

## Story: Mohamed of Gashaka



My name is Mohamed Danda Ladan and I am ten years old. I live in the village of Gashaka in the state of Taraba in the country of Nigeria - which is in Africa. My village is in the mountains on the edge of the game reserve Gashaka-Gumti. I live with my father, my mother, my father's second wife and my six brothers and sisters.

I am the eldest son. I have two elder sisters. One is fifteen and she doesn't live with us any more because she got married this year. The other, Afshatu, is thirteen and she is in charge of all the children in our family. She cooks all our food and does all our washing.

Everyone in our family has jobs to do. I get up very early and I go with Afshatu to the river to fetch water. When we get back, we have breakfast before we go to school. Breakfast is usually maize porridge. I sometimes cook breakfast if Afshatu is very busy with the other children, or pounding the maize into flour.

After breakfast we go to school at eight o'clock. The school has just opened in our village and it has twenty-two students. We have one teacher who is from our village. He went away to train to teach. The school was closed while he was gone. Our school has a grass roof and open sides. We don't have any walls or desks or chairs or any books yet, but the teacher has a blackboard and some chalk. We stay at school all morning and then have lunch. After lunch I go to the fields to work.

Farming is very important to our village. It is how we get food to eat and crops to sell at the market. Everyone is involved in farming. My jobs include weeding the crops and scaring away the birds and monkeys which come to steal the food. The baboons are the worst. They

are so greedy and there are so many of them, all the children are kept busy scaring them away.

I have other jobs as well. Twice a week, us children go onto the savannah to collect firewood, which we bring back and pile near the house. We need the wood to cook food and to stay warm in the cool evenings. One of my other jobs, which I really enjoy, is fishing in the river. I fish using a net which we make with cotton or nylon bought from Serti, our nearest town. I am also learning how to spear fish. Only men and boys fish in our village, which we bring back to cook. If we have a really good catch we smoke the fish to preserve it, but mainly we eat fresh fish.

Another time we have a lot of fun is when we drive the cane rats out of the sugar cane. Cane rats are pests. We go into the fields and beat the ground with sticks and shout to drive the rats out. I like lying in wait for the rats, ready to kill them as they run out. The cane rats are huge like rabbits - and they taste like rabbits, too. After we've killed them, we cook them in a stew.

Although I go to school, I still have lots of things to learn afterwards. I go out with the men on the savannah to learn how to choose trees which will make good handles for our farming tools. It's very important to choose trees which are resistant to termites. (Termites are insects which live on the insides of trees. They eat all the pulp inside the wood until it gets hollow and collapses.)

We need wood for lots of things, including building. One of the biggest jobs in the village is when a couple get married and build their own house and pit latrine everybody helps.

A pit latrine is a very clever kind of toilet. You dig an enormous hole - up to twenty feet deep - and then shore up the sides with termite-resistant wood. You then cover the hole, leaving just a little hole for the toilet.

I bet you are wondering how we keep the toilet clean. This is where we rely on maggots. Thousands of maggots live in the latrine. They eat the human waste so that it doesn't poison the ground.

At the end of the day, I go to Koranic school. Here, our prayer leader, the Imam, teaches us how to write the Koran, the holy book of Islam, in Arabic. (Arabic is a foreign language to us we speak Fulani.) We write in black ink on wooden boards. It is very important for Muslims to learn this holy book and I really enjoy the Koranic school. We all sit in a circle with a big fire to keep us warm and to see by.

This is the rhythm of our lives. We don't often leave the village, but I go once every two months to Serti with my mother and sister to sell our crops. I can carry about six kilos of guinea corn on my head. It is 18 miles to Serti, and it takes about five hours to walk there.

On the way, we have to cross two rivers - the Gam and the Cam-Cam. In the wet season, we use a canoe



**A typical tourist chalet in the park.**

to paddle across - in the dry season, we just wade across. There used to be a bridge, but it fell down and we haven't got the money to repair it. In Serti we stay with relatives for a couple of days. Then we trek back with the things we have bought on our heads.

The only other time we might go to Serti is if someone is sick. We don't have a doctor in Gashaka, so if we get really sick, and our own medicines don't work, we have to go to the hospital.

As well as being a farmer, my father is a game guard for the Gashaka-Gumti game reserve. His job is to patrol the reserve and protect the wild animals from hunters. He has a special green uniform and a gun. Sometimes he is away for two or three weeks at a time working. He also has to make sure the Fulani people, who have cattle, don't bring them into the reserve to graze. They often cut down the forest and set up illegal farms. If he finds them in the forest, he has to chase them out.

My father used to work in Selbe, another village, five and a half thousand feet up in the mountains - a twenty mile trek. I've never been there, but when Aishatu was seven, she used to trek up there with our mother to visit. One of my brothers and one sister got sick up there. They died because it was too far to get to the hospital. I'm glad we live in Gashaka now.

The money my father earns buys us the things we need that we can't grow ourselves. It buys us clothes and shoes, and salt and palm oil for cooking. We also buy paraffin to light our lamps to see by at night - because it gets dark at about 6.45pm all year round.

When he is not working as a game guard, my father has a lot of work to do on the farm. We don't have a tractor, so there is a lot of heavy work digging the soil to prepare it for the crops. We grow some of our crops on ridges, which are really hard work to build. This is work for men and women - it is too hard for children.

My father is a very good farmer and he sometimes experiments with new crops. This year he planted some

cocoa plants to see how they do. If he is successful, he will sell the cocoa in town so it can go to the factory to be made into chocolate. I've never had chocolate, but I'd like to try it.

In December, one of the jobs for the men in the village is burning off the grasses which have reached over seven feet high - otherwise we can't move about easily. Before burning, some of it is cut for making mats, thatching the roofs of our houses or for weaving into fences.

Sometimes I go into the forest with my father. Once, I saw a python! It was about twenty feet long and it lay on the ground curled up in a big circle. I was really scared, but pythons won't hurt you if you ignore them. There are lots of wild animals living in the forest. I've never seen hippos, but I know they like to play in the hippo pool.

Once a year, because we are Muslims, we observe Ramadan. This is when all the healthy adults fast (that means they don't eat or drink) between sunrise (at about 6.45am) and sunset (at about 6.45pm). Ramadan lasts for a whole month. It reminds us how lucky we are to have food and drink, and to remember



**Market day in Serti.**

how it feels to be hungry and thirsty.

Children don't have to fast, but when I am twelve, I will start practising by fasting just one or two days.

The best time of the year here is Eid, when we celebrate the end of Ramadan. Everyone gets new clothes and three days off work just for playing and celebrating. I like playing football with the other boys in the day. In the evening, we roast a sheep and have a big feast. Then everyone sings and plays music and dances. I am learning to play a drum.

If Eid is the best time of the year, then the worse time is when the Harmattan comes. The Harmattan is a dusty, dirty wind from the Sahara desert. It creates a huge cloud that blocks out the sun. This happens every December, January and February.

When I grow up, I want to be a teacher in the school. Aishatu wants to be a nurse. What do you want to be?