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In Africa

by *Kathryn Bain*

Home Economics Freshman

THE beautiful African girl who attends boarding school has large hips, long straight hair, very black skin, pierced ears, and orange tinted fingernails, according to Miss Ethel Brooks, graduate student in mathematics at Iowa State.

Miss Brooks has spent the last two years teaching mathematics at Harford Girls' School, a mission school in Moyambe, Sierre Leone, Africa. She is now on a nine-months furlough from this job as one of four American teachers at the Evangelical United Brethren school, the only high school for girls in the protectorate of Sierre Leone.

The Harford school-girl sleeps in a large room which is divided into three sections, fifteen girls in each section. A locker is provided for her belongings. She may travel as far as one hundred miles to go home on holidays and between quarters.

African foods and nutrition

The African girl learns to cook in an iron pot with three legs resting on three stones, around which the fire is built. Most Africans use home-made wooden cooking utensils and the standard equipment consists of a spoon, and a large and small spatula. Three meals a day are eaten at the school, although many of the natives do not eat more than one meal a day. This meal of rice is eaten just before retiring at night.

"That is the sort of thing we try to teach against at school," says Miss Brooks. "We try to teach good nutrition." For breakfast the girl at school will eat tea and bread. Her other two meals will consist solely of rice, covered with some type of stew. "We try to vary the stew to provide a balanced diet," Miss Brooks commented. "The girls will not eat fruit with their meals, but they, like other native Africans, do eat much fruit between meals."

Sews without pattern

At the school a girl learns to sew without a pattern, for no patterns are available. The dresses she makes resemble American and European dresses. She also wears a dress which consists of a long wrap-around

skirt, and a short, full blouse worn outside the skirt. This type of dress is made by the native men, who do the sewing and tailoring, says the missionary.

Long hair desired

An African girl has definite standards of beauty, and she has certain methods to attain this beauty. A beautiful African girl has long hair. Since the hair of most Africans does not grow very fast, either because of poor nutrition or because of the climate, long hair is envied by the girls. The African girl "threads" her hair to try to remove the kinks. This is done by taking small locks of hair and winding them very tightly with thread.

Hips an asset

The blacker her skin is and the larger her hips are, the more beautiful she is considered to be. An African girl even wears strings of beads around her hips to make them seem larger. Each girl's ears are pierced when she is very young, and she wears earrings constantly.

Several natural "beauty aids" are used by an African girl. She has a "compact" which is a small gourd-shaped container for "tira," a substance obtained from the ground which is used to make the eyelids gleam. A girl polishes her fingernails by cooking the leaves of a certain tree and placing them on her fingernails long enough to leave an orange-colored stain.

Activities at Harford include Girl Guide, Girls' Guild, attendance at a Friday night Play Night featuring special entertainment, and church attendance with the school as a body. There are no boy-girl relationships while a girl is in school. The boys' school is thirty miles distant.

Bride at ten

An African girl may marry when she is ten years old. She usually has little say in the matter, for her husband-to-be agrees with her father to pay a certain sum for her. A man may have as many wives as he wants. In fact, says Miss Brooks, a man's wealth is often measured by the number of wives he has. A chief may have thirty wives.

After a girl is married, she may be expected to take care of the farm, for farming is done by the women. When her children arrive, she may not raise them herself, but might send them to be raised by relatives. She is afraid that she and her husband will not be severe enough with them. "There is outstanding respect for mothers in that country," says Miss Brooks. "The easiest way to insult someone is to say something against his mother."

"In Africa, there are definitely the educated and the uneducated people," states Miss Brooks. "As the people have acquired education, they have tended to adopt European dress and habits. They have shown they can be educated, yet still keep some of the unique traits of their culture."