

THE LOST BOY

Tales of a child soldier

Ayik Chut Deng
with Craig Henderson

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1

A DIFFERENT WORLD

‘When you were a baby you were dropped on your head,’ my darling mum will sometimes remind me. ‘You landed on a brick.’

I’m told that accidental tumble from the arms of my eldest sister Aguil left me with a depressed fracture of the skull – right in the middle of my forehead. It also left Mum in no doubt that this was the reason I was ‘different’ from other children in our tribe.

Unlike my brothers and sisters, and just about every other kid in our village, I was fascinated by things most people considered dangerous. As a boy I loved to play with scorpions; the bigger they were, the better. As soon as I’d catch one I’d secretly cut the venomous stinger from the tip of its tail and terrorise other children – either chase them with the disarmed bug or shove it under their noses. It was such a great game.

THE LOST BOY

I had no fear of snakes either and I could often be found bustling about in the endless grasslands of southern Sudan trying to catch them or generally harassing them with sticks. Bullies didn't scare me and I would always step in forcefully whenever I thought someone weaker was being pushed around. My mum said I was a cheeky, quick-tempered and fearless little boy. All the kids in the village saw it a different way. 'Ohh, that guy is crazy.'

As I grew a bit older, though, something came to our village that scared me as much as it did all the other people in my tribe. A war. Over time the conflict would teach me that some bullies have guns, grenades, tanks and jet bombers. I would discover that bullets are more lethal than any snakebite and no matter how fearless or different your mamma says you are, when bombs start raining down you run for your life like everybody else.

The country of my birth, the Central East-African nation of Sudan, had already been ravaged by a civil war that raged between 1955 and 1972. That was all before my time, though, and I was lucky to be born during a brief stretch of uneasy peace sometime around 1977. Although my early childhood memories were spared the horrors of conflict, Sudan's truce would prove to be short-lived; my battles awaited me but in the meantime I would have to face many other hardships, each one worse than being dropped on my head.

A DIFFERENT WORLD

Just like me, my dad had a childhood fascination with snakes; a character trait that would alter the path of his life. His name was Chut Deng Achouth, and he was born into the Ayual clan of the Dinka people in place called Wangulei, a village in the Twic region of southern Sudan. On top of being the largest ethnic group in southern Sudan, the Dinka have the distinction of being the tallest humans in Africa, and some are said to be owners of the blackest skin, too. My dad was no exception; as a boy I marvelled at the gigantic man who stood at the head of our family.

In spite of our towering presence, the Dinka have traditionally lived modest, uncomplicated and gentle lives in perfect harmony with nature. For many centuries we have raised cattle, farmed crops and sung our songs in simple grass hut villages along the fertile plains and swamplands that flank the White Nile as it whispers north towards the Sahara Desert and Egypt. The enormous artery of the river pulses through the heart of our existence, as it sustains the long-horned cows and bulls we dedicate our lives to raising and protecting.

Dinka must have a million songs that tell of our love for the majestic animals we call weng and the blessings they bring us: milk, status, joy and – on sacred occasions like weddings and in sacrifice to the gods – meat. In a commodity-free society, a herd of cattle is the Dinka's truest measure of wealth.

It was this beautiful, bucolic future that beckoned my father until the day he decided it would be a good idea to mess with an angry cobra.

THE LOST BOY

Dad was fourteen and apparently out taking care of cattle in the fields when he glimpsed the familiar twist of a serpent in the bush. True to form, he went after it but instead of him triumphantly digging the cobra from a hole in the dirt, the thing rounded on him and spat a stream of venom into his eye. By the next day Dad couldn't see properly out of his poisoned pupil and it only got worse.

Since there were no doctors in the village, Dad's parents sold some cows to pay for him to get hospital treatment at a place called Mading Bor. But by the time Dad finally arrived it was too late; he never saw out of that eye again.

After this brush with modern medicine, Dad could have simply returned to his tribal life among the cows and the crops but, despite being half-blind, he glimpsed a different future for himself: one brimming with more dazzling possibilities than the acquisition of cattle, wives and grass huts. Instead of heading home he travelled to Khartoum – the sprawling, low-built capital of Sudan nearly a thousand kilometres away in the arid north of the country.

