

FATHER
of the
LOST
BOYS

A Memoir

Yuot A. Alaak



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Author's note

The events of this book occurred primarily during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005), but are more broadly reflective of Sudan's turbulent history. Myriad events over the past century have contributed to the conflict that still rages today. The creation of the country called Sudan, or the Sudan, which was arranged by the British in the second half of the twentieth century, led to a tragedy that produced thousands of heroes, and shattered the dreams of millions. It rendered tens of thousands of boys lost to their families. But it also produced a great man to lead them. A leader and a teacher, a father to these Lost Boys: my father, Mecak Ajang Alaak.¹

In a place that has endured so much conflict for so long, there are as many points of view as there are stories to be told. The story that follows is my story, and one I am lucky to have survived to tell. For readers who seek further historical background, my summarised account at the end of this book, 'Historical overview of conflict in the Sudan', provides a context for the story of the Lost Boys. It helps to show why there has always been marginalisation and conflict in the Sudan and why, even today, my beloved people are a displaced people.

¹ When Southerners converted to Christianity, they were asked to pick a Christian name from the Bible before being baptised. Many chose common names like John and Peter but Dad chose 'Meshach', which is spelt 'Mecak', as the Dinka alphabet has the sounds but not the letters for the Latin alphabet including 's' and 'h'. When he was baptised as a teenager, Mecak became Dad's official name, although no-one within the tribe calls him that. They still call him 'Ajang' as he has always been known.

Prologue

As the summer sun rises over Kongor, voices of joy come from the distance. The land is green and dotted with rain-filled ponds. It has poured overnight, as it has on the previous five nights. The voices get louder as more and more women emerge from their huts to join in the singing. Within hours, the family compound is full of women dancing and singing. The village resounds with voices synchronised in a smooth melody, pronouncing the arrival of a baby boy – the son of a chief. Standing tall and proud, Alaak Arinytung looks on. He knows it will be weeks before he can hold his newborn. The tradition of his people bars him. His mother, Akuol, stands beside him, her right arm wrapped around his shoulder. Fears of evil spirits and infection mean very few people will get to see the child for weeks.

Akuol walks to the hut and catches the eye of Abul, her daughter-in-law and the proud mother of the baby. Their faces break into broad, gentle smiles.

‘Congratulations,’ she says to Abul. ‘You have given us a handsome grandson. He will be a great wrestler and singer.’

As news spreads to neighbouring villages, more people come to congratulate Alaak on the birth of his son. A white bull is slaughtered and the village is joyous with celebration.

Weeks pass and Alaak becomes increasingly anxious to hold his son, but he maintains an outward calm. He knows his mother Akuol and his wife Abul are taking good care of the newborn boy.

Finally, the wait is over. Young men arrive in droves from the cattle camps. Girls wear colourful beads, faces covered in

red paint, singing and dancing. The elders arrive, shouting congratulations and words of encouragement as they wave their walking sticks high, aches and pains forgotten. For Abul, it is a proud moment. Her son is to be given a name and welcomed into the tribe. He is becoming a *Muonyjäñ*.² The excitement becomes electric. Bulls and goats are slaughtered to mark the occasion, as the voices of men and women, the young and the old, mingle in a rhythmic melody that threads its way into the surrounding bushes and beyond.

When Alaak arrives, he stands tall and proud, his spears glittering in the midday sunshine. His father, Yuot, stands beside him. As the circle of wellwishers tightens around the hut, Abul senses the moment is near. At any moment, Akuol will ask for the baby to be taken outside and presented to the tribe for the first time. Now Yuot bends down and crawls into the hut. He looks proudly at his grandson. He blesses the baby by spitting on his head – a common practice. Abul gently hands the baby to Yuot. Holding his grandson for the first time, his face breaks into a wide, bright smile. His white teeth glow in the light that filters into the grass-thatched hut.

Drums outside beat louder. The singing reaches fever pitch. The ground shakes as feet stomp. Excitement fills the air. Holding the baby carefully, Yuot crawls out of the hut and gets to his feet, then holds his grandson aloft.

The gathered clan members break into applause, their voices rising in jubilant song. As the singing begins to subside, Yuot speaks, still grinning. He congratulates Alaak and Abul for giving him a healthy, handsome grandson.

