

Long Walk for a Purpose

When I had no school

It was after my father's death and the eruption of fight in Rumbek town. My mother decided to move us to a village outside the town. It was in a remote rural area of Akot. One day I asked myself of what would my life be in the future. I was in a village where there wasn't any formal school. There was only the traditional education. I couldn't attend school in town because my mother told me the enemies were there. I wouldn't either join the traditional ways of living in the village. That was because my father didn't like such practices when he was alive.

However the village men wanted me to follow their traditional practices. These practices included removal of lower teeth and cutting of marks across the forehead for the initiation. Though I didn't like these, most boys in the village were initiated in this way. I was fifteen by then and all the village boys and girls made fun on me. They said that I was a coward to refuse the initiation. I stayed so lonely because I had no friends to share things with me. The living became very horrible to me in the village.

Drawing for the above section: A little boy of 14 sitting lonely and looking very sad under a tree near a small hut/ village house.

Thinking about school

One day I told my mother and uncle Dongrin that I should go to school. I heard there were schools in refugee camps in Ethiopia. However the camp wasn't a near place. It was across the border at a distance of around six hundred miles from our village. My mother almost collapsed when she heard me claiming to leave the home.

"Going to Ethiopia, where strong men died on the way, leave about children like you!" My mother nervously replied. "People died of thirst, diseases, hunger and some got killed by enemies and wild animals." She added.

When I insisted, she sympathized with my situation but hesitatively accepted my request. She prayed for me and said that God would guide me on my way. My mother concluded that she would die before I return. I didn't believe that but truly happened eventually. My uncle counseled her that my education was important instead of having children without better future.

Going for school

I started preparing myself for the journey. My mother prepared me a gourd of simsim paste to eat on the way. She also gave me a mosquito-net and a blanket to carry with me. My nephew Kon who was elder than I, awaked me very early in the morning. He wanted us to rush to Akot where people were gathering for the travel. I got out of bed and said goodbye to my two younger brothers Khor and Cholthok. Uncle Malual stood me in front of the house before I could leave. He started performing some rituals so that God may listen to his prayers. He poured water onto my feet and threw some onto my body. That was a blessing according to our tradition. "You will go and come back home in peace," He assured me.

Drawing for the above section: A tall nilotic man wearing a traditional dress (robe) and small hat. Holding a long thin stick together with bowel made of calabash full of water speaking whilst facing up/ sky. Before him a young boy wearing a shirt and shorts folding his arms at his chest whilst facing down like in prayers session.

I left Akot on the 18/11/1987 with group of around one thousand men. They were blowing trumpets excitingly as we grinded the rough road surface with our bare feet. We walked a distance of thirty miles that day. We arrived to Yirol after two days. We had an assembly under big mahogany trees. During the assembly one of the leaders announced that our paramount Chief Majok Derder had been killed in Akot town. This occurred in the same day we had left Akot. It was very alarming to hear that as the whole group came from late Majok area. Majok was one of the famous chiefs in the Dinka Agar land.

We proceeded that evening and in the following morning came to Adior, the village of Chief Manyang Jok. He was a spiritual leader as well as the paramount chief of Chiec clan. We were warmly welcomed by Adior elders including Chief Manyang himself. The heads and other members of our groups met chief Manyang and asked to give us blessings. Manyang accepted and invited other elders who also possessed some spiritual powers to come and say words of blessing for us. Chief Manyang had to say words of prayer as his men repeat after him.

'God let them cross the Nile River without facing any danger. Give them courage to move across all kinds of wilderness. Let them survive on any thing they can chew. They should not perish in the bushes but bring there soul and bodies back home!' Prayed Chief Manyang and concluded with the word 'Yenakan' which meant *there it is* in the Dinak language. Sometimes this word was associated with the word Amen which is used by Christians and Muslims in their prayers.

