

The Guardian at five

A communist in *The Guardian*

By Edwin Madunagu

find myself subjectively incapable of setting up a private enterprise then only one option is really open, namely: paid employment. And this paid employment has to be in an organisation which, so long as the capitalist economy holds sway in all parts of the country, has to be run more or less according to the capitalist laws of value and exchange of values. This is the option, communist or no communist. Anyone who, against the background sketched above, still asks why I should work in a capitalist organisation is in reality asking why I should be alive. And I don't think it is fair to demand an answer from me.

The question, therefore, is not why I am working in a capitalist organisation, but why — since I was not forced to be here — I have chosen to work in *The Guardian* of all the organisations that were, and are, willing to employ me.

I resigned my teaching job at the University of Calabar in September 1983 to look for a job in the print media. This was after I graduated from my *self-tuition* as a reporter and prose-writer. After a couple of false signals and false starts, I moved to Ife-Ibadan-Lagos since this was, and still is, where print organisations are concentrated. The fact that I had friends and former colleagues in most of the media houses was simultaneously an advantage and a disadvantage. Because these people knew me very well there was no question of cross-checking my credentials or giving me the benefit of the doubt: they

were able to make up their minds on the spot — one way or the other. But there was a single exception: *The Guardian*. Here a real debate on my application took place and I monitored it with keen interest — from my "base" at Ife and Ibadan. This debate on my application coupled with the unique intellectual bent of *The Guardian* fore-closed other options for me and led me to zero in on the newspaper.

Let us jump the details of this debate, and come to Friday February 1, 1985 when I appeared before an interview panel of three: the most high-powered that the organisation could set up. After greeting and exchanging pleasantries with the panel, the chairman told me that a debate had been going on over my application and that this debate had aroused his interest. He said that he did not believe I could be dangerous to the organisation. He asked the other two members for their comments. They concurred. Thereafter the chairman gave me their verdict: they did not mind my Marxism and socialism; I was free to write any-

thing I believed under my name; but editorial opinions were collective decisions arrived at through debate. The meeting rose — having lasted exactly five minutes. I can today testify that all my signed articles in *The Guardian* — now about 120 — have come out exactly as I submitted them.

On Monday, February 4, 1985, I made my first appearance in the editorial board meeting. Discussions proceeded as I was told. At the end of the meeting a topic was assigned to me. When the typed draft was ready I

showed it to my colleagues Richard Umaru and Odia Ofeimun. Without caring for my feelings and without any inhibition or hypocrisy they cancelled the first half of the three-page draft and heavily edited the second half. That has been, to date, the most effective lesson I have learnt both in comradely openness and in editorial-writing in *The Guardian*.

Conclusion: I came to *The Guardian* for a chain of reasons: first, because I wanted a wage-employment; secondly, because I wanted to work in the print media; thirdly because *The Guardian* welcomes and cherishes internal debate and invests heavily in debates; fourthly, because this newspaper does not share the anti-communist paranoia which nauseatingly pervades the media in Nigeria. Finally, I am in *The Guardian* because of its unique intellectual bent in a dominantly philistine environment.

As for the future of *The Guardian* one can only make projections and predictions on the basis of the balance, on the ground today, of the forces currently at play and the general line of the movement of this balance — as far as one can discern. *The Guardian* that we proudly present to the world everyday is not the product of homogeneous inclination or disposition, but a product of contradictions. The pre-eminence of this newspaper derives, not from any magic in the name, "Guardian", but from the fact that a particular side of this contradiction — the literal, urbane and intellectual side has remained dominant. A substantial decline, or defeat, of this dominance (which I hope will not take place) will definitely threaten the cause for this celebration.

I WANT to seize the opportunity of the fifth anniversary of the founding of this remarkable newspaper, *The Guardian*, to attempt to answer, or at least look seriously at, a rhetorical question which, sometimes jokingly and sometimes seriously, has been thrown at me: Why should I, a communist, be working in, and for, a capitalist organisation like *The Guardian*? I am using the strong term, *communist*, rather than the more "acceptable" term, *socialist*, quite deliberately: for I am, strictly speaking, a communist and only by adhering to strictness will the import of this question and its answer be brought out.

The first step in answering this question immediately brings me to the realisation that this is merely one side of a two-sided question — the side being: Why should *The Guardian*, a capitalist organisation, employ me? This second question has even now assumed a larger dimension: Why should *The Guardian* not only appoint a communist into its Editorial Board, but also select him to act as its Editorial Page Editor, the *de facto* coordinator and deputy chairman of this all-important board? Indeed, why should this capitalist organisation release this communist to serve in the Political Bureau and continue to pay his salary for 16 months — for doing nothing for the organisation and *objectively* for promoting and championing positions which negate capitalist principles and logic? Why should *The Guardian*, a capitalist organisation, support this communist with an editorial comment (see *The Guardian*, January 9, 1987), when he ran into trouble with his non-communist colleagues?

Were I in a debating hall. I would

perhaps be tempted to chuckle and challenge the other side to answer the second set of questions, or seek the assistance of *The Guardian* to do so. But since this is not a face-to-face debate, the most I can do is to assume the answers to the second set of questions and proceed to answer the original question. The assumed answers will be implicit in the explicit one. I have to assume an answer because after all, I am also a member of the *The Guardian* organisation. But anyone who cares to look into the second set of questions will begin to see why I am here, and can be here.

Two questions, or rather, two sets of questions: one thrown at me and the other thrown at *The Guardian* of which I am a part.

I start by placing certain simple and incontrovertible facts on the table. First, Nigeria is a capitalist country, and runs a capitalist economy. Secondly, as my "interrogators" rightly say, *The Guardian* is a capitalist organisation run, when considered as an economic project, according to the logic and demands of capitalism. Thirdly, I am a Nigerian, and I am in Nigeria. Fourthly, I am a mathematics-teacher by training and a communist by ideological orientation.

If I add to these facts my own deliberate choice to earn my living within the Nigerian economy, then three practical options are open. I can either become a parasite, establish a business, or seek employment in a business house. If for some reasons I rule out parasitism, and other forms of forcible appropriations and if I find it difficult to establish a business or