

# REUNION WITH NATURE AT NEW BUSSA

WALE OKEDIRAN



The week before we left for New Bussa, friends tried to prepare me. 'It's a nice place' they said.

'A good place for a vacation'.

They told me about the impressive Kainji dam, the clement weather as well as the comfortable hotels and good food. I was also reminded of the scenic River Niger that has brought fame, fortune and fish (plenty of it) to the mostly agrarian community whose beauty could take a while to appreciate as friends further implored:

'Don't jump to conclusions. Give the place a chance'. Those were the parting words of an acquaintance who had lived in the place before.

Twilight was setting in when our car rolled across the bridge over the river Niger into New Bussa one afternoon this last January.

All around us, were armed soldiers - a sad reminder of the uncertain times in which we lived. Far in the distance,

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tinged by the January sunset was the river Niger as it made it's arduous run towards the coast. The river, long an historic element in the area, feeds the hopes and bellies of the sturdy souls who as fishermen, farmers and washermen make a living along its banks.

Unfortunately, there is a dark side to the river. Having taken care of the natives for so long, the river Niger and some of its tributaries are also the harbingers of disease, deformity and death. They are the source of the dreaded disease onchocerciasis, the cause of river blindness which today afflicts about

two million Nigerians. The ailment is endemic in regions with fast flowing rivers that breed the carrier of the disease - the blackfly. It is characterised by itching of the skin, presence of skin modules containing adult worms and ultimately, eye affectation - which may culminate in blindness. According to Dr. Jonathan Jiya, the Federal Chief Consultant of Primary Health Care, about 18 million people have been rendered blind world-wide out of which 350,000 are from Nigeria. As someone put it:

'The river serves the people, but it maims as well'.

It was actually this grim outlook that brought me to New Bussa. Having learnt about and treated occasional onchocerciasis cases for roughly a decade now, I jumped at the opportunity of a grassroots exposure in the company of Adelani Ogunrinade, professor of Veterinary Parasitology and a writing colleague. Ogunrinade and his team have been working now for upwards of five years with other medical and

scientific colleagues in the eradication of the dreaded disease.

Despite this dark side, there is also a sweetness to life in New Bussa. The idyllic countryside with its occasional bone-chilling harmattan wind is a healing balm after the noise and pollution typical of our crowded cities. Everywhere we went in the community, the simple laid-back lifestyle of the inhabitants contrasted sharply with the 'pressure-cooker' ways of living in urban areas so much so that crime seemed to be a stranger here.

But I continued to clutch my field camera out of fear of being snatched off me before my companions reminded me that, 'they don't do such things here.'

In the villages surrounding New Bussa such as Koro, Old and New Dogongeri as well as Pelengi, the people were very co-operative in our investigations. The community with their simple adobe buildings enjoyed uninterrupted supplies of water and electricity from the nearby Kainji dam. Made of mud, the houses had their earthen floors smeared with putrefying layers of fresh cow dung.

More cakes of cow dung could be seen drying on the walls to be used later as fuel against the evening meals. I was also told that the heaps of green leaves and grasses on top of the flat-roofed houses were for feeding the goats and cow since such greens are difficult to come by in the dry season.

Everywhere we went, we were greeted by the sights of happy but scantily-clad children, some of them sadly with shining skins and reddish watery eyes - telltale signs of early stages of river blindness. As for the adults, their skins were coarse, nodules usually on their foreheads and chest walls, not to talk of glassy visionless eyes which were again clear attestation of the ravages of onchocerciasis.

In the semi-darkness of the following morning, I decided to shake off the stiffness of the long journey far south from Ibadan as well as the aches of our hectic schedule by jogging. I therefore headed for the city centre. Almost out of the premises of the Institute of Fresh Water Fish Technology where we lodged, I ran into two men apparently poaching from some of the many *dogonyaro* trees that lined the premises. Confused and frightened by my sudden appearance, they dropped their booty and fled into the darkness but I did the civic thing. I greeted them. Outside the gate, everything was dim and strangely quiet as it seemed that everyone was still in bed. I thus took full possession of the road, coming in contact with only goats and the occasional guards returning from work.

As I jogged, the cool harmattan wind caressed my face as the fresh country air bathed my lungs. Suddenly, the voice of a muezzin crying out to the faithful blared out from a loud speaker in a roadside mosque. 'Don't let what is happening in the country depress you', it said. 'Leave everything to Allah'.

Back at the camp, I was awaited by the miff of my colleagues at my audacity for jogging in the dark in unfamiliar territory. 'You could have been mistakenly shot for an antelope' I heard Adelani complain.

On our last day in New Bussa, I followed Samson, the research assistant, to the Mayanra River, a tributary of the river Niger where he had gone to catch the larvae of the blackfly.

The river which was full of huge boulders of trees broke out in several places into beautiful frothing falls which unfortunately I was told are good breeding sites for the blackflies. Dotting the sides of the river in their squatting positions were washerwomen who used the boulders as their laundry tables. And while Samson hunted for his game, I contented myself with lolling at the

grassy riverbank enjoying the rare luxury of watching the day pass. It was a pleasure learning how the river made its rapids.

After lapping at the outer wall of the bank, the water from the river would then dash against the boulders on the left and then throw itself back against the right boulders to create huge falls which will then break into beautiful whitish froths that delight the eyes. Overhead, the chirping of birds added music to the peace and beauty of the moment. It was as that great American explorer, John Wesley Powell put it in 1869: 'The river rolls by us in silent majesty, the quiet of the camp is sweet; our joy is almost ecstasy'.

I squandered some time talking with one of the washermen, Ahmed, who hailed from Bama in Borno State. He has been in New Bussa for seven years and has not started to scratch. Kabiru on the other hand already has the 'elephant skin' appearance of onchocerciasis all over his body. A New Bussa born farmer, who had only come to the riverside to wash his clothes, the bucolic hard life left deep wrinkles on his work-scarred hands which gave him the appearance of being much older than his forty years. In the place where his right eye should have been was a glassy mass of visionless tissue - a final testimony to the dreadful river blindness.

But it was time to go and I reluctantly dragged myself away from the bewitching river sights despite all its depressing effects of river blindness. I took one more glance at the dancing river and the surrounding radiant plains that seemed to laugh with delight in the day's waning light. As we waved at Ahmed who watched us depart from the riverside, he asked, 'Are you coming back?'.

To which we replied 'Yes'.

Faintly through the rising breezes, he asked again, 'How long?'. And we whistled back, 'It won't be long'. **LGR**