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A Shaky Peace

The scars and hopes of a boy named Logocho mirror his land.



**By Matthew Teague**

One day some years ago, before the latest civil war began in earnest, a Sudanese boy named Logocho peeked into the entry of his family's grass hut. His father sprang out and grabbed him, and then, with an older boy, pinned him in the dirt.

A strange boy, Logocho. Above him, his father's shoulders and chest rippled with welted tribal scars. A Morse code of dots and dashes crossed the father's face and forehead, signaling to any potential cattle raiders—the Dinka, the Nuer—that he, as a Murle, would defend his stock with spear, knife, fists, and teeth.

But his son showed no interest in the old ways. When other children, including his own brother, underwent an early Murle rite of passage, he ran and hid in the grass. Now his body, smooth as a calf's, trembled and arched in the dust. Nothing marked him as Murle.

More alarming, the nine-year-old boy showed no interest in cattle. Like his brother, Logocho crouched to suckle the udders of cows, but to him they meant only milk. For countless generations Murle men—and their rivals throughout southern Sudan—had lived alongside their cows. They named them, decorated them, slept beside them. Sang of them. Danced in their honor. Loved them. Men used cattle to purchase brides, who provided children, who tended more cows.

What is your purpose? Logocho's father asked.

While the men and beasts migrated from water to water, Logocho preferred to stay behind with his grandmother. The old woman scratched lines in the callous earth to grow sorghum and beans and maize and even pumpkins, and in lean seasons the men came to her with hands outstretched. Logocho helped her plant the seeds, tend the sprouts, and harvest the crops. She protected him from his father.

You are special, she would say.

She could not save him now, though. His father and the boy were holding him hard against the ground. *"Naa?"* Logocho cried. "Why?"

When he saw the "specialist," he knew. The man kneeled and bent over Logocho's face, then he reached for what looked like a thin metal file. He pried open the boy's jaw and wedged the blade between the two bottom middle teeth. He worked it down to the gum, and then with a wrench of his shoulder, he twisted it. Crack! An incisor splintered, and blood filled the moaning Logocho's mouth. The specialist reset the blade and—crack!—shattered the other middle tooth.

Now you look like a Murle.

In the next few months, chaos would descend on both Logocho and his homeland. A magician in the village would pronounce his family doomed. Across southern Sudan, the fury of generations would erupt in 1983 in a war both horrific and invisible to the outside world. During the next two decades more than four million southerners would flee their villages into the hinterlands, northern cities, and neighboring countries. Two million would die.

Logocho's life—fleeing, warring, searching for purpose—would share a trajectory with southern Sudan itself. But on this day, the boy's father released him and walked away with the specialist. Logocho rolled onto his side so the blood could pour from his mouth into the dust.

The origin of tensions in Sudan is so geographic, so stark, you could see it even from the surface of the moon. The broad ivory of the Sahara in Africa's north set against the green savanna and jungles of the continent's narrowing center. A great, grass-stained tusk. Populations generally fall to one side or the other of that vegetative divide. Which side, north or south, largely defines the culture—religion, music, dress, language—of the people there. Sudan straddles that line to include arid desert in its north and grasslands and tropical rain forests in its south, and the estranged cultures on either side.

In Sudan, Arabs and black Africans had met with a clash. Islamic conquerors in the seventh century discovered that many inhabitants of the land then called Nubia were already Christian. The Nubians fought them to a stalemate that lasted more than a millennium, until the Ottoman governor based in Cairo invaded, exploiting the land south of Egypt as a reservoir of ivory and humans. In 1820 he enslaved 30,000 people known as Sudan, which meant simply "blacks."

Eventually global distaste for slavery put the slave traders out of business. The Ottomans retreated in the early 1880s, and in 1899, after a brief period of independence for Sudan, the British took control, ruling its two halves as distinct regions. They couldn't garrison all of Sudan—it's a massive country, ten times as big as the United Kingdom—so they ruled from Khartoum and gave limited powers to tribal leaders in the provinces. Meanwhile, they encouraged Islam and Arabic in the north and Christianity and English in the south. Putting effort and resources into the north, they left the south to languish. The question all this raises is: Why? Why was a single Sudan created at all?

One reason, again, is geographic. As the Nile flows north toward Egypt, it binds the disparate cultures along its banks in a fitful, sometimes hateful, relationship. It defines trade, environment, even politics, linking the affairs of north and south. When the British ruled, they needed to control the Suez Canal at the Nile's mouth, because it linked Britain to the "jewel in the crown," India. That meant controlling the Nile, so no enemy could divert it.

