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Culture of Socialisation, Identity Reconstruction and Belonging in Selected Nigerian Juvenile Correctional Facilities

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Abstract
This paper explored the practice of inmate-led socialisation within two Nigerian Juvenile Correctional Facilities (JCFs), examining how juvenile inmates navigate their transition into institutional life. Drawing on ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews with ten consenting inmates, this article examined how institutional rituals detach new juvenile inmates from their former identities and subsequently integrate them into the inmate social order. The data reveal the practice of structured socialisation rituals for new entrants at the sampled JCFs, which symbolise separation, transition, and incorporation. Though punitive in nature, these rituals not only foster a transformative process through which new arrivals negotiate their identities and roles within the institutional hierarchy but also serve to establish authority, create a sense of shared identity, and reinforce group belonging among the inmates. Ultimately, this paper highlights the complex interplay of culture, identity, and belonging in restrictive environments, contributing to discussions on their significance, particularly in JCFs.

Keywords: Borstal training institutions, identity reconstruction, Nigeria, rites of passage

Introduction

Correctional facilities across the world operate as total institutions, where inmates experience profound identity disruptions and reconstruction, and are subjected to tightly regulated environments (Goffman, 2017). Total institutions are social arrangements in which all aspects of life occur in the same place under a single authority, and individuals face severe resocialisation. Largely, the Nigerian juvenile correctional institutions mirror these traits, as juvenile inmates are isolated from larger society, allowing for the imposition of regimented

routines intended for behavioural modification. Beyond their official administrative structures and correctional mandates, these institutions also function as complex socio-cultural environments in which inmates develop informal systems of authority and belonging that govern social interaction. These practices function as mechanisms of adaptation to confinement while also reproducing institutional hierarchies (Ayete-Nyampong, 2013).

Nigerian Borstal Training Institutions (BTIs) are federal juvenile correctional facilities established under the Borstal Institutions and Remand Centres Act (1962) for the detention and rehabilitation for male juveniles who are not younger than sixteen and not older than twenty-one at the time of commitment (Act 3[1b]), whose behaviours conflict with the law of the country, and where educational and vocational trainings can be made available to them in addition to moral training, for a period not exceeding three years (Section 13[1] Borstal Institutions and Remand Centres Act, 1962). Based on these provisions, juveniles are expected to have been discharged from BTIs before they turn twenty-five, but this study found out that various factors, including inaccurate age declarations and wilful falsification of age at the point of admission, in addition to prolonged detention, ensured that some of the juvenile inmates' ages were not consistent with the provisions of the Act.

The borstal system originated from British penal reforms and was adapted into Nigeria's juvenile justice architecture during the colonial era. The word "Borstal" was got from the name of a village in England where the first juvenile prison was established in Britain (Ugwuoke, 2020). Like in other correctional facilities in Nigeria, BTIs operate within broader structural constraints, including poor funding, overcrowding, inadequate staffing, and institutional violence, to which inmates are forced to devise special adaptation strategies. Existing studies have shown that confined individuals often invent informal inmate cultures that shape everyday experiences more profoundly than formal regulations, including secondary adjustments to mitigate the "pains of imprisonment" (Goffman, 2017; Sykes, 1971). The pains of imprisonment are the various deprivations and hardships that inmates endure as part of their incarceration experience, which affect their psychological and social well-being (Sykes, 1971). Secondary adjustments are the behaviours or attitudes that subtly circumvent institutional constraints without openly challenging authority, such as forming secret peer networks, clandestinely preserving elements of pre-institutional identity, or negotiating the terms of compliance to retain some sense of autonomy (Goffman, 2017).

Although existing literature has examined juvenile justice administration and the institutional challenges of incarceration, limited scholarly attention has been paid to the informal, inmate-led socialisation rituals among juvenile detainees and to how they function as mechanisms of socialisation, identity reconstruction, and incorporation within these settings. Although Ayete-Nyampong (2013) reports similar practices among juvenile inmates in Ghanaian juvenile correctional facilities, there remains a paucity of ethnographic studies on these subjects in both Nigerian and African scholarship. Against this background, this

article examined inmate socialisation practices within two Nigerian BTIs as institutional rites of passage through which juvenile inmates are socialised into custodial life, reconstruct institutional identities, and develop a sense of belonging within the inmate community. Gennep (1960) defines rites of passage as the ceremonies or rituals observed when individuals transition from one social or cosmic status to another. Drawing on the theoretical insights of van Gennep and Victor Turner, the study explored the processes, meanings, and social functions of these rituals within Nigerian BTIs in Ilorin and Abeokuta.

