

ABSOLUTION

By

P.A.DAVIES

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I

In the South Sudanese County of Kajo-Keji lies Nyanyar Ngun, a small, lightly populated village inhabited by no more than three hundred Kuku people: a breakaway tribe of the Bari People that had occupied South Sudan since the early 1900's.

The Kuku's religious beliefs were that of the Christian persuasion owing to the fact that Anglican Missionaries were in residence until the mid-60's, spreading the divine word of the good Lord amongst the assumed misguided and unholy black folk. In fact, it was the missionaries that gave the village its name of Nyanyar Ngun - *To love God* - and taught the children (and those that wanted to learn) how to read, write and speak English. So successful was the missionaries' integration with the Kuku people of Nyanyar Ngun that they publicly proclaimed credit for turning the *violent savages* of said village into English speaking followers of the Christian faith.

In truth, these particular Kuku people were - and always had been - a peaceful farming tribe. They had chosen to accept and tolerate the presence of the crazy men in their black suits, funny hats and passion for the Lord's work because, when it came down to it, they weren't afraid to roll up their sleeves and take a hoe to the hard earth or a machete to the maize. Plus, the missionaries' unusual ways were a constant source of entertainment to the village *Matat* (Chief) and would always evoke amused chatter amongst his people during their weekly social gatherings. As such, the *white* folk were allowed to stay.

In 1955, a bitter civil war broke out in the Sudan. By 1964, all the missionaries - those God-fearing men and women of peace who had been there since the turn of the century determined to bring harmony and love to their fellow man - had been forced to leave the

country by the rage of a conflict that would continue for a further ten years. God, it seemed, had given up on this part of the planet.

II

Two decades after the missionaries had been forced to leave Sudan - during the first civil war - the country became embroiled in its second civil war, a conflict brought on by the South's refusal to accept the military rule and Islamic dominance of the North. It was a war that would last for almost twenty-two years - from April 1983 to January 2005 - and result in approximately two million civilian deaths; the highest civilian death toll since WWII.

Led by Colonel John Garang, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) rose up and fought against the northern-based Government for their right to free thought and democracy, pronouncing to the watching world that they were victims of inhumane oppression. In reality, it was Garang who would become the oppressor, committing unspeakable acts of brutality against the very people he claimed to have been fighting for: by murdering or imprisoning anyone who didn't agree with his ideals.

Over the years, the unity within the SPLA became fractious, resulting in many violent disagreements amongst their soldiers and the formation of several breakaway militia groups. Some of those groups believed in and fought for the initial values set out by the SPLA, while others saw it as an opportunity to further their agendas of greed and power. It was the latter that would scour the land and terrorise the passive, the weak and those ill-equipped to fight back. It was the latter that would be the satanic purveyors of theft, kidnap, rape and murder. It was the latter that the innocent feared the most.

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During the rainy season between May and October, the White Nile River running to the east of Nyanyar Ngun would have been bursting at its seams, covering the surrounding plains with flood water and making it almost impossible to travel to this

particular location. Even during the dry season, the journey to this remote village was an arduous one and not one that anyone would care to make unless it was necessary. For the people approaching today, their journey wasn't necessary. Not really.

III

A thick plume of beige coloured dust rose high off the ground and hung in the air like an impenetrable wall of fog, as the ten or so rudimentary military vehicles sped along the sun-baked clay road towards the village. It had been an eleven-year-old boy called Loro who had first seen the convoy approaching and had run to tell his father who in turn, had alerted the *Temejik*, the council of elders. Due to the village's geographical location, impromptu visits by outsiders were rare but, given that a civil war was raging throughout the country, the Temejik knew that it was only a matter of time before this particular day would arrive.

The village Matat, a man whose age was unknown but was believed to be well into the nineties, walked with the speed and agility of a man forty years his junior and stood anxiously at the entrance to Nyanyar Ngun awaiting the arrival of the not-entirely-unexpected visitors. He had heard many stories of dread from the Nomadic or internally displaced tribes that had stopped at his village before travelling on to Uganda in search of refuge and wondered if his decision not to follow them had been a wise one. At the time, yes it had been. But now, with that conscience stirring benefit of hindsight, perhaps not.

