

My Daily Life with Takor

A Volunteer's Experience Living in Besongabang Village.

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Takor's invitation to stay in his house while my house is being prepared offered me a golden opportunity to understand village life on a daily basis. This can certainly help in our design of the local housing, taking into consideration how households use their spaces, both indoor and outdoor. I hereby describe my daily activities in detail

Takor's rented unit has two bedrooms and one living room. Living room has a TV, video player and stereo, with beautifully decorated sofas. There is also a dining table with four beautiful chairs. Each of us occupies one room in his house. The house is separated by a wooden door and a cloth. Takor did not have the habit of closing the door, but the cloth is screening the view from outside. People also like curtains (Implication: they like using cloth to separate spaces, perhaps because they have the habit of leaving the door open for ventilation and natural light)



Early in the morning, when I wake up, I move to the front porch, which is facing the compound courtyard. There are usually two black buckets (see picture below)



on the front porch, filled with water most of the time. I am using water from this bucket to brush my teeth and wash my face. I take water from the bucket using a cup-sized plastic container. (I do not get to see myself in a mirror.)

If I would like to take a bath (they usually do it twice both in the morning and evening), I would change into my sarong, carry only one of these buckets, my plastic container, and set off to the rows of toilets about 50 meters away. See picture below. I always spilled much of my water during my trip.



I have only access to two of the doors there. They are locked. One of the doors I have access to, is a bathing room with nothing but a small hole in the middle with sloping floor towards it. And the other door is the pit latrine which people only use to defecate. There are always a few flies (not many) when I am using the toilet. Men are seen urinating everywhere. Women are more discreet and hence cannot be seen but they are known to do it in the bush as well. **(Implication: people already have the habit of urinating and defecating in different places.)** People also take a bath in a structure like the next picture.



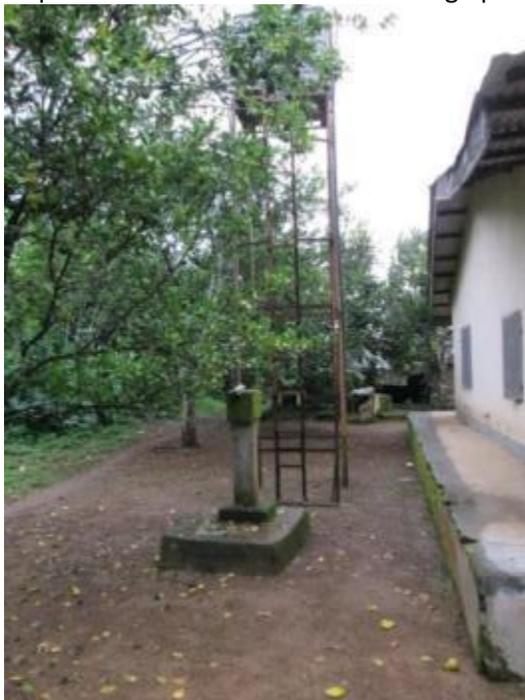
It is located near the toilet and bathroom. The road to toilet is muddy and slippery during the rainy season. I slipped once into the mud. There is no lighting structure whatsoever during the night. A torch is essential for me, but Takor seems to be able to see things clearly in complete darkness. Some people

also have the habit of urinating in a bucket in the middle of the night, especially during rainy season, and pour them away during the day time.

When coming back from my bathing and toilet trip, there is always dirt sticking onto my feet and around the bottom parts of my legs which are exposed. Ideally I would like to wash my feet before going into the house but water is not available at all times especially in the evening and after bathing. It felt troublesome to fetch water merely to clean one's feet. As a result, it is also difficult to keep the indoors dirt free (For those with outdoor toilets and bathroom, a water bucket exclusively for washing feet might be essential).

After taking a bath, I would usually wash my clothes again in the front porch. **(Implication: a lot of water related activities are carried on outdoors, this can affect the design of outdoor spaces and water storage location)**. To wash my clothes I usually use two buckets of water. I would pour some water on my clothes to wet them, and then soap and brush them. After wetting, soaping and brushing my clothes, I would squeeze the clothes to discard the soap water, before rinsing them in the remaining water from the first bucket. Then I would rinse them again in the second bucket of water before hanging them up, also in the same front porch. We have only two buckets. If we had three, I would prefer to split the second bucket of water into half, and rinse the clothes for one more time.

To fill up these buckets after bath or laundry, I can either get a key to have access to a pipe system, from groundwater pumped up to an elevated storage tank, or I can draw water myself from the well. I have done both. The former needs no pulling of water from inside the well up but is located 20 steps further away than the well. The well requires pulling up of water using a bucket. As a girl having grown up in the city with unsatisfactory physical strength, I prefer the latter, as carrying water for an extra 20 steps require a lot of effort from me. Pulling up water from the well on the other hand, is affordable by me.





