

This edition has been adapted for younger readers from the
original text, *Father of the Lost Boys* (2020)

First published 2024 by FREMANTLE PRESS
Fremantle Press Inc. trading as Fremantle Press
PO Box 158, North Fremantle, Western Australia, 6159
fremantlepress.com.au

Original text first published 2020.

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Adapted from the original text by Cheryl Hingley.

Cover illustration by Briony Stewart.
Cover design by Briony Stewart and Rebecca Mills.
Map created by Chris Crook.
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press.



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

ISBN 9781760993900 (paperback)

ISBN 9781760993917 (ebook)



Department of
**Local Government, Sport
and Cultural Industries**



Publication of this title was assisted by the State Government through the
Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries.

Fremantle Press respectfully acknowledges the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation
as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land where we work in Walyalup.



FATHER
OF THE LOST
BOYS

THE MECAK AJANG ALAAK STORY

YUOT A. ALAAK



FREMANTLE PRESS

PROLOGUE

Once, there was a man who rescued 20,000 boys from becoming child soldiers and facing almost certain death. That man was Mecak Ajang Alaak. That man was my father. One of those boys was me. This is our story.

As the summer sun rises over Kongor in South Sudan, voices of joy come from the distance. The land is green and dotted with rain-filled ponds. Within hours, the family compound is full of women dancing and singing. The village resounds with a smooth melody, pronouncing the arrival of a baby boy — the son of a chief. Standing tall, Alaak Arinytung looks on. Alaak knows it will be some time before he can hold his newborn. Fears of evil spirits and infection mean very few people will get to see the baby for some time.

Weeks pass and Alaak's 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 as they wave their walking sticks high. For the baby's mother, Abul, it is a proud moment. Her son is to be given a name and welcomed into the tribe.

Alaak arrives, his spears glittering in the midday sunshine. His father, Yuot, stands beside him. Now Yuot bends down and crawls into the hut. He blesses the baby by spitting on his head — a common practice. 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 ground shakes as feet stomp. Holding the baby carefully, Yuot crawls out and gets to his feet, then holds his grandson aloft. 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 people and shall be for the people. He will become a good wrestler. He will be a *Muonyjäj*' ['a man of men', of the Dinka tribe].

This was my father.

Ajang grows up strong and healthy. He thrives in his tribe's culture and way of life. In his home village of Majak, he and his friends sit under trees and play all day. Using the sticky clay soil, they make replicas of the best huts and biggest bulls they see in the village and cattle camps, and stage

mock bullfights. 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. 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.

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. 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, and white bulls with patches of black are the most desirable. Eligible bachelors spend hours polishing their bulls, decorating them with bells around their necks that ring out as they stroll. Their long horns are altered to be elaborately curved. The very best bulls are paraded around the cattle camps, followed by proud owners. Enthusiastic crowds fall

in behind, amused and entertained. This is like young men driving sports cars down a popular boulevard on a Saturday night, blasting out tunes, hoping to catch the eye of attractive women.

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 the water subsides and pastures dwindle, young men move their cattle to the edges of swamps and up to the Nile, sometimes hundreds of kilometres from home.

To the Dinka, family is paramount. The Alaak family is highly respected in their area. Ajang's father, Alaak, was clan chief, as was his father, Yuot, before him. 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.

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 who govern Sudan. From the age of eight, Ajang attends Kongor Bush School. He goes on to Obel Intermediate School, where brilliant results ensure that he is accepted into Rumbek Secondary School, the best school in South Sudan. Then, in 1963, just as nineteen-year-

old Ajang is settling into his second year at Rumbek, the First Sudanese Civil War, begun nine years earlier, engulfs the entire country. Government troops go on a rampage, burning Southern villages and towns. Schools are shut down and Rumbek is targeted because the government believes it is a breeding ground for future leaders of the South.

Ajang and his best friend, Garang, hide with other students in the nearby forest. They are determined to continue their education in Ethiopia, hundreds of kilometres to the east. There, they hope for assistance from the United Nations and the Ethiopian government. For over three months, the students walk across forests, savannah and barren land razed by the military. They cross rivers, are stalked by hyenas and teased by monkeys. Sometimes, they are chased by local tribespeople who suspect them of being thieves. Occasionally, they receive generous hospitality from villagers. After more than one hundred days, they arrive in Ethiopia in a state of exhaustion. They are 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. Ajang attains his high school

diploma with distinction, topping the school in mathematics and physics.

Back home, the civil war rages on. Ajang 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. He cannot go home. He is sponsored by the World Council of Churches to study at the University of Liberia, in West Africa, on the other side of the continent.

In 1972, the Addis Ababa peace agreement is signed between the government of Sudan and the Southern rebels. 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.

Within a few weeks, he is appointed head teacher of mathematics at Rumbek Secondary School. 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. He has a burning desire to educate every child 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. His dream is to build hundreds of schools, technical colleges and universities across South Sudan.

Preskilla, a beautiful young woman from the village of Kuchdok, catches the eye of Ajang. To his joy, Preskilla's father gives his approval for them to marry. Many cows and bulls are exchanged as a dowry for Preskilla. A week-long celebration follows to celebrate the union of both families. Ajang and Preskilla go on to have two children — myself, 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 into our new house in Bor Town, I become aware of my father's stature in the community. 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 they come from many tribes, they are a strong-willed and united people.

But 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 announces on national radio that he has torn up the peace agreement that gave the

South its autonomy and 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. There is a mutiny in Bor Town, pitting Southern soldiers against troops from the North. 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, some 130 kilometres north of Bor Town. We only make it to Majak because two of my uncles take turns carrying me. Mum carries my eleven-month-old sister 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. A goat is slaughtered to welcome us, its blood smeared on us and around our allocated hut, 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. I meet many of my relatives for the first time. I 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. But I am afraid for my father. His desperate attempts to sneak out of the North are unsuccessful. I miss him and my fears are unrelieved.

After nearly three years, 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. No-one can travel from one part of the country to another without putting their life in danger. Dad's return is impossible. He is working underground in the state of Upper Nile for the South Sudanese resistance. 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. How it must pain him that the pen is being replaced by the gun.

My grandmother tells stories of when Dad was a wrestling champion, and I aspire to be 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. In the mornings, I usually sit with my uncles. They have a small handheld radio and 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. In August, there is more news. As I walk the goats back from their morning graze, I see my uncle Pageer standing outside his hut, listening intently to the radio. Suddenly he runs to my grandmother's hut, where she is sitting outside in the sun. He says something to her and she cries out and drops to the ground. My uncle kneels beside her and wraps his arms around her.

I run to them as they walk over to our hut. Other members of the extended family begin to arrive.

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. 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. For the first time in my life, I feel hatred. Seeds of bitterness are sprouting and I contemplate revenge. Mum also struggles enormously.

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. 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 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. 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 become the boy whose father has died. I must take care of my family, do whatever it takes to defend them.

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. This is all we can do to comfort her.

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

One month passes, then two, then three. I looked up to my father and loved his company, and 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. 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.