

Farming Adventure

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“OK, let's go.” “We'll walk to my mother's farm” “Come on now, it takes about one hour and some more minutes to walk.” “We must go.”

“OK, I am ready.”

“But wait, first I must change my clothes”

“But, you said, ‘come on, let’s go!’”

So, just now we start.

The start of the farming day is about 6:00 AM, but it is now near 8:00AM. We are going because I want to see the farm and the mother said, “You can come.”

Walking through the village, “Mwashibukeni, mukwai” (“Good morning”); “Muli shani?” (“How are you?”).”Mwabuka shani?” (“How did you wake?”) Being greeted by everyone and returning greetings as well. It is difficult to be a stranger, among such warm welcomes.

After the village, we take a footpath through the bush. The shrubbery and grass was burned in August, and the rains are late this year. With little growth there is no grass or places for snakes to hide. Off to the side of the footpath, a tree loaded with small blue fruits, *fishameno*, the size of acorns, give a fresh taste and burst of energy.

Now the footpath reaches the red dirt road to Chipundu. People walk with loads in their arms and balanced on their head. Charcoal, wood, chickens, vegetables, and clothes are in the stacks. Some carry the same cargo on bicycles and in wheelbarrows and maybe carry pigs or goats. One wagon pulled by oxen carries a load of sugar cane and taxies people. After another 30 minutes of walking, we branch off into the bush, but it is a false start and we return to walk for five more minutes on the road. Then again, we walk through the out back with no apparent trail or sign, a seemingly aimless wandering. A variety of birds of different sizes and colors fly up from the underbrush and trees, announcing displeasure with us passing through their territory.

Presto! As if by magic, there is the mother, her two sisters and the Grandmother. Also count five boys and two girls, all less than ten years old and as young as 15-months, “helping” to make land ready. Mothers do the farming and must tend the children. Children do help some, can run errands, and certainly learn from experience. They also play a lot and can be a bit of distraction.

There is much labor by hand for land clearing and soil preparation in subsistence farming. Axes made of triangles of iron with short handles from tree-limbs are used for chopping trees and shrub. Trees, usually only 12 – 15-foot tall saplings from repeatedly cut over forests, are cut and land is burned during the dry season. By stacking cut trees, covering with leaves, covering all with mud, and then igniting a fire inside the overlaid stack, slow burning kilns for charcoal

(icibili camalasha) are molded. In a few days, when ready, the charcoal serves as a primary cooking and heating source for people.

After six months of no rain the ground becomes 'hard as concrete', the rains make the ground soft and suited to cultivate. Although the rains are late, there were some small rains this past week and cultivation begins.

Hoe, hoe, hoe. The hoes are heavy, made of large blades of flattened and sharpened steel with handles shaped from limbs of trees. They weigh several pounds each. The women and children, all barefoot, hoe at a constant pace, the children take many breaks to play and chase each other and explore surroundings. When a den for field mice (ntundu) is discovered, children dig, dig, dig following the burrow until the mouse is unearthed. This is a true delicacy for a people with limited protein selections. Once captured, the mouse is defended with great energy from all pilfering.

Again, "OK, Let's go."

Across and through the bush walking towards the escarpment, "This tract is for groundnuts, and see this is cassava. Here is where my mother will plant maize and beans." "Last year, here was squash."

"See, my stepfather is there, planting his maize. He collected maize at the market where people spilled when putting in small bags. He does not have fertilizer."

"What are these small round hills of soil?"

"That is for my grandfather to plant maize." "He plants 20 all around the hill and then one on the top in the middle, there."

Still walking through the bush, sometimes on a footpath and sometimes across broken ground and sometimes in just the bush. Spotting *misuku* trees beside and sometimes a short distance off the footpath, we pick up small round fruits from the ground, because then they are ripe and good to eat. On the tree they are bitter, like persimmons. And, they look like big persimmons. It is time for the *masuku*, a tasty local fruit. There is more seed than fruit. The fruits are not so many, because the rain is late and the fruits become ready and sweet with rain.

"Whose farm is this?" "Is it still your family?"

"No, I do not know whose this is."

"LOOK! Do you see it? Running up the mountainside?"

"Yes, there. Is it an antelope?"

"Yes, before my brother chased some wild pigs here. He was looking for them, now. But they are gone and that antelope was sleeping here. See the flat grass

bed?”

“Who cuts down all the big trees. Those lying there and there? Soon, there will be no trees here at all.” “Why do they cut them and leave them just there?”

“I don’t know.” “They clear land to plant.” “I do not know why the trees are cut.” “Sometimes they cut the tree to get caterpillars.”

Walking up the steep escarpment mountainside, which just here is rocky ground and boulders. Oh what a view at the top! Miles of rolling mountains and forest to the east and miles of forest plain to the west. Small thatch houses here and there across the distance. Checkered spaces where small farms are located. A thin brown scratch locates the dirt road.

Walking along in the bush, again sometimes on footpaths and sometimes across without a path an *akasangole* tree is spotted. Grapefruit and orange size yellow fruits, the shell is quite hard. Several sharp blows to a rock or trunk of a tree, breaks open to a tangy, juicy fruit with a citrus taste. This fruit, too, is mostly seed, Brazil nut size seeds. Twenty or more inside each fruit.

Walking some more now on a well trod path. This footpath is from Mwamfushi Village, six miles on the other side of the mountain. On this side here, I see Malashi and Kamwanya Villages with mud and thatch houses and some roofs of metal, then the township of Mpika. Now, slipping and sliding, the teenage boys running down the steep side of the mountain, leaping over boulders exposed by rains the path leads into the town past neighbors’ houses straight into the yard of the house where I stay.

Tomorrow, there will be another hike early in the morning to Mwamfushi in search of caterpillars.