Anthropological scholarship on rites of passage provides an important framework for understanding such institutional transitions. Arnold van Gennep (1960) introduces the concept of rites of passage as ritualised sequences which mark transitions between social statuses, typically comprising three phases of rites, jointly referred to as a "complete scheme": preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition/ liminality), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation) (Gennep, 1960, p. 11). Gennep observed that "The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another" and that societies develop ritual mechanisms to regulate these movements (p. 2).

Victor Witter Turner (1977) further expands van Gennep's formulation by focusing on the concept of "liminality" or "margin" as a social and symbolic condition. He emphasises that liminality is not just a period of transformation but also a condition of ambiguity in which liminal individuals find themselves to be "neither here nor there" or "betwixt and between", due to suspension of normal social roles, identities and structures before new ones emerge, thereby portraying them as possessing nothing and belonging nowhere (Turner, 1977, p. 95). This condition creates a situation of vulnerability and uncertainty, which ultimately paves the way for the transition. Turner also introduces the concept of *communitas*, referring to the development of feelings of solidarity and collective identity among liminal persons. Both Gennep and Turner also emphasise the importance of detailed descriptions of the ceremonial sequence and of the relative positions of participants in ritual performances marking transitions between social statuses or roles.

This article examines the practice of inmate-led initiation rituals of "stand-by" and "knocking" as institutional rites of passage through which newly incarcerated juveniles are transformed from outsiders into recognised members of the inmate community in the BTIs, Ilorin and Abeokuta. These theories are relevant to this study because incarceration itself brings about both physical and social separation from society, suspension of previous statuses, identities and roles, and adaptation to new institutional norms. The situation is further intensified by the initiation rituals, which apparently confirm the transition of the new inmates from free citizens to captives. Concerns have, however, been raised about such practices contributing to violence, intimidation, and insecurity within custodial facilities, thereby undermining staff authority and rehabilitation efforts (Nnam *et al*., 2022).

Materials and Methods

This qualitative study was conducted at two BTIs, located in Abeokuta (South-western) and Ilorin (North-central), Nigeria. There are thirty-one functional juvenile correctional facilities in Nigeria, comprising 28 remand homes and 3 borstal training institutions (United Nations Children's Fund, 2024). The choice of these two facilities was considered appropriate for this study due to their differential mandates: BTI Abeokuta serves dual purposes of a correctional institution and remand home, while BTI Ilorin only serves as a correctional institution. Consequently, the administration of the two institutions differs in that BTI Abeokuta, being a correctional cum remand home, admits both juvenile committals (inmates who have already been placed on a definite period of confinement following the adjudication of their cases at the family court) and juveniles awaiting trials (juveniles on unspecified periods of detention while their adjudication reports are still pending at the family court), whereas BTI Ilorin confines only committals.

The data reported in this paper are part of a larger study conducted in 2022 and 2024, taking a break in 2023. The study lasted for 22 weeks (13 weeks at Ilorin and eight weeks at Abeokuta). The target population were the inmates of the BTIs in Ilorin and Abeokuta, who were generally referred to as "students". The term "inmate" was, however, adopted in this study in alignment with the widespread term for confined individuals. The data were generated through the complementary use of the participatory approach of participant observation and in-depth interview. My observation of the institutions was direct and participatory, involving paying careful paying attention to details about the daily lives and practices of the study population and keeping records of the observations. In a bid to facilitate my acceptance into the field, I participated in academic activities at the two institutions, particularly at Ilorin, where I volunteered to teach Government for two hours per week during the second term of the 2021/2022 academic session. I also occasionally taught French at Abeokuta.

10 consenting participants with histories of diverse offending behaviours were purposively sampled for in-depth interviews from the two BTIs. While the sample size might appear modest, it is considered methodologically appropriate for the study given the highly specific and narrow lived-experiential nature of the topic, which allowed for thematic overlap that led to data saturation being attained rather quickly. The in-depth interviews of five participants from each institution also allowed for long, detailed, in-depth, and repeated interviews to be conducted, giving room for rich, balanced, and comparative data to be generated from both BTIs. The use of the observatory approach equally allowed for the cross-verification of interview data through the careful observation of the everyday experiences and practices in the institutions, in addition to permitting for breaking barriers, building rapport and gaining the trust of the inmates who were generally suspicious of outsiders.

