

Tell Me about an African Child in a Village

Mambu is only four years old, but every morning he walks over a mile to the spring in the forest. At the bottom of a deep valley, the water gushes clear and clean from the earth. Mambu balances a huge five gallon jug on his head as he winds his way down the hillside, fills the jug with water, and walks only a little more slowly on his way back up the hill. On a second trip, he brings a huge shallow pan full of the family dishes to be washed. He doesn't need a washcloth or soap. A wad of grass serves as a scrubber and a few wads of sand help to scour the dishes. After Mambu rinses them in the lake, he carries them back to the house and turns them upside down on a wooden rack to dry in the yard. The rest of the day, Mambu watches after his eighteen-month old brother, toting him around the village on his back. His mother then goes to the forest to gather food and firewood, carrying a newborn on her back. His father goes hunting and trapping and makes repairs to the thatch roof of their simple mud home.

Mambu also helps supplement the family diet by picking giant mushrooms in the early morning. When he pulls them up straight out of the damp ground, they have a long underground stem attached. Sometimes the top is as big as a pizza! He also catches all kinds of insects, grubs and caterpillars to add protein to the family diet. Mambu's favorite is termites. When they are swarming, he loves to catch them in mid-air and pop them into his mouth live. Yum! The other insects are given to his mother to add to the sauces she makes so well. Sometimes Mambu helps shuck peanuts or mantete (gourd seeds) and smash them for sauces.



I hope you enjoy reading about my little brother, Mambu. There are ten children in our family. Mambu is the youngest.

Mambu scampers around barefoot most of the time. The sand is warm and feels good, but tiny insects infect the ground, especially where the animals leave their droppings. So every few days, Mambu's father digs parasites out of his feet with a razor blade, disinfecting the wound with a dag of kerosene. Mambu wears simple shorts and sometimes a shirt, made by his mother.

Mambu hopes his parents may find the money to send him to school next year. His parents do not know how to read. When they are asked to sign documents, they rub their thumb with ink and put their print on the paper. Mambu wants to learn to read. He has heard his parents talking. They hope to send most of their six boys to school somehow. The four girls will have to help their mother feed the family. There are no books in Mambu's home. Neither he nor any of his brothers or sisters have ever even held a book. Yet one of the older brothers is learning to read in school, by reciting words as the teachers write them on the blackboard.

There is very little furniture in Mambu's home. His parents share a bed with the two babies. All the other children share a single bed made from bamboo. Their mother made a mattress by sewing old pieces of cloth together like a quilt and then stuffing it with dry grass. The children lay on the bed like logs lined up. There is not much room to turn, but being close together does help keep Mambu warm and make him feel secure. There is no table or chairs.

The family eats outside, squatting large dishes placed on the ground. Mambu's father eats with some of the other men. His mother eats with some of the other women, and the children eat together. First the father is served. Then the women. Finally the children. Of course the best food is always gone before it gets to the children. Mambu gets very little meat to eat, maybe only once or twice a year, but he loves the tasty insects, and gets those almost every day. His food is almost always "luku", a heavy paste made from ground cassava flour. He and the other children share a big bowl, pinching off chunks of it and dipping it in a sauce. Usually the sauce is a bit different every day. Only toward the end of the dry season—in late July—does he eat his luku with little or no sauce. At that time of year, everything is dried up. Nothing green is left, and the insects are nearly gone. Mambu's mother always dries some greens and stuffs them in big burlap bags for the dry season. If these run out before the rains come, the family can become very hungry.

Mambu's family attends church, and Mambu can sing several of the lively African tunes, but often the children are asked to leave before any teaching is given, to make room for the adults to come in. Mambu has heard that some other villages have started Sunday schools. When Sunday school comes to his village, he is planning to be one of the first ones there!

(Note—Mambu is a common Congolese name, meaning "problem" or "a big deal needing special attention." His story is a composite of common situations we have observed repeatedly. Children's lives vary greatly in Africa, just as they do in America. Mambu's story centers on village life in the interior of the DR Congo. The picture accompanying the story is an unidentified child from ECM's file of thousands of pictures we have taken in Africa.