When the British withdrew in the mid-1950s, there's little wonder the place fell into civil war. Southern rebels battled the northern government fiercely during the 1960s, and half a million people died before the two sides struck an agreement in 1972. Yet the pact only gave each side a chance to breathe deeply and rearm for what would be a much bloodier war.

During the lull between the two civil wars, the government in Khartoum joined Egypt to embark on a breathtaking project in the south. Where the Nile spreads across southern Sudan— that great tableland—it forms the Sudd, one of Africa's largest wetlands. And the river's annual floods rejuvenate grazing lands where southern tribes have long kept their cattle. The partners decided to build a 225-mile canal to shunt the river past the Sudd, due north to supply water-hungry Egypt. They brought in an eight-story digging machine, and tribesmen stood and watched as their pastures were ripped up.

At the start of the 1983 civil war, a rebel group called the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) formed, and in one of its first conspicuous acts, it attacked the Jonglei Canal construction headquarters, halting the project.

Years of bloodshed followed, ending in 2005 after extraordinary, behind-the-scenes diplomatic maneuvers brought about the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. This pact gave southern Sudan a measure of autonomy: its own constitution (based on separation of religion and state), army, and currency. Now Sudan finds itself wobbling between the possibility of lasting peace and the threat of fresh violence. In 2011, according to the pact, the people of southern Sudan will vote on whether to secede from the north and form a fully independent country.

The two sides smile and nod toward the pact, afraid that breaking it will invite international intervention. At the same time they wage a subterranean war of allegation and antagonism. The depths of that duplicity—and the dark prospects for peace—became clear to me midway through my time in Sudan, when half a dozen men in suits accosted me at the airport in Juba, the south's capital. They bundled me into a truck full of soldiers bristling with assault rifles and drove me to a compound in the city. There they took my phone and camera, denied me access to water or a toilet during a day and a night of interrogation. They refused to call the United States Consulate. They were, it turned out, southern Sudanese intelligence agents.

The arrest bewildered me, not just because they wouldn't level any charges but also because their behavior flew against the warmth and goodwill southern Sudanese usually show Westerners.  That night, as they released me, a security officer named Gas explained: The intelligence agency had thought I was a spy. "We have been thinking for several weeks that Khartoum might recruit an American," he said. "An American would be perfect, because we allow them to move so freely through our country." I found out later that a driver who had tried to extort money from me had then reported me as a spy, but the incident underscores how deep the suspicion is between north and south.

So the question arises: Amid such animosity, why hasn't the north simply let the south break away? And again the answer is geography. Geography that is now binding them together in a new way: oil. Much of the oil is in the south, but the north, where all the refineries are, controls the distribution of profits.

Logocho disappointed his father while still in the womb, in a way. Arriving as he did.

A couple of years earlier his mother had delivered twins, and one of them died before Logocho's birth. So according to Murle tradition, he took his dead brother's place, alongside a twin who was stronger, faster. Who loved cows. Who traveled with their father during the dry season instead of staying in the village with the women.

One day when Logocho was nine, his father summoned him. He threatened to withhold the boy's birthright—cows—so Logocho would not have a dowry. "If I am alive, you will not get married soon, because you do not like cows."

A sister of Logocho's died of malaria. Another died of dysentery. A disease swept through the cattle—the doom foreseen by the magician, the villagers thought. Then his father died. With the cattle and her husband gone, Logocho's mother despaired. How could she feed her children? She sent Logocho to live with his uncle, who was many miles away and who marveled at the strange child thrust upon him. Who was this useless boy, unable to drive a herd of goats, much less cattle? The uncle yelled and threatened and raged, and Logocho shrank from him in fear.

Then something remarkable happened. The second civil war had begun, and the SPLA had stopped the great canal-digging machine. One day an SPLA soldier came to Logocho's camp looking for food, and the boy gave him some meat. Soldiers had swept through before, and Logocho had sensed the fear in his uncle's voice as he donated a bull to feed them. Now this soldier placed five bullets in Logocho's hand, a reward for his helpfulness. The boy gave three to his uncle, but he held back two for himself, later firing them into the sky from a borrowed gun. The soldier's power—of identity in his uniform, of purpose in his weapon—burned itself into Logocho's mind. He devised a plan and shared it with several of his friends.

When his uncle sent Logocho, who was now 12, out with the animals, he and five friends wandered off, pretending they had discovered a dead buffalo in the bush and wanted to skin it. They escaped into the wilderness, on the run and hungry until they came upon a hunting party of four SPLA soldiers. Two weeks later they made their way into an SPLA camp in the countryside near Boma, assembling with other recruits who wanted to join the rebellion. A handful of grown soldiers lived at the camp, half starved and awaiting orders themselves. For a month the group survived on wild game. Then SPLA commanders sent word: Head to Ethiopia. On foot.