Prior to the study's commencement, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Ibadan Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics

Committee (SSHREC), and official permissions were granted by the authorities of the involved institutions. Key ethical considerations of voluntariness, confidentiality and anonymity were strictly adhered to both during and after the study. To ensure their anonymity, alphanumeric codes were assigned to all interviewees. Informed consent was obtained verbally from each participant, who was informed that they could withdraw their consent at any stage of the study. Inclusion criteria for this study included that participants (i) were current inmates of either BTI, Ganmo, Ilorin, or BTI, Adigbe, Abeokuta, during the period of data collection, (ii) had been formally committed to either of the BTIs through the issuance of a commitment warrant, and (iii) willingly agreed to participate and provided informed consent. On the other hand, some categories of inmates were excluded from participation, including inmates who: had recently been admitted to the institution and had not spent at least two months, were incapacitated by physical or mental illness at the time of data collection, declined participation or were unwilling to provide informed consent.

Age was not considered as an inclusion/exclusion criterion for participation in this study, as all the inmates' official records indicated ages that fell within the BIRCA's legally stipulated range. This suggested that they all met the institutional admission criteria and the study's first two inclusion criteria of being current inmates with commitment warrants to either of the two BTIs sampled in this study. As this study progressed, however, some participants disclosed ages that were either lower or higher than the prescribed age range, which is a reflection of the broader challenge of age documentation and verification in Nigeria as a whole (Hassan & Okoh-Michael, 2025; Shoewu *et al*., 2022; National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) & United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2022). Apart from the issue of age irregularities, some of the inmates became over-aged for the institutions due to prolonged detention while they awaited trial, which has led to their continued stay within the institutions after attaining adulthood. Consequently, since these inmates had been officially admitted to these BTIs within the recognised age limits, and were recognised by the authorities as legitimate at the time of data collection, their inclusion in this study was therefore considered methodologically appropriate.

All interviews were conducted within the premises of the two BTIs, with each lasting between 25 and 40 minutes. In compliance with one of the instructions I was given, all the interviews were conducted with a correctional officer within sight. Interviews explored inmates' initial experiences at the institutions, their stand-by/knocking experiences, and the purposes of the initiation rituals. In order to ensure the security of the data, all interviews were tape-recorded with the prior permission of the interviewees. All the recordings were also listened to several times, while still in the field, in order to detect any ambiguous or incomplete information and to be able to seek clarifications early enough. After getting familiarised with the data, they were manually transcribed by the researcher. Upon successful transcription, the data were subjected to thematic analysis to identify and sort recurring ideas and facts that constitute the findings. These were

presented in textual form, featuring direct quotations from the interviewees where necessary.

Results

Admission and the Disruption of Prior Identity

The study revealed that Nigerian BTIs today accommodate three categories of male juveniles – juvenile offenders (police cases), juveniles beyond parental control (parents' cases), and juveniles in need of care and protection. Irrespective of the purpose of their commitment, however, juvenile inmates who were newly received into the two BTIs were subjected to a series of elaborate admission and socialisation processes. The admission processes were mainly formal procedures of documentation, achieving uniformity in inmates' appearance, and ensuring their conformity to institutional expectations by correctional officers. These were followed by informal inmate-led initiation rituals targeted at sustaining intra-inmate hierarchies, dormitory leadership and the expected means of social control.

Participants in the study were asked to narrate their experience on the day they arrived at the institutions, and one of the responses was:

> When I got here that day, we were asked to alight from the car... At the gate, I was searched, and all the money that was found in my pocket was removed: the phones I had on me, the bag I was holding, my cap and the cardigan I had on were also collected from me and given to my grandma to take back home. We [referring to himself and another boy who also arrived that day] then went there (pointing to an office), and we were given green uniforms, and we were told that our hair was going to be shaved... (*IDI, Participant 02, 17 years old, BTI, Ilorin, 11/04/2022***)**

While many of these admission processes were means of officialising the juveniles' inmatehood, a number of the processes were aimed at curtailing their freedom and subjecting them to the totalizing nature of correctional institutions. This is exemplified in the cases of some of the participants who reported the experience of violence from correctional officers upon their arrival.

Participant 01 narrated his experience:

> When I got here… they searched me, they took the 2,000 in my pocket; they told me to remove my clothes, and they gave me this green [shirt] and khaki [shorts]. They started taking me… and when we reached this car park, they now said I should let them see my hands; they now gave me handcuffs…. The next day, they

> removed the handcuffs and gave me leg chains…. The leg chain was on my legs for one month…. (*IDI, Participant 01, 17 years old, BTI, Ilorin, 07/04/2022)*

Many of these processes carry a high degree of totalising significance, including photographing, medical examinations, issuing the institution's uniforms, undressing to replace the new inmates' clothing with the issued uniforms, bodily searches, confiscation of personal belongings, haircutting, and, in some cases, use of mechanical restraints and beating in cases of resistance. Beyond the treatments received by the inmates, their arrival at the institutions also symbolises both the physical and social separation from the free world.