When we were leaving Adior, everybody had to pass between Chief Manyang and another old man waving and pointing their holy spears towards the sky. The

people were singing both war and worship songs. After two days we reached to the Toach, and crossed the Nile using Machardit boat. We were eight in the boat rowed for two hours, before reaching the island of Achum. We spent the night in Achum and everybody was happy because we had crossed the Nile safely. Achum was a very rich island. The residents of Achum grew a variety of crops for food. Most of them were also fisheries and had plenty of fish. Unfortunately there were a lot of mosquitoes biting us throughout the night. People smeared themselves with blood as they ironed hundreds of mosquitoes upon themselves. We were lucky to have not got Malaria parasite.

In the following morning we continued for other days walk to Bor area. My trip was ten days by then from the day I had left home. My food finished and I was now sharing with others. We were provided with some sorghum for food by Commander Kuol in Manydeng town. It was my turn for the cooking duty that day for our group of ten. Unfortunately I was going to cook "*balila*" boiled sorghum grain. It was very tedious since there was no enough firewood around. There was only very light dry grass that didn't keep the head constant under the cooking pot. Two people used to collect the grass for me as I kept it lighting under the cooking pot. I was sweating due to extensive heat while sitting beside the pot. The heap of ashes also dirt my dress and my eyes were paining from the thick smoke that moved around me. It took me two hours to at least tell the people that food was ready. I knew it was not very soft to eat but no body complained because they had seen the difficult task I was doing.

Crossing dry and wet lands

We continued with our journey towards the villages of Makuac, Anyidi and Ajakager. We assembled at Ajakager where we received serious advices from the area administrator. When viewing the Eastern part of Ajakager you would see a dry land with scattered trees. We were leading to the town of Gumuruk but there was no any source of water across a distance of fifty miles which we covered in seventeen hours walk. We started this trip in the evening and continued through out the night. People preferred to travel by night as to avoid the heat of the sun during the day. Everybody gave thanks to God for crossing the desert safely.

Gumuruk was a small town in Murle Land. They had small houses thatched with grass and often with two doors at the different ends. They keep cattle and mainly depended on them for food. The food we had carried finished but the area administration contributed some bulls for us. Meat was our main food from there onward during the journey. We proceeded to Pibor which was a bigger town and settled there for tow days. There was insecurity in Pibor because enemy's planes tried to bomb the town. This pressurized us to move out without taking enough rest.

Unlike the semi-desert of Ajakager, Eastern Pibor where we passed was flooded up the town of Ajwara and Pochalla. Most parts had water to the level below my

knees but other raise up to my chest. It was very scarring to walk through. However my nephew Kon often walked near me in-order to help me when needed.

It was not easy to sit and take rest around Ajwara because there was water everywhere. One would either remain standing or look for a big ant hill to sit on. Again it was not safe because other creatures like insects and snakes gathered on the hills. There was no fire and we didn't cook food during that day. We only ate some wild fruits and dry meat we had roasted in Pibor.

Drawing for the above section: The same young boy crossing a stream with water to the level of his abdomen and being assisted to move across by an elder person. The environment is flooded with some trees standing in water and birds flying in the sky.

Settling in refugee camp

We came to Pochalla and spent one day rest before crossing Ethiopia Sudan Border. It was a beautiful green town with houses along the river. The inhabitants were people from Anuak tribe. Their girls wore colourful tradition dresses and necklaces. We crossed the border on the following day and spent two days before reaching Pinyudu refugee camp.

When we arrived to the camp I thought everything would be all right but I couldn't believe my eyes. Things were too bad from the beginning and that was in 1988. People just looked like moving skeletons. There was no enough food, shelter and health care in the camp. As a secondary school student, opportunities were very limited for me in finding a school. We had a special class but with few learning materials. We started with Sudanese and later shifted to Kenyan course books. I remember my best teachers and especially Dak Mabor who taught me English. He really prepared the way for me through his knowledge and attitudes that I gained. Along side schooling we were trained some life skills e.g. protection from aerial bombardment, how to escape an attack and etc. I also had some vocational skills like making a tukul, basic tailoring, simple furniture and growing of short term crops.

Though I missed my family, I kept on hoping to see them again. I continued looking for education further and further facing different challenges. Later I succeeded to complete my school. When I came back home, I didn't find my mother, brother Cholthok and Uncle Malual. They had died when I was a way but their pictures still remained at my sight.