About the same time, in mid-1986, an American named Roger Winter flew to Ethiopia to meet with the SPLA's charismatic leader, John Garang. Winter, in his early 40s, had spent his life working with desperate people. In college he volunteered on the South Side of Chicago, then worked for the Salvation Army, and eventually took a position with the Carter Administration, serving as a sort of human bridge for refugees fleeing oppressive states. Now he headed the nonprofit U.S. Committee for Refugees, personally focusing on crumbling African states such as Rwanda, Ethiopia—and Sudan.

Winter liked Garang, a complicated man. He had a crackling smile and a doctorate from Iowa State, where he had studied economics during the gap between the civil wars. He read Marx and the Bible. His army used child soldiers, yet he had crafted a vision of a unified "New Sudan," with the north and south at peace. And now he wanted to know: Would America help the people of southern Sudan?

Winter felt the place drawing him toward its chaotic heart. He considered himself a human rights worker on a mission to warn the world about coming catastrophes. (He would later warn about Rwanda's looming genocide.) What he saw in Sudan shocked him as "a very vicious war," a war that forced any serious observer to make a choice: walk away or get involved. Winter couldn't walk away.

At the SPLA outpost Logocho and the other recruits formed a line flanked by the dozen or so soldiers and struck out for Ethiopia. The boys were now solely dependent on the soldiers for food and water. Others joined as they walked, and soon the group numbered more than a hundred, stretched over a mile.

Early in the walk, as hunger set in, the group stopped by a river. Several soldiers lined up on its banks, their rifles raised. One blew a loud whistle, and several animals lifted their heads from the water. The shooters fired a volley toward the flickering ears, killing four hippos. Logocho watched, their deaths hardly registering against the rumbling of his stomach. The group ate some of the hippo meat on the riverside and dried the rest. Then they continued north toward the border.

After several meals of hippo meat, Logocho's stomach knotted, and his bowels loosened. He remembered his sister who had died of dysentery. It racked him hour after hour, exhausting him, wringing the water from his body. At last he lay down at the side of the path and watched the shapes of passing travelers. Some stopped, but others prodded them forward. "Leave him."

He lay there drying out in the sun, and a thought filled his mind: I am going to die.

A young man named Jowang—a relative of his—saw him. "I will go and get water and come back," he said. A while later someone appeared with water, and Logocho tipped it into his mouth. After some time he climbed to his feet and continued walking. He held on to hope for whatever waited in Ethiopia. Food and water. Rest.

At the end of another day, a soldier made an announcement: A great forest lay ahead, and there was no water in it. To reach water on the other side, they should walk through the night, when the temperature dipped. They entered the trees as darkness settled in, and the men put the boys in the middle of the line and watched for nodding heads.

As they walked, Logocho's own head whipped around. The forest had made a sound. He listened, and it came again, the sound of snapping wood, of something heavy moving in the dark. Then an elephant let out a trumpet that seized the boys where they stood. A blast of gunfire followed, and instructions from a soldier: "Keep walking." And so the night continued, with the terror of elephant charges answered by gunfire.

At daybreak they emerged from the forest, exhausted. The sweat had dried cold on their skin, and they ran forward when they saw a river ahead. A soldier held up a warning hand. He and others fired their rifles into the water, and several crocodiles glided away. The boys bunched together and paddled through the water as soldiers continually fired around them, and with relief they heaved themselves onto the opposite shore.

Only a little farther now.

"You are still young and need to take time here," the soldiers told Logocho when he first arrived in Ethiopia after the grueling 12-day walk. People had come from all over southern Sudan to this camp near Gambela. It was a camp for refugees, but the SPLA used it as a kind of recruiting pen, sorting boys and men according to their age, strength, and stamina.

Later, as Roger Winter toured the Ethiopian camps, he peered into boys' faces, and his heart broke for them. They walked on thin legs, some with teeth protruding from shrunken cheeks, others with eyes that bulged, blind from hunger and sickness. He wondered whether he might ever meet any of them again as men.

Many of the boys were malnourished because the northern Sudanese government had learned to use food as a weapon. At first, villagers throughout the south clustered in open areas when they heard planes flying overhead, because pallets of food would always follow. So the government started sending planes in just afterward, dropping bombs. It had a devastating double effect: It streamlined the killing, since a few bombs could wipe out whole crowds of people, and it taught people to fear air-dropped food, so they starved out of sight.