Initiation as Ritualised Discipline

Following their admission and the necessary documentation, new inmates were allocated to the dormitories where they would stay during their detention in the institutions. The study reveals a deeply entrenched culture of socialisation rituals – known as "knocking" at BTI, Abeokuta, and "stand-by" at BTI, Ilorin – which were always held for all new entrants by existing inmates in all the dormitories across the two BTIs sampled in this study. These events, though informal and normally excluded the participation of correctional staff, were one of the most prominent initial experiences often reported by inmates of the two selected BTIs. Both knocking and stand-by were habitually performed in every dormitory to which a new entrant was allocated on the very night of his arrival. Irrespective of the new entrants' social status before admission, the rituals were always held for them in each of the BTIs involved in this study.

The inmates who were involved in this study were asked to describe their knocking/ stand-by experiences, and two of the interviewees captured the event perfectly in their description: Participant 10, from BTI, Ilorin described it as a form of "induction" – "Stand-by is like an induction, it's [held] among students. They read the rules and regulations, and they just tell you how the whole system is. Number 1 [rule]: No escape – no matter what, no escape. Then they assign you to your post, where you'll put your mattress and your stuffs, where you'll live, where you'll spend your time.*" (IDI, Participant 10, 25 years old, BTI, Ilorin, 11/10/2024).* The other interviewee, from BTI, Abeokuta reported that he felt like he was being introduced "to a particular cult" – "I was asked to sit down close to the wall at a corner. I was just looking because I have never seen a place like this… I've never seen such a place in my life… So the time for knocking now came…. I just saw him [the house captain] holding one iron cup and knocked it on the floor: Ko! ko! ko! ko! ko! As if they were introducing me into a particular cult…" (*IDI, Participant 07, 25 years old, BTI, Abeokuta, 24/03/2024).*

Some of the participants' narrations of the events are presented in the following extracts:

> I just sat down… then in the night, there's something that they used to do when a new boy comes… no, before that night, in the evening, they came with one boy also – a new admission. They told him that I am also a new boy. By the night, all of them gathered and they said that we (the two new entrants) should kneel down at the middle. They gathered around us, the senior boys sat down in front of us, they asked us information. They read the rules and regulations for us…the rules and regulations in the dormitory and in the school, and they asked us to give them 5 out of them (the rules). There were about 25 rules and regulations, and they asked us to give them 5 after reading them. If we were not able to give those 5, they would beat us, but we gave them the 5… me and that boy gave them the 5…. (*IDI, Participant 04, 17 years old, BTI, Ilorin, 12/04/2022)*

A more elaborate narration of the socialisation was given by Participant 06, including the chanting of a song, as performed at Abeokuta:

> I was told to sit down in one place; they told me to "cargo". There is a word they use here – cargo – when you sit down on the floor, then your legs will be crossed together… So the [new] student will be asked to sit in the middle of the hostel, to "cargo", like I said earlier… to cargo in the middle of the hostel – his legs crossed, sit down on the floor; then the other students in the hostel sit around him. Then there is a usual anthem that we sing, it's more like a salutation in the hostel…
>
> Ehnn, it's just like:
> *Who dey there?*
> *Nobody (Chorus)*
> *Be to your normal post*
> *Outside from lavatory*
> *Fold your legs,*
> *Fold your bracket,*
> *Cargo your legs for one corner*
> *Say "who dey?"*
> *Gbolaga (chorus).*
>
> So that's like the normal salutation for every student… we'll recite it individually. Ok, let's say a student says it now, when he's done, the next person after him, in

> their order of ranking – how they got into the hostel – from the highest to the lowest… to the last person. So, each student, in their order of ranking, or should I say hierarchy, will do that; and afterwards, flogged. I mean, I was seriously beaten…. [The rules]:
>
> (1) So the first one there is "escape is a taboo".
> (2) The second one is "no sodomy in the hostel"
> (3) The third one is "the captain's decision is final"

When asked for the purpose of the beating, he replied: "The beating… so that the student can put it at the back of his mind… so that he won't forget. And I think to put that fear in them; to put the fear in them that, ok yes, if you do things that you're not meant to do, those are the things that you'll face, or should I say, just to abhor those habits…*" (IDI, Participant 06, 26 years old, BTI, Abeokuta, 23/03/2024).*