Raising his voice, he proclaims, 'I give each of you a new member of our tribe. I have named him Ajang. He is of the

²The name 'Dinka' was given to us by foreigners and it has stuck, but an old person in a village would not actually know what 'Dinka' means. The Dinka knew themselves as *Jieng* or *Muonyjäñ*, meaning 'the man of men'.

people and shall be for the people. He will become a good wrestler. He will be a proud *Muonyjān*.³

The crowd applaud again and their dancing, singing, clapping and stomping resumes. Songs incorporate the baby's name – 'Ajang! Ajang! Ajang!' – into their choruses. Alaak and Abul look on proudly as Ajang is passed from one tribal elder to another, each blessing him in his own words. Celebrations run late into the night, and continue for days. The boy's full clan name is to be Ajang Alaak Yuot Alaak. This is to separate him from the rest and set his path. A new era has begun for the family, the clan and the tribe.³

Ajang grows up to become a strong, healthy boy. He displays leadership and is admired and respected by his peers. He thrives in his tribe's culture and way of life. In his home village of Majak, Ajang and his friends sit under trees and play all day. Using the sticky clay soil that lies beneath the village, they make replicas of the best huts and biggest bulls they see in the village and cattle camps. They stage mock bullfights with their beautifully crafted creations. They zigzag around the huts as they try to catch each other. Often, they take goats out for morning and afternoon grazing. While their goats graze, the boys fish in the ponds and waterways that surround the village, and practise their wrestling skills. Wrestling is the favourite activity of the Dinka. Boys start to practise as soon as they can walk. By the age of ten, Ajang excels at wrestling. No boy his age is able to defeat him. Ajang also helps his mother attend to the family farm and cattle.

His father, Alaak, and grandfather, Yuot, are proud of him. Ajang demonstrates leadership ability and is an asset to the family from an early age.

³ The Dinka is the largest tribe in South Sudan and, in the 1940s when my father was born, it was estimated to number between two to three million. It is now closer to five million people. The Dinka is comprised of some fifty-six clans. The clans are collectively governed through clan chiefs; the family is a subset of the clan.

The Dinka are a dark-skinned, semi-nomadic tribe in South Sudan. They are believed to be the tallest ethnic group in the world and have contributed several basketball players to the NBA in America. The cow is the centre of all life among the Dinka. Cattle hold a spiritual place in the hearts of the Dinka. As the only source of dowry, cattle are a means to a wife and hence a family. The most beautiful girls cost up to two hundred head of cattle in dowry, greatly enhancing the fortunes of their families. Dinka men take immense pride in their bulls, with the biggest and most colourful bulls the most coveted of all. White bulls with patches of black are the most desirable. Eligible bachelors spend hours polishing their bulls to perfection, decorating them with bells around their necks that ring out as they stroll. Their long horns are altered to be elaborately curved. Straight horns are considered unattractive. As calves, their growing horns are cut strategically with a large, hot knife at various angles, forcing the horns to grow in a certain direction. This process is repeated as the bulls grow up. The very best bulls are paraded around the cattle camps, followed by proud owners singing their best songs, often in praise of the bull and potential brides. Enthusiastic crowds fall in behind, amused and entertained. This is like young men driving polished sports cars down a popular boulevard on a Saturday night, blasting out tunes as their exhaust roars, hoping to catch the eye of attractive women. The Dinka are a competitive people. Competition is especially intense among young men as each strives to be the strongest, the best dancer, the best singer – and especially to have the greatest bull. But despite the competition, there is a strong spirit of community and oneness.

With millions of cattle to watch, Dinka life revolves around finding water and green pastures. Older women, children and the elderly stay in the villages throughout the year. During the wet season, cattle camps return to the villages as water and pastures become plentiful. As the water subsides and pastures dwindle, young men move their cattle to the edges of the swamps and up

to the banks of the Nile, sometimes hundreds of kilometres from home.

To the Dinka, family is paramount and the foundation upon which the tribe stands. Young men ensure they do not damage their family's reputation. The Alaak family is highly respected in their area and held in high regard. Ajang's father, Alaak, was clan chief, as was his father, Yuot, before him. Values of loyalty and service are instilled in Ajang at an early age. Ajang's mother is the first of six wives. All the mothers treat their stepchildren with love, care and affection. They regard Ajang as their own so that, at times, he doesn't even distinguish his birth mother from the rest.

