

I AM happy to be back to this column. I had been planning the vacation for an unbelievably long time – more than three years – before I finally embarked on it on Sunday, January 1, 2006. Why did the plan drag on for so long, and why did it terminate when it did? For the first part of the question, I think there were many reasons for the prolonged plan to go on vacation which, going by our family tradition, meant my travelling out of Calabar and suspending my normal activities and engagements for at least one unbroken week. Some of these reasons can be articulated; others, having to do with pure inertia, are difficult to articulate, at least by me.

Of the reasons that I can articulate, some were objective, others subjective. The former included my daily routine and structure of engagement since I relocated fully to Calabar on leaving Lagos in September 1994. This routine demanded my being physically present in Calabar virtually every day. The subjective reasons had to do with alienation from my natural political terrain. My friends and comrades are well aware of this.

Two main factors were responsible for my terminating the plan and proceeding on leave on January 1. The first was what I may call a political block in relation to this weekly column that I had maintained unbroken since President Olusegun Obasanjo came to power in May 1999: I suddenly did not know what to write after drafting the piece *Reviews and prospects* which I later changed to *To BJ* at 60, a salute (January 5, 2006). Quite uncharacteristically, I felt that I had said everything I had to say about the direction Nigeria was moving under Obasanjo and the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). Many predictions were coming to pass with alarming – and depressing – precision. I tried the foreign scene for a subject. Nothing came. Then I turned to non-political issues. For being escapist, this worsened the block I had.

As I was battling to see what I could do in the circumstance, a message arrived from Lagos. Sent by a younger colleague in the media, the short message informed me that my friend and comrade, Professor Biodun Jeyifo, popularly and affectionately known as BJ, would be 60 on Thursday, January 5, 2006. To mark the event, the message went on a dinner, which would also serve as occasion for tributes, was being organised by BJ's friends and former students in Lagos, that evening. Finally, I was told that I had been chosen, "by popular demand," as one of the speakers. The message, sent through my spouse, came around Christmas. She passed it to me without comment. I also made no comments, but we both knew it was an invitation I could not dodge without a strong reason which must be convincing to BJ. Then, the following day, a nearly identical message, from another source, was sent to me via the office phone.

Now, I had known that BJ would be 60 on January, 2006. I also knew that BJ had arrived in the country, from America: he had, in fact, telephoned me as soon as he arrived. But, thereafter, he had remained silent. I told my spouse that if within three days BJ had not communicated with me on the planned dinner and the invitation to me, of which he must be aware, that would mean that I must be present. A week passed, and nothing from BJ. It was then I decided, or rather, the decision that thrust on me, that I must attend the Lagos dinner cum night of tributes.

Why could I not reject this invitation as I had rejected several others before it? Simple. My joining forces with BJ in 1975 was a defining moment in my revolutionary career: I took a leap unto a path from which I have never deviated, and will never deviate. This is the path of categorical imperative of being, and remaining, a revolution-

Vacation notes

By Edwin Madunagu

ary Marxist and socialist humanist and hence the categorical commitment to the liberation of the toiling masses of Nigeria, of the African continent, of the Third World, and of the world as a whole. This commitment required that everything I did thereafter, even to earn a living, even in my family, must serve the cause of popular liberation.

When I reflected on my decision to be in Lagos to honour BJ, and juxtaposed this with my mental block, I saw that I must take a vacation: not just to honour the pre-eminent literary critic and theorist, but also, by so doing, break my block. As soon as I announced my decision to the family (nuclear family), my spouse and daughter started to pack my bags and make other arrangements – something they had not done before, for, in our family, patriarchy and headship naturally do not exist. In fact, in our family, the "traditional" male-female division of labour has, in some vital respects, been reversed – with amazing results, to the glory of radical feminism. With my decision, I sent a note to the Chairman of the Editorial Board of *The Guardian* requesting for a six-week absence from this column.

As I finalised my arrangements to leave for Lagos, I took another decision: since the time I had at my disposal would not be sufficient to renew contacts with even a fraction of my Lagos friends and comrades, I would simply attend the BJ event and immediately withdraw from Lagos. This, I did. So, I attended the BJ event, but did not visit Lagos.

I left Calabar on Monday, January 2, 2006, with two young men, one of them on the steering. We got to Nnewi in Anambra State about 4.30 p.m. Since I could not

afford to spend more than 18 hours in Anambra State, I decided to remain there, and send the two young men to Nnobi, my hometown, which has physically merged with Nnewi, to assess the situation in my family (the larger Madunagu family). They came back with the report that almost all members of the family were at home for the Christmas and New Year celebration. I sent them back to bring a particular female member of the family to my "hideout".

She came, and we agreed that I would reach the family through her. As incentive to make her undertake such a burdensome mission, I had to listen to her stories sympathetically. She came back the following morning (Wednesday, January 3), and we all drove through Nnobi, to a niece of mine who had just lost her mother (my sister). From there we drove to Onitsha. On the way I briefed her on my trip and sent, through her, messages to at least 20 members of the family. We separated at Onitsha: she, to return to Nnobi with the burden of explaining my disappearance; we, to continue with our journey across the River Niger.

It was while at Nnewi that I received a telephone message that comrade SOZ Ejiofoh, a frontline trade unionist, had lost his spouse. I immediately requested one of my companions to send a text message of condolence to SOZ, since I am still learning how to operate these modern communication gadgets. It was also at Nnewi that I told BJ by phone to expect me at Ibadan about 5.00 p.m. on Wednesday, January 4. I also confirmed that the comrade who had sent the first invitation would be with him as I had requested. We arrived in Benin in the late afternoon of Tuesday, January 3.

In the morning of the following day, Wednesday, January 4, I sent my companions to my immediate elder brother who had resided in that city for more than 30

years. As soon as the emissaries came back, we set off for Ibadan, arriving there about the time I had communicated to BJ. The invitation sender, Kayode Komolafe (KK), soon arrived. It was a memorable night reunion, animated by "Gulder" and "Star". The following morning, January 5, we all set out for Lagos.

As the Lagos event (tributes and dinner) had been generously and copiously reported in the media, I shall omit the story here. I only have to remark that had I not attended that event the only image of BJ that would have appeared would have been that of a good human being, a radical social critic, and a brilliant literary critic and theorist, not that of a practising revolutionary Marxist. So, I am happy I was there, although I was only able to present two episodes out of about 13 that came to my mind. We left Lagos the following morning Friday, January 6, 2005, on our return journey to Calabar.

Our first stop was at Ilesha (Osun State) where I had lived from about the age of two to the age of 20. I was able to locate the three houses where we had lived at various times, and the secondary school I attended. From Ilesha we moved to, Akure, the capital of Ondo State, where we spent the night. From Akure we moved to Asaba, Delta State where we spent another night. We arrived Calabar in the afternoon of Sunday, January 8, 2006, via Onitsha, Awka, Enugu, Okigwe, Umuahia and Ikot Ekpene. This last bit of the trip was largely uneventful except for my quarrel with a Road Safety man near Iru who did not know how to demand a bribe, and thus save his and the traveller's time.

The seven-day trip was the only period of my absence from this column that one can call a vacation. For, within hours of my return, people forgot that I was on vacation. With time I also forgot. Has my block disappeared? Honestly, I don't know. But here I am. With what is happening in the country how can I justify being on vacation?