Some of the inmates interviewed in the study also spoke about the appropriate codes of conduct that had to be followed when socialisation rituals were being performed. These expectations, which were different for the intitiants and existing inmates (depending on their hierarchy), included rules about dressing, bodily postures, and manners of communication throughout the process: "You have to tuck in your clothes while knocking [and] fold your legs… Everybody. The seniors will not fold their legs. Okay, during knocking, if you've not spent up to one year or if you're not up to number one to ten in the state, you'll have to sit down on the floor – we call it *jam ground* – and fold your legs; fold your brackets." *(IDI, Participant 07, 25 years old, BTI, Abeokuta, 24/03/2024).*

Apart from instructing the inductees to position themselves in awkward positions (such as sitting behind the door or in a corner) and to maintain certain uncomfortable bodily postures (such as sitting on the floor, folding the arms and legs, and kneeling down), another seemingly traumatising practice reported by interviewees sampled from the two BTIs was the practice of non-communication with new entrants (especially by junior inmates) before the performance of their socialisation rituals.

Participant 10, sampled from BTI, Ilorin narrated his experience:

> … So they took me to the dormitory, and they asked me to stay behind the door. So I just sat down behind the door until night. There's something we call stand-by…. Then, nobody talked to me until that stand-by: it's part of the rules – when a new student enters the dormitory, you're not meant to talk to him… because there're some people, when they come, they want to show that they're the boss…. To be honest, I can't say I know why [the practice is observed], but I just feel

> like it's just to put fear in the student. That's just the general rule: when someone just enters the dormitory, don't talk to the person. In fact, you'll get punished severely for it.
>
> Me like this, I'm not a senior student, if someone enters the dormitory newly and I talk to the person, I'm meant to be punished that night. Definitely, I'm going to be punished for that. I don't know but I feel it to put a form of fear in the student because that was how I felt: nobody was talking to me… there were about 20 other people in the dormitory and they were doing their own and I was just left alone… *(IDI, Participant 10, 25 years old, BTI, Ilorin, 11/10/2024)*

Participant 07 from BTI, Abeokuta, also narrated his experience when he attempted to interact with his cousin, who was earlier committed to the institution and whom he was excited to see after a long period of their separation, prior to his (the interviewee's) knocking ritual. To his surprise, he was harshly checked by the seniors: "… I just saw some mad faces telling me to "*dake jare! Tani e!? Se o ya were ni? Oo mo ibi ti o wa sha!?"* (Keep quiet! Who are you!? Are you mad!? Do you not know where you are?)" *(IDI, Participant 07, 25 years old, BTI, Abeokuta, 24/03/2024).*

One of the schedules central to the performance of knocking and stand-by was the reading of the rules that guide the conduct of inmates in the institutions and in the particular dormitory to which the new entrant was allocated. These rules were dormitory-based and varied in number and in arrangement, depending on the discretion of the leadership of each dormitory. Participant 06 explained the purpose of the rituals in the extract below:

> The main reason why we do that knocking is to read the laws of the yard [and] the laws of the hostel for the new students. We have the laws of the yard and the laws of the hostel together – everything is twenty-one. So we have like [about] twenty-one laws. We do that knocking for the students to know that these are the things that you're not supposed to do here if you don't want to be facing punishment, beatings, or them doing anything to you that you would not like. We'll read the twenty-one laws to them… now it's twenty-two in my hostel because we recently added one – no growing of nails in the hostel….
>
> Every student has to do it because, the officers here, we don't want them to lock us up every time. We don't

> want them to be harsh on us, so we don't want escape. "No escape" is one of the rules. The new students [have to] know that no matter the cause, no matter what you are facing here, you must not [attempt to] escape; you must not even think about escaping in this yard. *(IDI, Participant 06, 26 years old, BTI, Abeokuta, 23/03/2024)*

It was observed that the rule that prohibited escape was a cultural universal in all dormitories across the two BTIs. Participant 06 was further asked for the reason for this inclusion, since escape was an offence against the administration and not against the inmates. His response was that escape, or the attempt of it, was an offence against both the administration and all inmates because such occurrences would cause the officers to get tougher on them and further curtail the little freedom they had. Therefore, to ensure that new inmates did not forget the rules, they were always instructed to memorise and recite the first five most important rules, which included the prohibition of escape, offhand during the rituals. This also explains why initiants were beaten during the rituals so that they would have a feel of what would happen to them if they defaulted. Although there were reports that the practice of actual beating had been banned during the performance of the rituals at the time of conducting this study, other practices that still signify physical and emotional ordeal were still in practice.