It is the summer of 1952. Ajang's father nominates him to go to school. The boy is gifted, and tribal elders believe he will one day make a terrific translator for them in their negotiations with the Anglo-Egyptian rulers that govern Sudan. They are convinced he will adapt well to school life and bring back knowledge to serve his people. So, from the age of eight, Ajang attends Kongor Bush School. He subsequently goes on to Obel Intermediate School, where brilliant academic results – particularly in mathematics and physics – ensure that he is accepted into Rumbek Secondary School, the best school in South Sudan. Then, in 1963, just as a nineteen-year-old Ajang is settling into his second year at Rumbek, the First Sudanese Civil War intensifies. Begun nine years earlier in Torit, war now engulfs the entire country. Government troops go on a rampage, burning Southern villages and towns. They kill thousands of Southerners in an attempt to crush the rebellion. Schools are shut down and Rumbek is particularly targeted because the government believes it is a breeding ground for future leaders of the South.

Shortly after their school is taken over by soldiers, Ajang and his best friend Garang, along with some fellow students, hide in the nearby forest and talk about their dreams and their future. They are determined to continue their education at any cost and

by any means necessary. It is uncertain when the war will end or if it will end at all, so they come up with an audacious plan to leave the country and go to Ethiopia, hundreds of kilometres to the east. There, they believe, they will be able to continue their education with assistance from the United Nations and the Ethiopian government.

For over three months, the students walk across forests, savannah and barren land, once forest, now razed by the military. They cross rivers, are stalked by hyenas and teased by monkeys as they trek. Sometimes, they are chased by local tribespeople who suspect them of being thieves. Occasionally, they receive generous hospitality from sympathetic villagers. Many village elders are inspired by the determination of these young men. Sometimes the boys are given a goat to take with them. After more than one hundred days, they arrive in Ethiopia in a state of exhaustion. They're accepted as refugees and taken to the capital, Addis Ababa, by the United Nations.

Ajang's desire to learn and help his people is unwavering. He is sponsored by the UN to attend Ethiopian Evangelical College. There he becomes a champion high-jumper and star footballer. His sporting and academic credentials win him the privilege of meeting and shaking hands with the emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie. After two years in Addis Ababa, Ajang attains his high school diploma with distinction, topping the school in mathematics and physics.

Back home, the civil war rages on. Despite Ajang's appreciation of the opportunities he has been given in Ethiopia, he worries about his siblings and parents in Majak. There is no means of communication and he has no way of knowing whether his family is safe. Nor does he receive confirmation that any of his messages to them have ever been received. Even so, he cannot yet go home. As a result of his academic achievements, he is sponsored by the World Council of Churches to study in Monrovia, at the University of Liberia, in West Africa, on the other side of

the continent. While there, he is elected as a representative for International Students at the National Students Union.

In 1972, the Addis Ababa peace agreement is signed between the government of Sudan and the Southern rebels. The people of South Sudan are given a higher level of autonomy, and a rebuilding process begins. When Ajang graduates from the University of Liberia with a degree in mathematics and physics in December 1973, he returns to South Sudan and is relieved to find his parents and siblings alive and well. His village of Majak has partially survived the war, and he is welcomed back with singing and dancing. His father offers a bull to the gods for bringing back his son.

But Ajang's stay in Majak is brief. Within a few weeks, he is appointed head teacher of mathematics at Rumbek Secondary School, where he was once a student. It is as if he never left, and he feels at home. Then, in 1978, Malek Secondary School is established in his home state of Jonglei. At the age of thirty-four, Ajang is appointed as its first headmaster and moves to Bor, the state's capital.

Eventually, he becomes the head of educational planning, overseeing the establishment of new schools across the South. He ensures that students from smaller tribes are enrolled and given special care. To him, this ensures parity in education. He has a burning desire to educate every boy and girl in the country. His belief in education is almost religious. As he sees it, education is the only solution to the problems that his people and his country face. He has hope for the future of his people and country. His dream is to build hundreds of schools, technical colleges and universities across South Sudan.

1. Shattered dreams

Preskilla, a beautiful young lady from the nearby village of Kuchdok, catches the eye of Ajang. She attends a local school in Bor. Ajang starts courting her and it is not long before he asks her hand in marriage. But there is one problem: she cannot get married without her father's permission and neither can Ajang. He rushes back to Majak and returns with his father, who, upon meeting Preskilla, decides she is the right girl for his son. Ajang and his father travel to Kuchdok for a meeting with Kucha Tiir, Preskilla's dad. To his joy, Preskilla's father gives his approval. Both families travel back to Majak, where many cows and bulls are exchanged as a dowry for Preskilla. A week-long celebration follows to mark the marriage of Ajang and Preskilla and to celebrate the union of both families. Not long after, Ajang and Preskilla have two children – me, born in late 1978, and then my younger sister, Athok, born in 1982. Bul, my older half-brother, lives in a neighbouring village.

