

Brush, brush, brush, yet the dust remains

Michael Holman discovers some purpose in an old woman's seemingly futile, mundane and monotonous activity

She no done come." The old lady with a home-made brush of grass and twigs paused in her work. I must have looked puzzled.

"She no done come," she repeated.

As she went back to her task, I settled down to wait for my accreditation, and as I waited, I watched.

Brush, brush, brush, vigorously brushing carpets so ingrained with dust that the pattern is barely discernible. And so trodden in over the years that the pile is almost worn smooth.

Brush, brush, brush.

The information ministry is housed in what is called a prefab – short for prefabricated – built from a kit of frame and panels

designed to be erected quickly, and to have a comparatively short life.

I suspect it was built in the 1950s. It has that colonial works' department look and feel to it, with its cement verandah and vestiges of shrubbery.

Inside, the style is different. Offices built of wood panels with a glossy dark veneer have been added, seemingly at random, carving out space by dividing and subdividing the original rooms.

The passages now are dark and narrow, and partially blocked by the detritus of decades – chairs with missing legs, rickety tables, dusty files, broken fans, old blinds, which no one has the authority or initiative to repair, sell, or simply throw out.

Brush, brush, brush.

I wondered whether the old lady brushes when no one is present. Then I remembered that when I first entered the office, I had heard the rasp of her brush from behind one of the office doors.

She emerged when she heard my knock on a nearby office, distracted from her task, or from her reverie, by my query: "Has the press officer arrived?"

"She no done come."

It was after nine in the morning.

I sit, and wait, and watch, as the old lady steadily works her way down the passage.

At first I think that her work is pointless. Whatever is brushed is not collected. There is no dustpan in sight. She also carries a bundle

of rags. Every now and then she pauses, and takes the bundle, and passes it over the surface of the desk, the arm of the chair, the top of the filing cabinet. My interest flags, and I look around the office in which I am sitting.

The gap in the ceiling, where a panel has dropped out, reveals the timber frame. The curtains of both the external window and an internal window into the passage are drawn, and yellowing netting is pulled across the curtains.

An air conditioner labours and wheezes, but I can still hear the rasp, rasp, rasp, as the old lady goes about her business.

I count the calendars, three on the wall, two on the filing cabinet, and read the exhortations on the

wall. "The Lord will Perfect that Which Concerneth Me", and "Perfect" is outlined in a rectangular box.

"The Lord will satisfy me with long life and prosperity".

"God is my provider".

The fridge is marked with the letters and figures EPD/DIST/04/01.

And a picture of General Sani Abacha is above the desk.

Dust is still being moved around the carpet, but I look again, and now I see a purpose. I look at where she has been, and then at the carpet she has yet to reach.

And then it dawns on me, for you can tell it has been swept.

It's like raking a bunker, eliminating the crater made in the sand

by the ball and the stroke that propels it on to the green, and the footsteps of the golfer.

But the sand remains.

The official arrives, and the process is painless. I am accredited.

As I write up my notes, in the back of an air-conditioned Mercedes, a street urchin, leading an old blind beggar, approaches the window. He waves his hand to attract my attention.

I don't look up, and keep my eyes fixed on the screen. But I am aware of him as a blur, out of the corner of my eye.

And on the screen of my laptop computer, his supplicating hand casts a shadow, moving back and forth until the traffic clears, and the car pulls away.