Through the performance of these rituals, senior inmates in each dormitory across the selected BTIs socialised the new entrants into the inmate communities. The rituals were not only performed to regulate relationships among the inmates, but also with the officers, as well as with the environment within which the institutions are located. For instance, while the rules that upheld the superiority of the house captains and their decisions, prohibited keeping long nails, stealing and backbiting, and mandated everyone to eat their food at the same time, were meant to regulate intra-inmate relationships, the rules that warned against escape, and moving close to the fences emphasised the interest of the institutions as a whole, and not just those of the inmates. This was because the inmates recognised that acting as moral police among themselves was necessary to achieve harmonious relationships between them and the officers.

Seniority and Informal Governance

Another purpose of the socialisation rituals was to enable new entrants to recognise the status cues right from the start. This helped to prevent any form of insubordination, and allowed existing inmates to establish their superiority over the new ones easily. As strange as it may sound, seniority, at the two BTIs sampled in this study, was strictly and exclusively determined based on the order of admission: at the time a new inmate was admitted, every other inmate who had been admitted before him was automatically considered his senior, irrespective of the superiority of his presenting identity compared to those of the existing inmates. There were situations, for instance, in which the age of a junior

would be about twice that of his senior, or in which an inmate, who was an undergraduate or a graduate prior to his admission, would be assigned to serve a younger inmate who did not even complete primary school. Seniors, not minding if they were younger or if they occupied inferior social statuses in the civil world, also had the right to send their juniors on errands. They could also punish them if they disobeyed any of the rules or if any of their conduct was considered an offence.

In reference to the way seniority was defined and the treatment of juniors by seniors, one of the interviewees at BTI, Abeokuta described the institution as "a place where ants rule elephants". Further into the interview, he expatiated on the analogy:

> *…the way they use to punish someone anyhow… [if you do] any small thing: match your [a senior's] bed, punishment; do mistake pour small water for floor, punishment; all those things…. Make person wey don born pikin… make he get 20 pikin, if them bring the person come here, small boy like the person wey he don born go punish am.*
>
> (… the way one gets punished anyhow here… [if you make] any little mistake: match on [a seniors'] bed, you will get punished; if you mistakenly pour water on the floor, you will get punished…. If someone who has given birth to 20 children comes here, a little boy about the age of a child he has given birth to will punish him). *(IDI, Participant 09, 22 years old, BTI, Abeokuta, 26/03/2024)*

It is also important to mention that correctional officers at both BTIs approved of the rituals and also considered them as a significant means of establishing informal leadership among the inmates. This was necessary to ensure the involvement of senior inmates in the management and control of other inmates, thereby extending the imposition of the culture of totality in Nigerian BTIs beyond the duties of correctional officers.

In addition to serving as a means of socialising new inmates on the expected ways of behaviour in the institutions, stand-by and knocking rituals were also used to inform new entrants about the nature and the purpose of the institutions. This is particularly important because many of the juveniles got to BTIs out of deceit and/ or coercion from their parents/ families, leaving them either completely uninformed or wrongly informed about where they were going to, and for what purpose. In many cases, they would be told that they were being taken to a boarding school or to an office to obtain an important document. In some other cases, parents would secretly arrange with police or correctional officers to overpower/ capture the juveniles, after which they would find themselves either at the family court or at the intended BTI.

17-year-old Participant 04, who was committed for engaging in internet fraud and moving with bad friends, narrated how he discovered the true nature and purpose of the institution after his admission:

> … we went to the CDO's office… but as we were going, [I checked] the warrant that they gave us, … at the court, they said I was going to a school, but on that warrant, I saw they wrote: Name of prisoner, term of imprisonment, everything…. So I just asked my mother that is this a prison? She told me that it's not a prison, but the people working here are correctional officers; [that] it's a training school. I started to suspect that maybe it's because of what I was doing….
>
> [During stand-by in the dormitory at night]
> … and they asked that "Do you know where the place that you are?" We [he and another new boy] told them that it is a school, and they brought one plate; at the back of that plate, they wrote "Nigerian Prisons".
>
> Then they told us that this place is not a school; that it's a prison for young prisoners, but it's not like a normal prison, but it's also a prison. That everyone goes to school, that prayer is compulsory, that we eat three times, so it's not a normal prison. That we're free to play ball, but that they just have a school here and that we can do our exams here….
> *(IDI, Participant 04, 17 years old, BTI, Ilorin, 12/04/2022)*

Just like the interviewee above, most juvenile inmates arrived at BTIs either with incorrect information or with no information at all about the institutions. The socialisation rituals were thus used by existing inmates to resolve this initial confusion.