From an early age, as we settle back into our new house in Bor Town, I become aware of my father's stature in the community and I can see the reasons for it. He is tall and handsome, with a strikingly athletic build. His smile is white, wide and glorious. He is calm and collected, and has a powerful, visionary character. He is convinced that nothing can stop the people of South Sudan from realising their dreams, and he believes that although the South Sudanese people come from many tribes, they are a strong-willed and united people.

Dad's dreams are shattered while he is in the capital, Khartoum, organising supplies for Southern schools. It is May 1983. The

president of Sudan goes on national radio and, to Dad's dismay, announces that he has torn up the peace agreement that has given the South its autonomy for the last eleven years, and which recognised its black African ethnic composition and religious diversity. The president's voice streams across Southern airwaves: *Sudan is one country. From today, all must speak Arabic and adhere to sharia law.*

Southerners are poised to be ruled by a religion they know nothing about. They are to speak a language foreign in their lands. It is something they have rejected in the past, and they are ready to reject it again. They will not abandon centuries-old cultures and their languages and beliefs for a religion they know nothing about and a language they do not understand.

There is a mutiny in Bor Town, pitting Southern soldiers against troops from the North who have been sent to enforce the orders of the president. The fighting kills scores of people. Bor Town is abandoned as thousands flee. My family escapes into the bush, too, but Dad is still in Khartoum, thousands of kilometres away.

We walk for days, finally arriving in our home village of Majak in Twic East County, some 130 kilometres north of Bor Town. We make it to Majak because two of my uncles take turns carrying me. Mum carries eleven-month-old Athok on her back, and our food basket on her head. As we arrive, we are welcomed by our grandparents, uncles, aunties and countless cousins, singing joyously for our safe arrival. A goat is slaughtered to welcome us, its blood smeared on us and around our allocated hut, freshly replastered, to thank the spirits for protecting us and guiding us home. We are spat on by village elders to bless us. We crawl through the legs of elders as a symbol of our passage and a new life beginning.

Majak is beautiful. The landscape is covered with acacia trees. We watch cattle graze on the lush green pastures that extend as

far as the eye can see. It is a tranquil remote paradise, separated from the war that rages around Bor. I meet many of my relatives for the first time. I meet many of my relatives for the first time. They're all immediately fond of me, as I am of them. I never expected to have so many relatives, but essentially all of Majak is related to me.

I am not a natural at village life. I am afraid of goats and chickens. I struggle to adjust, but eventually adapt. I start to look after our goats. I begin wrestling with other boys. I become close to my grandparents, spending countless hours with them.

Despite the tranquillity of our life in Majak, I am afraid for my father. He has not been able to return since we fled Bor Town, his desperate attempts to sneak out of the North unsuccessful. Occasionally, we hear some rumour that he is safe, or that he has been spotted in this town or that town. But I miss him and my fears are unrelieved.

After nearly three years without any definite news, we get a letter from one of Dad's colleagues stating that he has been smuggled out from the North. We're told he's hiding in a safe location but that the security forces are looking for him. Because of the war, thousands are trapped in different locations across the country. No-one can travel from one part of the country to another without putting their lives in danger. Dad's return is impossible under these circumstances. He is working underground in the state of Upper Nile for the South Sudanese resistance against oppression from the North. He is wanted by the Islamic government in the North for his refusal to teach Arabic and for teaching English instead. Malek, his school in Bor, has been taken over by soldiers. Schools are now used as military barracks across the South. Many of his students have taken up arms to fight for the South. I cannot begin to imagine how it must pain him that the pen is being replaced by the gun.

As I have become older, and even though our extended family takes care of us, I become ever more aware of the absence of my

father. My grandmother tells stories of when Dad was a wrestling champion, and I aspire to be just like him.

Mum teases me about it. 'Yuot, you're too small. Maybe you can wrestle with your sister. The other boys will defeat you.'

Each day, Mum fetches water while I take the goats out for a morning graze. At the end of the day, she milks the goats and cows, and makes us dinner. We sit around a fire as Grandma Abul tells us stories. Everyone calls her Abuldit – *dit* is an honorary Dinka suffix bestowed upon a respected person, commonly an elder. Many times, we're besieged by mosquitoes, and our night is cut short. Prior to entering the huts, green branches are lit to create intense smoke, and Abuldit holds the burning branches outside the entrance to the hut while we rush inside. The mosquitoes are unable to find the entrance through the thick smoke while our door is slammed shut. We settle into our beds, lying in the darkness, chatting to Mum until we fall asleep.

