest is weak or out rightly absent, any plans of action or prospect for reintegrating ex-convicts into the larger society is most likely to be less effective.

In conclusion, ex-convicts constitute a growing population in Nigeria. However, the facilities necessary for the correction, rehabilitation and eventual rehabilitation of ex-convicts into the mainstream society are appalling. The situation has engendered greater level rate of recidivism and worse economic and social states of the ex-convicts and the society. To stem the tide, drastic steps should be taken in areas of legislation, sensitization, and commitment to upholding the principles and drifts of contemporary correctional institutions.

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