Because northern Sudan – a largely desert region – had long been governed by Arabs, Islam had been practised there for centuries. In the lush arable south, however, Dinka clans worshipped animals as gods and also gave praise to a supreme creator called Nhailic – the god of the sky and the rain. Some Dinka even prayed to a deity called Jesus, the one the travelling white missionaries talked about. In time I would do so myself, but in my father's clan, God was a Nile eagle.

A DIFFERENT WORLD

Back then, only Muslims were permitted to attend school in the north, and Dad apparently had no problem turning his back on the eagle and converting to Islam. Suitably pious, he attended classes and studied medical sciences. Dad became what would probably be considered a nurse or a paramedic in the West and helped tend to patients in a government hospital in Khartoum. This made him an important man, particularly back in the tribe, where a formal education – let alone a profession – was practically unheard of. Everybody called my father ‘Dr Chut’.

In keeping with his new religion, Dad married an Arab Muslim woman. They had children and settled into family life in a run-down rented dwelling outside Khartoum. Although life in the big city seemed to suit him, Dad couldn’t ignore the strong pull of his tribal roots, which required him, as a proud Dinka man, to take a Dinka wife. Since Dinka men can marry as many women as they please – especially if they have a lot of cows to fatten their dowries – all Dad had to do was return to the tribal lands in the south to find a bride.

My mother, Achol Aguin Majok, was a shy and humble girl from the Dinka Twic ethnic group. As a member of the Awulian clan she worshipped the deadly puff adder and made daily offerings of oil and milk to honour it. She was given to Dr Chut and after they wed in a tribal ceremony, he took her back to Khartoum to live with his young Muslim family.

Mum was uneducated and couldn’t speak a word of Arabic, the universal language of Sudan, so she stayed

THE LOST BOY

home to cook and clean. Eventually Mum provided Dad with seven more kids: I arrived right in the middle of the brood, sandwiched between my big brother Aler and older sisters Aguil and Yar, and my little brothers, Deng and Garang and, finally, my baby sister Aker.

We didn't stay in Khartoum long enough for many clear memories to stay with me. When I was old enough to walk and talk, Dad was transferred to a new job in Juba, a much smaller town that served as the quasi capital of the less developed but infinitely more beautiful southern Sudan. His role at the local hospital may have earned Dad some respect but his higher station in life didn't translate into any great wealth. We were all crammed into a rented semi-permanent one-room hut. While our parents provided enough food to feed us, it often felt like there was only just enough to go around.

By the age of four or five I often found myself at the local garbage dump scavenging for food with a friend or two. It might sound depressing and disgusting but those forays into other people's filth brought moments of modest culinary awakening. The first time I tasted Coca-Cola, for instance, was via the dregs in a grime-covered bottle salvaged from a pile of trash in Juba. For a boy who was used to just milk and water it tasted like liquid sunshine.

More often than not we'd find bread or bits of fruit and vegetables that richer families had thrown out. We also discovered that clambering through mounds of rubbish could be as dangerous as it was nourishing. On one occasion I gashed my left calf so badly on a broken bottle that the

A DIFFERENT WORLD

huge flap of skin dangling off it had to be sewn back on – African-style, with no anaesthetic and me screaming as I wrapped my bony arms around my eyes.

Sometimes, more than just household waste would make its way to the dump. One day a friend and I came upon what at first looked like a rolled-up bag or blanket but, when I took a look inside, proved to be a man. He was sort of flat and he smelled awful. I didn't really know what to make of him at the time – after all, I was no older than five. When I look back today I feel desperately sorry for the soul who'd been so poorly regarded that someone likely murdered him and put him out with the garbage.

The dump encounter wasn't the first time I'd seen a dead body, either. One of my earliest memories is being at a Sunday market not far from our home. It was crowded with people selling food and wares when a commotion erupted: a fight between Mandari tribesmen and a rival ethnic group. People dived for cover and I ran as fast as I could. A moment later I saw a huge man with black ceremonial bands wrapped around his biceps lying motionless on his back in middle of the market. The smooth shaft of an arrow pointed skywards from his chest as if he'd been pinned to the earth like a bug on a table. I scurried away and hid. Later on I found out the bow and arrow is the weapon of choice among the Mandari.