Belonging, Collective Regulation, and Negotiated Participation

In addition to serving purposes of socialisation and identity reconstruction, stand-by and knocking were equally observed to fulfil other motives, including as subtle ways of expressing antagonism against official practices, and as mechanisms of collective social control.

Participant 10 gave a more detailed description of the purposes, procedures and schedules of stand-by in the extract that follows:

> … stand-by only occurs: (1) every Sunday (2) if there's an issue in the dormitory, there'll be stand-by and (3) arrival of a new boy.
>
> Because we spend a lot of time together and we can't keep malice and here, you can't talk to your senior boys anyhow, so if you have an issue with a senior boy, you can't resolve it [on your own]. If you talk to the senior boy just like that, he might feel insulted, and that might be an issue for you as a junior student too. Stand-by is the time when you talk your mind… you'll just wait till that night and talk your mind. So everybody in the dormitory gives complaints, observations and if you have anything you want resolved, you can say your mind about it. If you observe anything in the dormitory, as long as you're in that dormitory and it's happening in that dormitory, it automatically concerns you. So you give complaints, and you give observations, from the last boy to the house captain.

In response to a follow-up question intended to confirm whether junior boys could really express their complaints about senior boys, he replied:

> Yes, they can complain because there's no how we can do it, we're going to offend each other; so standby is the time to talk your mind freely without fear of punishment or anything. So that's what stand-bys are for. So, they read the rules and regulations to the new boy. If there's no new boy, they'll just resolve the issues… whatever issues, or they just plan whatever they want to plan.
>
> Why stand-bys occur on Sundays is because, every Monday morning, there's inspection, so Sunday nights, we prepare for inspections. Officers come for inspection on Monday morning so Sunday nights, everybody has to prepare. So, we just talk about it; so that's why it occurs on Sundays. So, if there's no new boy, we just resolve whatever issues on ground and everybody goes their way. That's stand-by. (*IDI, Participant 10, 25 years old, BTI, Ilorin, 11/10/2024)*

The extract above provides significant insights into stand-bys, not merely as informal dormitory gatherings but as institutionalised rituals that served not only as mechanisms of socialisation and identity reconstruction, but also as

mechanisms of conflict regulation, solidarity against undesired institutional routine practice of inspection, and collective belonging, and social control within the institution. Participant 10 explained that stand-bys occurred not only upon the arrival of new inmates, but also regularly on Sundays in preparation for Monday inspections, and when there were issues to resolve in each dormitory. This regularity also demonstrates that these rituals were part of the routine organisation of dormitory life, serving both preventive and corrective functions.

Discussion

This paper investigates the dynamics of socialisation rituals – stand-by and knocking – at BTIs Ilorin and Abeokuta, which possess different operational mandates but share the overarching goal of juvenile correction. The study reveals the existence of similar ritual practices at the two BTIs that function as structured processes of inmate socialisation through which inmate norms, hierarchies, and communal values were reproduced and transmitted from existing inmates to newcomers. Through these practices, newly admitted inmates were socialised into the acceptable behavioural standards of the dormitories and of the institutions. These findings align with anthropological understandings of socialisation as the process through which individuals acquire and assimilate group norms, values, and expected patterns of behaviour (Crisogen, 2015). More importantly, socialisation rituals, as practised at both institutions, have major anthropological significance as they closely reflect Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage (Gennep, 1960) and Victor Turner's concept of social liminality.

The first stage of inmate socialisation at the two BTIs sampled in this paper corresponds to van Gennep's preliminal (separation) phase: Upon their admission, juveniles were physically separated from civilian life and their former social identities, including their families, communities, and environments. This not only signifies the suspension of previous social statuses and roles, but also marks their entry into a new social grouping within the institutions. This is followed by institutional procedures, such as bodily search, haircutting, photographing, medical examinations, issuing of the institution's uniforms, confiscation of personal belongings, haircutting, and sometimes, the use of mechanical restraints, which subject inmates to restricted movement, surveillance and other disciplinary regulations that contrast with their previous roles and statuses.

