

LIVING WITH WATER SCARCITY

A TALE FROM AFRICA

SOPHIE SALFFNER

Sophie Salffner has spent six months in Nigeria doing linguistic fieldwork. She never lived a day without water, but learnt how to manage it in a different way. In this short article, Sophie describes her experience in the world of water scarcity, far away from home and far away from the luxurious daily showers and running tap water of her home country Germany.

I will start by explaining a little about the village I was in. It is called Ikakumo, and it is situated in Southwest Nigeria, in the Northeastern corner of Ondo State. In terms of infrastructure, there is electricity but like everywhere else in Nigeria this resource is never stable and there are power cuts every day. There is also an asphalt road leading to the village, although this road ends shortly after one passes the village. Yet mini cabs come to the village a few times every day, allowing the inhabitants a means of transportation whenever they need it.

Open drainage for waste and rainwater can be found on both sides of the road, though the village lacks an elaborated canalisation system.

It has a market, two primary schools, a secondary school, a number of churches, two mosques, and a very basic health centre and dispensary (like a little chemist) but they do not have trained medical staff. I would guess that there are around 1,000 to 1,500 people living in the village, with more people living in settlements in the bush.

There are a number of water sources. The farthest is the Osse River, which you will probably find on an average sized Nigerian map. It is about six kilometres down the road and that is where people go, for example, to wash and clean the melon seeds from their farms. Then there are various little streams and ponds where people fetch water for drinking. These are between one and three kilometres away from the village. Fetching water is a job for the women and girls, but if there are not enough girls in the house the boys also have to come along. They go with bowls, buckets and jerry cans. The size of these depends on the person carrying them. Usually it varies between half-filled five-litre buckets for the smallest five-year old to big thirty-litre bowls for the women. When they

reach the pond, everyone takes off their shoes as a matter of hygiene. The water is scooped out with little plastic bowls (metal is not allowed) and poured into the cans and buckets.

During the rainy season there is enough water to go around for everyone, but at the height of the dry season, which is around February and March, you might see queues of people waiting for the pond to refill. The water itself is slightly greenish brown, and people put something they call *alaun* in it, so that the particles settle. The water becomes clear then, but there may still be bacteria in it.

The Fulani, a nomadic people who keep cattle, also use the streams and the rivers to provide water for their cows. The animals are not allowed to use the drinking water ponds, and some local villagers do not even like it when they use the smaller streams. This is therefore a point of conflict between the nomadic Fulani and the settled villagers.

In Ikakumo villagers have various wells for fetching washing and cooking water, and there are around five functioning UNDP sponsored boreholes too. The wells are between five to seven metres deep, and everybody draws water from them with little five-litre buckets held on ropes, which are then emptied into bigger buckets and bowls and taken into the house. The boreholes are about thirty-five metres deep and have pumps. It is the children's job to stand there, pump away and fill all the buckets, and from what I could see they have a lot of fun doing that. The wells and boreholes are covered and locked. There are usually one or two respectable families in the neigh-

bourhood who are the guardians of the key. The boreholes, for example, are usually opened in the morning and then again between three and seven in the afternoon. People actually queue up around that time, and if you drive through some of the villages you will see a long and very straight line of buckets in front of the borehole, up to thirty metres long. That image was always funny to see! The borehole water is of drinkable quality and it does not need to be treated before use.

Regarding toilets, some people urinate wherever they are in the village, especially the children and the men, but also some of the women. For faeces people will either use the bushes by the side of the road or use the latrines at the back of some houses.

FEATURE-STORIES

WATER PROVERBS

“ Dirty water cannot be washed (Togo). ”

“ Only a fool tests the depth of the water with both feet (Mali). ”

“ Every course of water has its source (Zulu). ”

These are basically pits with a hole where people can squat and do their business. The latrines do not use water for flushing, which is an advantage.

To take showers, people grab a fifteen-litre bucket with water and a small bowl that they use to pour the water over themselves. Then they simply scrub themselves with soap and sponges and use the rest of the water to rinse it off.

I myself would get a five-litre pot of drinking water every day or every other day to use for drinking, brushing my teeth, washing some fruit and sometimes also for cooking.

I lived in a house with a proper toilet, but since there is no running water in the pipes, it needed to be flushed with a bucket. For that I would try to use the water that was left after washing my clothes so that I could save some water. However, I flushed the toilet more often than I washed my clothes, so sometimes I needed to use well water to flush it.

I also used between one and one and a half buckets of water every day for my showers (usually two a day, one in the morning and one at night).

I needed up to three buckets of water every week for washing my clothes, and I got by with about five litres a day or even less than that for washing dishes.

