



**PHILIP**

**EMEAGWALI**

**And The Internet**

**Chapter 3—Primary School**



At age four, I spent my entire days playing and fighting with the older boys in my compound in Sapele, Nigeria. Those boys were bigger and would gang up and beat me up. They bullied me whenever I stepped outside to play. Our compound, or open playground, was theirs. I was ashamed and afraid to leave my house. My father was angry that I was not allowed to play outside. He was angry when he saw me cry whenever I was beaten. He taught me to fight back by biting. Once I bit the first bully, the rest fled and refused to play with me. The mere sight of me made those big bullies cry aloud in terror and run inside their houses and grab their mothers by her *lappa* (gown, apron string), crying: “He’ll bite me! He’ll bite me!!”



Emeagwali's childhood compound, from 1958 to 1962. Yoruba Road, Sapele, Nigeria. (Photo taken on November 29, 2000)

Emeagwali started doing extra school homework when he was five years old. By the time he was eight, that homework helped him progress from the bottom of his first grade class to the top of his fourth grade class. His favorite subjects were math and science. Emeagwali had more math books than other kids in his school.

I remember my last day in first grade. It was in December, 1960, and the teacher was Mrs. Maria Mkpe. That afternoon, the teacher asked each student to step forward and receive his or her final report card. When the first in class position was called, everybody clapped their hands as he proudly stepped forward. The second stepped forward and there was another clap of hands.

I was the last to pick up his report card. It was the third time that I came last, or first from behind. As the teacher handed me my report card, she said: "You'll repeat Primary One with me."

At age five, we made our own telephone toy. It was a long black thread attached to two match boxes. I would whisper into one like a mouth piece:

“Can you hear me?”

“Yes, I can.”

I cried in joy and amazement when the receiver repeated what I whispered.



A street in Sapele, Nigeria similar to the one Emeagwali lived in the late 1950s. (Photo taken in 2009)



A street scene in Sapele, Nigeria (Photo taken in 2009)

At age seven, the Emeagwali family moved to Uromi, Nigeria. In the daytime, the boys played a game of touch-and-run. At night, the boys and girls got together for a moonlight game of hide-and-peek.



Sometimes, their mothers would tell them scary folktales about evil witches, ghosts, and mami-wata (mermaids).

In 1963, I joined my fourth grade classmates at Saint Anthony's Primary School, Uromi, running towards a long, open pit and somersaulting into it, hopefully, landing on our feet. During recess, I become part of a three-boy grasshoper chasing team that often returned to class 15 minutes late. Our teacher gave us two lashes on our buttocks for being late.



A school similar to Saint Anthony's Primary School in Uromi (Nigeria) that Emeagwali attended in 1962-63. (Photo taken in about 2012)



In 1964, Philip and his siblings lived in Agbor (Nigeria). He was then ten years old and the oldest of then six children. All six children slept on the same mat and they had their dinners while

seating on the floor. My mother cooked in an *ugbugba* or a clay pot over open fire. Breakfast could be boiled yam and palm oil. Lunch and dinner were *garri*, or boiled cassava, with one of our favorite soups, such as egusi. I did my practical chemistry with Mama.



Philip learned how to cook Egusi soup and pound *akpu* (cassava fufu) with a wooden mortar and pestle. Their Sunday dinner was rice and stew.



The Emeagwali family lived along Gbenoba Road, Agbor (Nigeria). It was very hilly, narrow, and dusty. That's where Philip



learned to ride a bicycle at the age of nine.

We didn't have a children's bicycle and my feet would not touch the pedals. I learned by striding across the bar of my father's Raleigh bicycle in monkey style.



A 1960s Raleigh bicycle poster in Africa.