The liminal (transition) phase is particularly visible in initiation practices known as "stand-by" and "knocking", which were always held for new inmates in their assigned dormitories on the night of arrival. The initiation rituals involved the observance of various specified rules and activities by the initiants, including adhering to particular dressing norms, enforced silence, bodily positioning, rule recitation, respecting hierarchies, intimidation and other ritualised performances through which newcomers were instructed in institutional norms, expected behaviour, and inmate hierarchies. These signify subjecting the newcomers to symbolic incorporation into institutional culture

through exposure to established rules, behavioural expectations, and collective scrutiny.

The postliminal (incorporation) phase is marked by the social transition, which finally facilitates the new entrants' incorporation into the inmate community. Prior to this phase, initiants occupied a liminal position as individuals who had been severed from the existing social identities and roles of free individuals, but who were yet to acquire full social integration into the new social order of the confined. Upon the successful completion of the initiation rituals, however, initiants became recognised as members of the inmate community, granting them access to dormitory structures and participation in collective activities, including role assignment, bunk allocation, assignment to bunk masters, and the right of participation in subsequent stand-bys/ knockings. These processes of social transition reflect van Gennep's tripartite structure of separation, transition, and incorporation.

Victor Turner's concept of liminality is equally applicable to the interpretation of this process. Turner conceptualises the liminal phase of the ritual process as a transitional threshold in which individuals "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between" social statuses (Turner, 1977, p. 95). The new inmates were positioned in such a liminal status until they were introduced to the moral expectations through stand-by or knocking. The practice of non-communication with new entrants, reported at both BTIs until the performance of their socialisation rituals, was one of the prominent ways through which new inmates were subjected to liminality. Although their admission into the institutions had detached them from the membership of the free society, the new boys were yet to be accepted as members of the inmate community until their incorporation was facilitated through the successful completion of their initiation rituals. This signifies that the rituals do not merely discipline newcomers; they also reconstruct identity by transforming borstal boys from ordinary civilians into individuals who understand the expectations of inmate life.

The findings, particularly from the interview with Participant 10, further demonstrate that these rituals also function as a mechanism for constructing collective belonging among inmates. The participant repeatedly emphasised the collective nature of dormitory life: "because we spend a lot of time together," and "as long as you're in that dormitory and it's happening in that dormitory, it automatically concerns you." These statements reveal that the dormitory operates as a communal social unit where shared responsibilities and collective accountability were undertaken, reflecting Turner's concept of communitas. Despite the hierarchical organisation of dormitory life, stand-bys created a temporary social space where inmates gathered collectively to express grievances and resolve conflicts.

The participant's description of stand-bys as "the time to talk your mind freely without fear of punishment or anything" presents the gathering as the only protected occasion on which juniors could freely express themselves to seniors. This reveals an important contradiction within the inmate-stratified social

structure, where "you can't talk to your senior boys anyhow." Stand-by temporarily suspends this hierarchy by creating a socially approved opportunity for open communication. From an anthropological view, this temporary suspension of hierarchy also mirrors Goffman's description of temporary role reversals, during which members of total institutions belonging to different hierarchies participate in "standard forms of sociability" that give them the "licence to 'take liberties' across the caste line...", such as staff and inmates temporarily becoming equals by dancing or playing games together during annual parties (Goffman, 2017, p. 97).

Conclusion

This article has examined the culture of socialisation, identity reconstruction and belonging in two Nigerian BTIs through the anthropological frameworks of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. The findings from the study reveal that newly admitted inmates at the two BTIs undergo structured initiation rituals, known as "stand-by" at Ilorin and "knocking" at Abeokuta, as a part of their socialisation practices, that culminate in the integration of the new entrants into the inmate communities as recognised members with rights and obligations. The observance of these rituals at the selected BTIs reveals the coexistence of formal and informal systems of power: officially, institutional administrators control discipline and rehabilitation, while informally, inmates regulate social interaction through ritual authority and peer enforcement. These dual systems of control mirror anthropological understandings of rituals as both integrative and regulatory (Gennep, 1960). Similarly, the practice of knocking and stand-by were socially recognised by both inmates and correctional officers as symbolic gateways into institutional membership, while also regulating the uncertainties associated with the arrival of new inmates.

Although some of the ritual processes are punitive in nature, reproducing abuse, unhealthy hierarchies and fear, they nonetheless served to regulate social order, sustain inmate hierarchies, and foster communal solidarities among juvenile inmates in confinement. This study contributes to scholarship on carceral anthropology and juvenile justice by demonstrating that juvenile correctional institutions are not merely administrative spaces where juvenile offenders are always locked behind bars, but that they are cultural worlds with their own practices and social expectations where identity, power, and belonging are continuously negotiated through ritual practices.

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