I would then take water stored in bottles in Takor's house (which is from the spring, according to him), and boil it for safe drinking. Takor does not boil it and drinks it straight away. In Takor's kitchen, there is a 20 litre white bucket filled with rainwater, exclusively for cooking. After boiling water, I might prepare breakfast together with Takor. Takor's kitchen has one rack to store food and utensils, one cabinet on which a gas stove is placed on. There are no preparing tables whatsoever. Usually we have to do preparation on the floor such as cutting of bread and vegetables on the floor. The floor is uneven ground, so water can accumulate and cannot flow away. Takor does all cutting using his two hands, without cutting boards or other tools. He has a hand powered grinding machine to mill some food such as melon. As there is no table, it is common to place dishes with food on the floor (**implication: design can improve hygienic condition**) There is a big window for ventilation.





We wash dishes once in a day. Takor will bring in a bucket (see picture of black bucket above) of water, and make some soap water in a big pot. He then used a sponge to clean plates using the soap water. After brushing the plates, he will rinse the plates with the soap water, and then put into another container with clean water, then he rinsed the plates and put it back to clean rack for drying. He can wash a day's dishes with less than a bucket of water (Implication: to prevent water from spilling and accumulating on the ground, perhaps a design for washing dishes where we can drain water away into a wastewater bucket would be nice)

After cooking, we just sit on the stools inside the kitchen and eat. It is rather warm even during the rainy season. There is no eating together time. Visitors come and eat and go. I am asked to eat anytime I want, and he does the same. Food is almost always available in the kitchen, as they always cook more for visitors that might visit. Feeding each other is common in the village. (Implication: dining hall is not nearly as important as kitchen in daily lives as eating and socializing space, but former is needed when receiving important guests or on special occasions)

As for Takor's neighbours, most of them are using firewood so they often eat at the veranda of their houses. Some of them also grind food using some tables available at the veranda instead of inside the kitchen (There is no preparation surface in the kitchen and Takor uses a stool when grinding). They usually wash plates in the morning in front of their houses using buckets with water.

During my stay in the village, I regularly visit three women whose firewood I was weighing. They regularly fed me inside or in front of a kitchen, usually on a stool. My new neighbour however, only fed me inside their house. The house is on dirt floor. They have a big water container inside their living room and a drainage hole in the middle of the room, where they usually disposed their used water.

People usually eat twice a day, in the morning before visiting their farm and in the evening at around 3 or 4pm. People also usually shower in late evening or night. At night, they will watch TV or movies in the living room if there is electricity. People really like music and they can be playing it till late night and since early morning.

Number of buckets of water for myself

1 bucket – personal hygiene such as brushing teeth, washing face, etc.

1 bucket – bath

2 bucket – laundry

1 bucket – dishes

So I need 6 buckets of water just for myself, excluding cleaning, drinking and cooking.

The three water bucket system seems useful in to be introduced into kitchen, and veranda. As only taking bath really takes place in the bathroom, I am not sure we should introduce the three bucket system there. I also think a drainage system suggested by Cary to drain away all used water into the wastewater bucket would be useful.

My bedroom

I am living in a bedroom of my own in Takor's house. I do not have a mosquito net so I have to close the window usually by 3 or 4pm in the afternoon to avoid mosquitoes. The room will become totally dark when there is no electricity. There is no fly screen or reinforced steels in Takor's windows and I am advised to keep my valuables away from the windows. Some very tiny wood pieces will constantly fall from the ceiling (made of plywood) onto my bed, laptop and all over. It is difficult to keep my bed dirt free. At night, insects are common and can be loud and noisy, especially if there is food in the room. (I have now moved into my own house. In contrast, my new house has no insect problem even when there is food present. I cover my food well, and I use insect sprays regularly.)

Describing cooking process of one African dish

I wish to describe the process of cooking sweet bitter leaves (a common vegetable dish in Cameroon).



First we pluck the leaves from the hard stem with hands, and slice them into very small pieces. Takor was doing this using both his hands without a cutting board or table so it took a long time, as we were preparing a very large amount (**Implication: a space for food preparation will improve hygiene and convenience**). After that, Takor squashed the leaves to discard the bitter taste, and then rinsed it with rainwater specially stored for cooking. After rinsing each time, Takor brought the water outside the compound to throw. Back and forth as such a few times. (**Implication: waste water bucket or drainage in kitchen seems useful**).

After that he picked up some salty dried fish, removed all the bones and boiled them in water. When the water is simmering, he added seasoning, salt and then onions in it. Then he ground some melon using a grinder, before adding them into the fish. Subsequently he added the sliced bitter leaves, and cooked them. At last, he added some oil. These are all achieved on a gas stove.

He also boiled some ripe plantain, to go with the vegetables. Other food I have consumed in Takor's place include plantain and stew, spaghetti with sardine and egg, rice with stew, omelette. Boiling, frying and stir frying are common. Cary would have the video for preparation of fufu, which is more time-consuming and therefore not preferred by a bachelor like Takor.

Other remarks

Spaces are generally very dark here. I would personally appreciate improved lightning. But there are restrictions in opening windows due to bugs problems and security reason. Fly screen and reinforcing steel are used as a solution in some houses.

I would also appreciate storage of water in kitchen, veranda and bathroom as I find it difficult to carry myself the bucket of water everywhere. For transporting purpose, I would appreciate a container of smaller sizes with lids, for me to carry water from source to fill up the different storage containers around the house.