In my house I had three buckets: one of ten litres, one of eighteen litres, and another of twenty-five litres. When I was on my own in the house I could manage with this quantity for about two days, but when my host father was there we obviously needed more.

When it came to fetching water and re-filling my buckets I always wanted to do that myself. Partly because I wanted the exercise, but also because I didn't want to play the princess, and because I wanted to live my life there the way the people in the village lived it. However, most of the time that was not possible. Yoruba culture requires that a guest is well cared for and that children or anybody younger than oneself will help adults or anybody senior to them. Since I was obviously older than the children and also a guest, the children would literally fight over who could get my water or go to the borehole to fetch my drinking water. That took getting used to, but I would have insulted them if I had insisted on doing it myself.

In the last months there was some construction work going on. A company drilled a one hundred metre deep borehole to supply water to the village. Then they mounted big water tanks on a stand over the borehole and were to install a solar panel to power the pump that would bring up the water into the tanks

from where it would go through pipes throughout the village. People could then draw it from taps rather than manually. The work had started well before I came to the village, the pipes and taps were done while I was there, and then the project came to a sudden standstill. By the time I left the village the project had not been finished, there still was no solar panel in sight and it was not clear what had happened. What happened to the money for the solar panel was particularly unclear. As far as I know there were no explanations from the government institutions who were responsible for the project. I expect to see what has happened when I return there in September. Neighbouring villages have solar powered pumps though and they work fine.

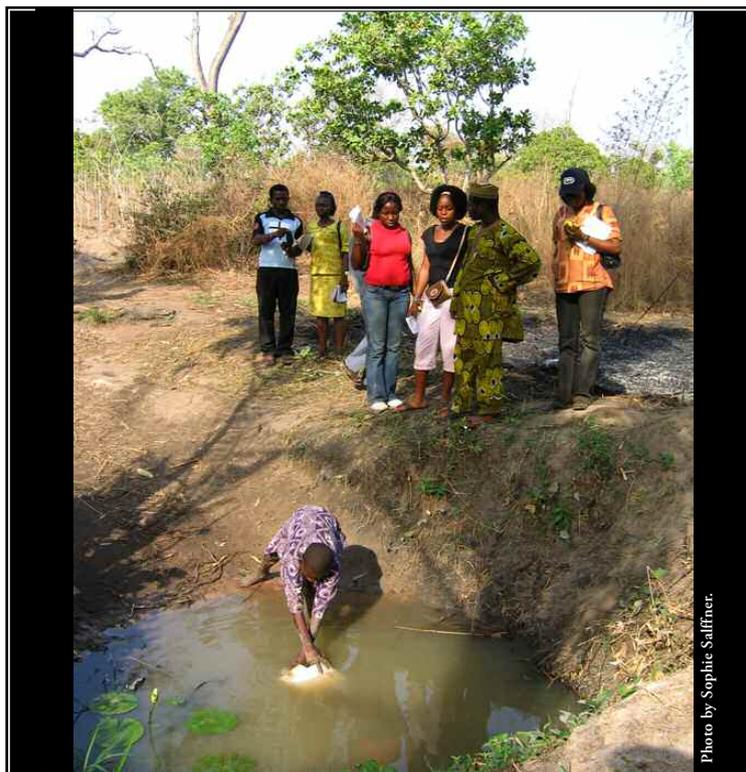


Photo by Sophie Saffner.

A few weeks before I left Nigeria I received an email from a friend who had also been doing field-work in the country and was about to go home to England. He finished off his email commenting that after having been in the field for six months he was now looking forward to a cup of real coffee, a cold beer and a hot shower. Did I agree? Most definitely when it came to the coffee. I drank coffee in Nigeria, but I never managed to get a decent cup of espresso. Regarding the beer I had to say that Nigeria has quite a few nice beers that I can really recommend. But about the hot shower? Well, having been brought up in Germany I never really

mind the lukewarm temperatures of the water in Nigeria. But it sure is a treat not to have to pour the water over myself, but to just stand under my shower with the water raining down on me. And it sure doesn't hurt to be able to just open the tap for my water either...



The picture above was taken near Ikakumo, Ondo State, Nigeria, at the end of January 2007. It shows one of the language consultants (Matthis, the man wearing green and yellow trousers and shirt) with students of linguistics from the University of Ibadan, who came for a short field trip to my village. After their work the language consultants took them for a walk around the village and the farms, where they collected more vocabulary on names of plants, crops and farming equipment. We ended up by the water pond that I mentioned in the story and you can see a little boy fetching water and all the university students standing around the pond looking at what is going on. Since most of them are city kids, their clothes (as you can see) and their life style is very different from that of the village. In fact, to many of them fetching water from the pond is just as alien to them as it is to me!