About a year later, I saw death rear its head yet again. This time it was much closer to home. As a public servant, Dad had only been assigned to the hospital in Juba for a fixed term and when he was told he would have to transfer

THE LOST BOY

to another far-flung town, he point-blank refused to leave. That apparently caused a problem. The man who was supposed to take over his role, a guy who was from the Kakwa tribal group, was none too pleased. He wanted that job badly but Dad dug in. They argued angrily. The Kakwa man finally left, but not before warning Dad, 'I'll make sure only one of us has this job.'

A few days later the Kakwa man returned. Things appeared to have cooled and he offered Dad a cup of tea during a work break. His own cup just happened to spill onto the floor. Not long after drinking the tea, Dad started vomiting and having seizures. A doctor gave him some medication and told him to go home until he got better. Dad did as he was told, but back at home he blacked out in his chair and never regained consciousness.

Although there was no autopsy or toxicology report there was a strong suspicion that Dad had been poisoned. One of my uncles who helped bury him said that in death my dad's skin had turned a lurid shade of purple. Later on I found out poison is a Kakwa weapon of choice. Whatever the cause of death, my father was gone forever.

The year was 1983 and it was to be a turning point for me. Not only was it the year I was robbed of my dad at the age of six, it also heralded the start of the Second Sudanese Civil War – the catastrophic conflict that would ultimately reshape my country and, in the process, dramatically and permanently alter the lives of millions of South Sudanese people like me. Millions more would die.

As they buried my dad in Juba, however, to me there was

A DIFFERENT WORLD

still the illusion of peace in the south. Besides, something else big was about to happen to me – the start of my true Dinka life. As a widow with hungry children to care for, Mum had no choice but to return to Awulian, the village of her mother in the Twic region, about three hundred kilometres north of Juba. There, her relatives gave her some cows and land to farm, and almost overnight my chaotic years in the dangerous ramshackle cities came to an end and my life as a tribal Dinka boy burst into bloom. Instead of scaling rubbish heaps I stood naked on the earth and gazed contentedly across the lush, empty grasslands in the golden haze of an African sunset. Although I had lost my father, for the first time in my life I felt happy and contented. I was where I was always supposed to be. I had no idea a terrible storm was gathering just over the horizon.

‘Ahhh!’ The little boy yelped in fright and ran straight into his auntie’s arms, leaving me standing alone with a stingerless scorpion in my hand and laughing at my practical joke.

Yes, life in Awulian was very good. Generally speaking in Dinka culture the maternal side of the family treats children much more gently than the father’s side, whose job it is to toughen kids up. And so it was for me. Without my big brother Aleer and eldest sister Aguil, who’d stayed in the city to study, in Twic my mum and grandma, Duop, took care of the rest of us. A host of loving uncles and aunties helped them, happy to show us the tribal ways.

THE LOST BOY

It turned out I wasn't the only Dinka who liked to play practical jokes. When we first arrived, my newfound relatives offered me a meal of wala-wala – a millet flour staple of the Dinka diet – in a hollowed-out gourd that served as a bowl. I hungrily gobbled a few mouthfuls using my fingers before suddenly dropping it and reeling away in disgust. The thin layer of wala-wala had been carefully arranged to disguise the bowl's true contents – a pile of fresh cow shit.

'Welcome to the village, little town boy!' my relatives howled as they rolled about laughing.

That didn't stop me from slipping comfortably into tribal life. Compared to the city, the Dinka world was very beautiful and completely fulfilling, and it suited an energetic young boy like me perfectly. People worked hard in the tribe – we needed to in order to survive in a subsistence economy. On top of caring for the cattle herds the tribe had to weed and tend to their crops: mostly sorghum, wheat and a little corn. There was hunting and cooking to be done, cows to be milked and huts to be built and maintained, including luaks – massive grass domes used to house our cattle at night when the herds weren't grazing further afield.