A similar ruthlessness in Darfur would lead the International Criminal Court in The Hague to issue an arrest warrant in March 2009 for Sudan's president, Omar al-Bashir, for war crimes and crimes against humanity. In July 2010 he was also charged with genocide, and a second arrest warrant was issued.

Logocho had hoped to join the fighting force, but he couldn't hold up an AK-47 long enough to train it on a target. So for six months, at the Bonga training camp, he learned other tactical skills, from commando crawling to secret keeping. When John Garang himself came to address the recruits, he delivered a rousing speech, issued uniforms, and divided them into two groups. The larger boys and men could join the fight, and Logocho and the other smaller boys should attend school at the Dima refugee camp, keeping their uniforms at hand.

By the time he was 15, Logocho was finally strong enough to hold a rifle, and he went on a three-week march with other troops to the SPLA stronghold of Kapoeta, near the Uganda-Kenya border. He had looked forward to soldiering, because he had seen the power it held over his domineering uncle. Soon after he arrived at the front line, a report came in of shots fired at a nearby well. Logocho and another young man went to check it out, and they found two of their colleagues shot dead by snipers. As he helped carry one of the bodies, he knew: War was not his purpose. This was not who he was.

Over the next few years Logocho fought as a rebel and dutifully fired his weapon, but he could never bring himself to aim it at another human being. When his friends found wounded Arabs on the battlefield, they would kill them with casual disinterest. Logocho couldn't.

The northern forces had far superior equipment and weaponry. They used jets to bomb southern fuel tanks and troops, so the SPLA fought a guerrilla war in the bush. Each time Logocho's unit moved into new territory, the soldiers each dug a shallow, man-size trench. When they heard the roar of bombers overhead, they dived into the trenches, hoping for the best. The big, Soviet-made Antonov planes arrived with a distinct drone, and then came the whistling of the bombs as they fell. More than once Logocho lay facedown, breathing in the smell of turned earth as his friends died around him.

A Christian friend had shown him a Bible, and one of the stories now made sense. "Woe," Isaiah had said of the place today called Sudan. "Woe to the land shadowed with buzzing wings, which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia."

Bombers circled overhead like locusts. Roger Winter knew he had crossed a line. True, other human rights workers had gone further—one former Irish priest had joined the fight outright, running weapons for the rebels—but the southern Sudanese leadership found in Winter guidance and inspiration. They wanted an American-style revolution, and they saw Winter as their Marquis de Lafayette.

In 1994 the leaders of the SPLA's political wing, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), held their first national convention, under a jungle canopy near the Ugandan border. Khartoum knew about the meeting and had sent planes to bomb it.

Southern leaders had long since abandoned towns and roadways—easy targets for bombs—and taken to the wilderness. Men like Garang and his second in command, Salva Kiir, had grown up in rural cattle camps and felt comfortable in the shelter of the backcountry. More than 500 people made their way to the meeting from across Sudan, and SPLA soldiers moved through the tall grass around the meeting site, combing up the trampled pathways so the bombers couldn't see them. Meeting organizers had cut steps into the hillsides, where the people sat in a naturally camouflaged amphitheater and listened to Winter talk about democracy. After that first, rugged political convention, the SPLM formed a government of its own, with Garang as chairman.

In January I sat with Salva Kiir, who became president of southern Sudan after Garang died in a 2005 helicopter crash, and he seemed uneasy in the presidential office, surrounded by the glitter of central African political power. He wore a black cowboy hat, a gift from President George W. Bush, and was sprawled awkwardly on an ornate sofa as though it cramped him. His political office also pinched him, in a figurative way. He had never expected the presidency to be thrust upon him, he said, and his vision for southern Sudan had him handing it off to someone else. "A peaceful transfer of power," he said, "that's the foundation of a good democracy." He seemed to come alive when I asked about his childhood among the cows, sleeping beside them, suckling them. "Delicious," he said, smiling. Does he still keep cows? "A man never tells how many children or cows he has," he said. "Sometimes you say only one. That one may be ten or a hundred or a thousand." So then how many does he have? He laughed. "One."

In the years after the meeting in the jungle, Winter continued his preoccupation with southern Sudan, struggling to explain Sudan and America to each other. In southern Sudan people knew little about Western politics; they often called him Senator Roger when he showed up in the bush. Americans knew even less about Sudan. By 2001 Winter had taken a job with the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the war in southern Sudan consumed him.

