

THE TEDIOUS WALK TO AND FROM SCHOOL – Sample Chapter

We got up early on a typical school day. The first task for the day was to walk to the Nwi River, about a mile away to fetch water for the home. The water was collected in plastic or aluminium buckets of various sizes, each capable of holding between five to ten litres of water. We carried the load on our heads.

On a typical day we undertook two to three trips. In the rainy season, when there was usually sufficient supply of water at home, we were spared that daily early morning routine.

When time permitted, we did have a proper bath; if, on the other hand, we were hard-pressed for time, we washed only our heads, our armpits and both legs from the knee downwards. Next, we hastily ate our breakfast, made up mainly of boiled plantains and stew.

It was customary for all children from Mpintimpi heading for school at Nyafoman to do so in a single group. The practice was for those who got ready first to go round the homes of the children to urge them to hurry up. There were times, though, when the group could not wait forever for one to be ready before heading for school.

Children as young as six years old, walking a distance of two miles to school - the mind boggles! And yet that was precisely the case. The bigger ones, those in the upper classes, kept an eye on the little ones as we journeyed on. We walked along the main road leading to Nkawkaw. Though traffic on it was sparse, we could still reckon with a few vehicles passing by in either direction as we journeyed on. The road was not tarred; beside that, it had potholes in several places. As a result, the vehicles could not travel with considerable speed. This allowed us sufficient time to 'park' ourselves along the fringes of the road long before the vehicles reached us.

In the dry season, the passing vehicles left considerable dust in their trails. That was a source of considerable irritation, not only because we were forced to inhale the dust but also because it resulted in our uniforms getting dirty. If the dust was a source of vexation, then the other factor in the equation, namely the rain, was less comforting. In the geographical region where we lived, it either rained or shined. If it poured down heavily in the morning long before we set out for school, we stayed away from school for that entire day. Usually, however, the rains did not come down early in the morning. Instead, it caught us by surprise just as we were heading for school, or returning home from school. In such situations, we were left with no other choice than to take an involuntary shower, for hardly any of us carried an umbrella. If by chance one of us was carrying a cutlass to be used to weed on his or her plot (more on the issue of plots later), we cut the broad leaves of a banana or plantain tree growing in the farms bordering the road and used them as improvised umbrellas.

Sometimes the problems brought by the rain were compounded by the passing vehicles! As I just pointed out, the road was not devoid of potholes. When it rained 'ponds' of water gathered in several places on the road so when the passing vehicles drove through them, they sent splashes of dirty water in all directions to soil our clothes. Some of the drivers left the impression on our minds that they just wanted to show the 'young academics' on the road who really was in charge of the roads, for they drove through 'pothole ponds' that, in our opinion, could have been avoided! Even if the vehicle passing by on a rainy day did not cause us problems, the mud caused by the rain did so by soiling our feet. Fortunately, there was a small stream a few hundred metres away from school so we headed there and cleaned our feet before reaching the school compound.

The fact that all of us, without any exception, walked barefooted to school brought with it its own peculiar problems. In the dry season, the scorching tropical sun heated the ground we were walking on. As we walked along, we could feel the burning sensation under our soles.

On some occasions, the driver of a vehicle pulled over and gave us a lift!

Those were very rare instances, though. In the first place, most of the vehicles that passed by were already filled to the last seat. Even if a vehicle boasted a few unoccupied seats, the fact that we usually walked in a group of not less than six pupils at a time might have dissuaded the driver from pulling to a stop and taking only a fraction along. It is not hard to imagine the consternation on the faces of those who were left behind!

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