Most projects were communal and everyone pitched in if someone needed help. Dinka commerce was a system of barter. There was no money, no shops, no running water, no machines and no electricity. We didn't even have clothes. Save for some ceremonial beads and a few skimpy adornments, our lives were lived entirely naked.

In the drier months, when the rainfall slowed and grass

A DIFFERENT WORLD

for the cattle grew sparse around the village, the men gathered their herds and made a several-weeks-long journey to fertile grazing land along the White Nile. Boys were allowed to go along and I always went with my uncles. It was a time I loved more than anything. We'd be gone for a month or so, caring for maybe one thousand head of cattle at a time, and we survived by hunting for deer, antelope and tiang, or fishing and spearing pythons in the mighty Nile. I loved it and I felt safe, most of the time.

Everything is hungry in Sudan so we had to take precautions against wild animals and stay on the lookout for danger. Just before the sun set each day all the children in the tribe would be gathered together and taken into the bush to have a shit – whether you had to go or not. This was to ensure no one was dragged away by a pack of hyenas. After a while, relieving myself at sunset became a habit.

Us kids also had a very important job in the tribe. Every morning we would help collect all the cow shit together, break it down and spread it out on the ground to dry out under the sun. In the late afternoon the dried dung would be gathered into big piles and set alight, sending up plumes of sweet-smelling smoke that settled over the camp like a huge misty blanket, helping keep the mosquitoes at bay. The next day we'd rub the powdery, peach-coloured ash from the burned shit onto our skin as an insect repellent, sun-block and natural antiseptic – an all-in-one treatment that had served the Dinka well for centuries.

I learned that cow piss was very useful, too, but more for reasons of fashion than practicality. Somewhere along

THE LOST BOY

the line some smart cookie had discovered the ammonia in cow urine could bleach our black hair and turn it a fetching shade of orange-red. All you had to do was stick your head under the hot gush of a pissing cow and chemistry would gradually do the rest. We sometimes rubbed dung ash into our urine-soaked locks to promote the bleaching process. After a week or so of repeating the treatment in our great outdoor salon, we'd be rewarded with funky red hair that was perpetually on-trend in Dinka culture. The women loved it.

Soon enough the rains would start again and we'd walk the herds back to the village on higher ground. The cattle always came first; everything we did and everywhere we went was about their wellbeing. We'd cover them in dung ash, too, polish their horns and adorn them with trinkets and tassels made of dried-out cows' tails. If we were grazing by the Nile we'd tie them to the ground at night. If we were in the village, we'd herd them into a luak for safe-keeping. The women and girls would milk them, treat any wounds and help deliver their calves.

Being Dinka was a lot of work but that's not to say there was no time for play.

If I wasn't harassing snakes and scorpions I was chasing and playing with my siblings, cousins and other children. Sometimes we'd start up a Dinka version of 'cops and robbers' using harmless homemade spears and pretend guns in mock battles. On other days our game of choice was a tribal take on 'mummies and daddies'. Fashioning little cattle herds out of clay, we'd arrange them in a make-believe

A DIFFERENT WORLD

village we scratched out in the dirt. We'd pretend to be married and the girls would harvest imaginary crops and cook while us boys discussed farming and looked after the pint-sized pottery cows.

Female Dinka didn't go hunting but as a young boy I was allowed to tag along with the older guys. I could usually be found scuttling around at their feet – especially if they managed to spear something big like an antelope. Since large kills were brought back and divided up to be shared among the different families, I'd make sure I was front and centre so I could be the one to take the meaty spoils assigned to the Chut family back to our home. My motivation wasn't greed, pride or impatience – I did it simply because I was devoted to my mum.

Ever since my father was killed I felt a strong urge to look after Mum as best I could. I was forever bringing her little treasures – cowhides to use as sleeping mats and pieces of animals to put in the family pot. In return Mum was always patient with me – maybe she was forever mindful of my head-first encounter with the brick back in Khartoum. She even sort of excused me the time I deliberately killed her god. I'd managed to corner a puff adder one day and for some reason I felt it necessary to burn it alive using sticks from the fire. Although I was punished, the penalty was light compared to what Dad would have dealt out, although he had himself been a renowned harasser of snakes.