On the morning of September 11, he was holding a meeting in Washington, D.C., about a possible cease-fire in the Nuba Mountains. Midway through the meeting, word of that day's terrorist attacks came, with orders to evacuate federal offices. I'm not going anywhere, Winter remembers thinking. We're so close. He had planned to drive to the Sudanese Embassy, but traffic gridlock made that impossible, so he spent the day negotiating on the telephone.

Back in Sudan, something bit him during an around-the-clock push to reach an agreement between the north and the south; he didn't realize it was a snakebite until the next day, when a colleague saw that his purple foot had fang marks.

When the civil war was in its early years, the only Americans paying close attention to southern Sudan's troubles were some members of Christian churches. They saw the war as a religious one between Islamic aggressors and non-Muslim victims. September 11 strengthened that view. Church leaders and their congregations put pressure on policymakers in Washington, D.C., to do something in southern Sudan.

Winter knew that the Sudanese civil war was not simply a battle between Islam and Christianity—southern Sudan is in many places a patchwork of animist tribes who know nothing of Christianity. He knew ethnic loyalty meant more than religion. He knew the economics involved, knew the north had suppressed development in the south. He wanted to get more Americans, especially those in Washington, D.C., thinking about Sudan, and he enlisted the help of journalists and legislators.

Where Arabs and black Africans historically had fought over land for grazing, they now fought over oil—as much as three billion barrels, mostly in a disputed borderland between north and south, where tribes and clans had long clashed.

The conflict was complicated, but Winter never discounted the power of religion to be a force for good. He had seen it for himself in 2002.

In a southern Sudanese village called Itti, near the Ethiopian border, he had found a Presbyterian church where more than 300 people crowded under the grass roof each Sunday. They played drums made of animal skins, and Winter was touched by their worship. One Sunday, the young pastor, a man named Simon whom Winter had met briefly before, stepped to the front of the room and spoke about the "peace of God, which passes all understanding," quoting the apostle Paul. Peace even with the Arabs.

Winter thought: This is wisdom personified.

After the service he approached the church's group of elders and asked what he could do to help the congregation. They conferred, while Winter and Simon discussed the possibilities. The elders could ask for anything. A new building. Musical instruments. Food. Medicine. Cash.

Our pastor, Simon, is a smart man, they said. But he has never had a proper education as a pastor. Could you help him?

Winter was stunned. These people hardly had enough to eat, and they chose schooling? Over the next few years he personally paid for Simon to attend a theology school in Kampala, Uganda, taking the young man's word that he would return to the relative bleakness of tiny Itti.

And Winter redoubled his efforts for peace.

Reading his friend's Bible in an SPLA barracks one night in 1991, Logocho had a realization. Yes, he thought. This is my purpose. He decided that he would become a pastor.

Soon after, a Protestant minister baptized him and asked if he'd like to choose a new name, a new identity. "Yes," Logocho said. "Simon."

He put down his rifle, left the SPLA, and attended a school for refugees in Kenya, where he continued learning English. Then he went to Bible school, and eventually he took a post at the far-flung church in Itti, where a balding American named Roger walked in one Sunday and sat down in the dirt among the other congregants. The young pastor delivered a simple sermon that inspired one of the principal architects of what may become Africa's newest democracy.

Winter's years of diplomatic wrangling culminated with the 2005 pact signed by the north and the south. The chaos and carnage of Sudan's history make it impossible to predict whether the treaty will hold through the 2011 vote on independence. But Winter—along with his U.S. colleagues and negotiators from Kenya, Britain, Norway, and elsewhere—brokered something in Sudan that once seemed impossible: peace. A peace that has held for five years.

Simon walked with me recently in Itti. He enjoys no social standing, since he has no cows, and he looked misplaced in his eyeglasses and smooth-soled, cap-toe shoes. For the past three years he has earned income during the week doing community outreach for the Wildlife Conservation Society—a long way, in a sense, from the cattle camps and hunting parties of his peers. But the villagers waved to him, and they promised to see him Sunday morning. "Big man!" they called.

"I am not the big man," he said, laughing.

Simon could have stayed in Uganda or gone to Kenya. Like the famous Lost Boys, he could have emigrated to America, where he could have made a better living. Why not go to the U.S.? He smiled and, as is his habit, made a small clicking sound by pulling his tongue back from the gap in his grin.

"No," he said.

As a child, Logocho had left behind the pastoral tradition. He had come of age in the chaos and pain of war, and then, when he became Simon, he had used his faith to reach an influential American who offered him and his country support. His history was the history of southern Sudan, and his purpose its people.

"No," he said. "This is my place."

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