In the mornings, I usually sit with my uncles as they plan their day. They have a small handheld radio and keep up with the events of the war. The village has no other form of communication, so it's our only window to the outside world. We listen each day, hoping to hear news of a peace deal. I pray that a ceasefire will be announced so that Dad can come home.

One day, in early March 1986, almost three years after the war started, we hear news that Dad has been arrested with several other Southerners and is a political prisoner in Malakal, the capital of Upper Nile State. I am afraid for him but continue to hope for news of a ceasefire or, even better, an end to the war.

In August, five months after Dad was arrested in Malakal, there is more news. As I walk the goats back from their morning graze, I see my uncle Pageer standing outside his hut. He yawns and stretches, the sun shining down on him. After a while, he wanders back into his hut, listening intently as he always does to the radio clasped in his right hand. Then suddenly he reappears,

all languidness gone. He runs to my grandmother's hut, where she is sitting outside in the sun. He says something to her and, as I watch, she cries out, and drops to the ground. My uncle kneels beside her and wraps his arms around her until she regains her composure.

I run to them as they both walk over to our hut. Other members of the extended family begin to arrive as word spreads around Majak village. Abuldit struggles to speak.

'Ajang is no longer with us,' she says, holding Mum's hand.

Mum starts screaming. Uncle Pageer and other family members attempt to subdue her. Athok drops down beside Mum, as do other women and children. I am held down as I writhe in grief.

A government announcement has been broadcast, and the news is that they have killed my father.

The radio, my only avenue for hope, has shattered my dreams. For the first time in my life, I feel hatred, an intense animosity towards those who have killed my father. Seeds of bitterness are sprouting and I contemplate revenge. In the days and weeks that follow, Mum also struggles enormously as she faces raising her children alone.

In accordance with Dinka tradition, last rites are performed within three days of learning that my father has gone. Village elders and the extended family gather. It is dawn as the ceremony begins. Drums beat gently as a rhythm takes hold. Synchronised voices follow the beat of the drums. The family sings the spirit of my father into the afterlife. My sister and I stand beside Mum as elders speak words of sorrow and encouragement amid flames that rise and dance in the dawn breeze.

'Ajang has not died,' shouts Uncle Pageer.

'He will live in us forever,' Abuldit echoes.

It is stressed that, as Ajang's son, I am to carry his legacy. I am to keep the family name alive. I am only seven, and I feel the enormous burden of responsibility to protect Mum and my sister.

For hours each day, Athok and I sit beside Mum, holding her hand as she cries. There has not been a sadder time in my life.

A few goats and a bull are slaughtered to mark the start of the mourning period. As tradition dictates, our heads are shaved. We're made to wear necklaces made from the skins of animals that have been sacrificed. I must wear mine for forty days, and it feels like a necklace of shame. To the other children in the village, I cease to be one of them. I become the boy whose father has died. I begin to wonder what I have done to deserve this, but really don't have time for self-pity. I must take care of my family, do whatever it takes to defend them. My spirit is strong, my age and size irrelevant.

I can see the pain in my mother's eyes. Every day she works to put food on our mat. And every night, she gathers us round her to tell us our favourite stories. We sit on an antelope skin mat outside our hut as she tells stories of the lion, the fox and the rabbit, and stories about when she was a girl in her home village of Kuchdok. Athok and I massage her feet as she retells tales handed down to her. This is all we can do to comfort her. And perhaps the familiar stories comfort her in the same way they comfort us.

The forty-day mark arrives. I remove all animal skin adornments as the family watches on. The mourning period is now officially over. Our lives can begin to return to some sort of normality, though nothing will ever be the same without my father. But it is a relief to get rid of the necklace and grow my afro back, everything that identifies me as a victim. I can be a child again. The grieving period is made easier by the support of the family. In Dinka culture you are never alone.

One month passes, then two, then three. While at times I forget about the absence of my father, I continue to contemplate what could have been. Though I looked up to him and loved his company, it is his guidance I miss the most. There were times when I asked him a hundred questions a day, and he patiently

answered every one of them. Despite tremendous support from my extended family, I have a longing for my dad that cannot be overcome. Sometimes, I dream I am playing with him. He takes me to town and buys me sweets from the market. We stroll along the Nile, our hands firmly locked. I wake up excitedly, only to realise he is gone.