Beyond raising cattle and having wives there were two pastimes the men in our village aspired to in order to make

THE LOST BOY

their mark. One was wrestling and the other was singing. I had my heart set on becoming a singer.

Songs are the history books of Dinka culture; they are how we chart our journeys, how we pass on knowledge, worship the gods, celebrate our victories, mourn lost loved ones, warn of dangers, introduce ourselves and declare our love for each other and the wonders of the world. We make up songs about anything that is worthy of attention or celebration. In my case, I really only wanted to sing songs about my beloved bull calf.

When my big sister Aguil was brought back to the village to be married our family received cows in exchange for her. One of the cows gave birth to a bull and that bull was given to me. He was my dearest possession and I fussed over him like he was a god. He was a beautiful animal, blessed with black and white markings and perfect white lips. Everybody knew how much I loved that bull so I was given the nickname Makerdit, which roughly translates to ‘Bull the great’. I wasted little time writing love songs about him. I can’t remember all the words but one verse stands out:

*I will polish his horns with dung ash,
His horns will shine bright in the sun,
Just like my girlfriend’s teeth . . .*

Only I didn’t have a girlfriend – I was too young for anything like that. But I did have that little bull and he meant the world to me. He also broke my heart. One day when we took the herd out to graze in the bush, my bull somehow wandered off and became stuck fast between

A DIFFERENT WORLD

two tree trunks. Normally hyenas would kill an animal trapped like that but when I found my beautiful pride and joy in the morning he didn't have a mark on him. He was dead all the same. I fell into a grief deeper than any pain I had ever felt before – even after losing my father. When Dad died I cried because Mum was crying; I think I was too young to properly process the enormity of that loss. Yet my sorrow at losing that baby bull would pale alongside the emotional torment I would soon have to face.

It wasn't unheard of for strangers to come into the tribal lands, and foreigners could readily be found in the cities. I was four or five when I first saw a white person; Mum and I were out in the street in Juba when a little boy with a mop of blond hair came and stood next to me. He must have been travelling with his parents. When he put his arm next to mine I couldn't quite believe what I was seeing. The contrast between black and white skin was mind-blowing to me and I had no idea what to make of it. Speechlessly I looked up at Mum in the hope she might be able to explain.

'It's all right,' she soothed. 'They're from a different world.'

Strangely, I obsessed over the boy's white skin. I was jealous of it and liked it far better than my own. Secretly I wished I could be a white person one day, too. There was something clean and magical about pale skin that intrigued me. A couple of years later I started to see a few more white people about the place. Two of them even came through our village on motorbikes, most likely adventurous tourists from the West. Some of the younger kids in the tribe were

THE LOST BOY

terrified by the sudden appearance of strange-looking white men riding noisy contraptions but not me. After all, I knew they were just creatures from a different world – nothing to be frightened of. The bikers managed to explain that they wanted to get their hands on some salt and cooking oil. Being the crazy one in our village, I volunteered to be their guide.

Before I knew it I was perched stark naked on the back of a motorbike and hurtling along a dirt track faster than I thought it was possible for a human to move. We even outran the rain that had been falling in the village. I held onto the white man for dear life and managed to direct him to the neighbouring village of another Dinka clan, about a twenty-minute ride away.

A market was on when we arrived and as the bikers bartered for some oil and salt all the little kids gathered around the bikes to stare at me. I knew right away what they were thinking: Who is this little black kid with the white men? And what is he doing on that motorbike? I couldn't help but feel that my pillion passenger heroics in the village that day would have provided good material for a song but I never went back to find out if anyone had written one.

When the bikers returned me to my own village they gave me a bag containing some fine brown powder and gestured that it was something I could eat. I tentatively put a bit on my tongue and was almost bowled over by the burst of warm sweetness that erupted in my mouth. I don't get quite that excited about it nowadays but any

A DIFFERENT WORLD

time I make a glass of Milo I remember that rainy day when I first tasted it – and the white bikers who brought it to me from a different world.

Not every visitor to our village came in search of adventure, oil and salt, though. Some came for blood.