Even though the convoy was still a good few miles away, the Chief knew exactly who would be manning the approaching vehicles and silently prayed to the *Muloko* - the spirits that resided on Earth - and *Ngun Lo Ki* - God of Heaven - for the protection of his people and asked that food and rest were all that the visitors sought. He also made a solemn vow that, if the visit today concluded without incident, then he would call a meeting of the council and lay plans to move his tribe south to Uganda. After all, he knew that this wouldn't be the last time that militia would pay them a call.

IV

The first vehicle to enter the village was a war-scarred, khaki coloured Jeep conveying a stocky man dressed in full army fatigues, a maroon-coloured beret and dark lense aviator sunglasses. A large Cuban cigar sat in his mouth, giving him the same air of authority as it had for Winston Churchill over forty years previously but without the adoration of his fellow countrymen.

The man was called General Ode Tombura; his self-assumed military title adopted when he'd formed his current band of miscreants in support of the plight of the South Sudanese people. Initially, Tombura's values appeared to be all about *the cause*, claiming that his militia, *Soldiers For Liberation* (SFL) were part of the much larger *Anti-Governmental Forces* (AGF) and that they fought side by side for the same democratic and human rights of the people. The AGF's leader, Riek Machar, publicly rebutted this claim stating that Tombura was little more than a thug and that his SFL was nothing but a pack of lawless renegades who were disgraced out of the AGF and fought only for themselves. Tombura cared not for the childish name calling, partly because it was true but mainly because he was too busy exploiting the war and making many American Dollars in the process. Added to this, the constant defamation of his character by Western journalists, who were creaming off the secret payroll of Sudan's news-hungry politicians, only served to heighten his status and gain him the respect he craved, even if that respect was born out of fear and intimidation rather than admiration. Tombura became consumed by his own importance believing himself to be untouchable and unstoppable and for him, the likes of John Garang and Riek Machar - both past Bosses - could go and royally fuck themselves.

In the rear of the Jeep, feverishly scanning the surroundings, sat a youth who couldn't have been more than seventeen years of age yet whose face suggested that he had experienced more travesty

than a man twice his age. He too was clothed in full army fatigues but wore a black beret as opposed to a maroon one. Hanging sash-style across his chest were two bandoliers of ammunition while an automatic assault rifle sat upright on his knee, his finger poised inside the trigger guard ready to fire the weapon and protect his leader at all costs: or take his own life if he failed to do so.

The village Chief held up his arm to greet the visitors, believing that the lead Jeep would stop to allow the main occupant to introduce himself and state his business for being there. It was, at the very least, common courtesy to do so. The Chief's arm was raised as the vehicle passed by without even slowing down and remained so as he watched it continue into the village. Rooted to the spot by a sudden foreboding of evil, he didn't even register the second Jeep approaching until he felt a sharp blow to his arm as that too sped by him. He glanced, almost casually, towards his arm and saw a thick jet of blood squirting out from where his hand had been severed from his wrist. A skinny youth, standing up in the second vehicle, jeered loudly at the dismembered man and screamed like a hyena in sick jubilation as he waved his machete high in the air. Whether or not the Chief saw the third vehicle approaching - a battered, red Nissan pickup truck - will remain a mystery, though the fanatical cheers from the eight soldiers sitting in the back, watching his decapitated body slump to the ground, would suggest not.

V

It was late into the evening when General Tombura and his militia finally left the village, leaving behind a smouldering ruin littered with the executed corpses of those whose only crime was to believe in God and hope for a better future. More than two-thirds of the inhabitants within that small, unthreatening farming community, were needlessly annihilated, while those that lived became the victims of dire humiliation, rape and in some cases, both; regardless of gender. It was a bitter irony that those who had survived believed death to be the better option.

Tombura had planned a particular agenda before entering that village and was pleased that he had been able to complete that agenda with success and fill one of his trucks with a quarry that would make him a tidy profit. The fact that the ten young girls he was taking were petrified and crying for their slaughtered parents, didn't concern Tombura in the slightest. What was more important was making sure that none of his *coked-up* soldiers tried to fuck them before he had delivered them to the buyer. After all, eight to twelve-year-old virgins brought a handsome return from the western rings of slavery and paedophilia, but damaged goods? Well, they would have to be tossed out onto the streets with little chance of survival or simply become the waste of another good bullet, neither of which was any good for his Swiss bank balance.

Tombura was also pleased that his trip had yielded a bonus and enabled him to procure a handful of fine, able-bodied *volunteers* to join his army. With a little time and careful handling, they would soon come to terms with the events of the day and grow into loyal fighters.

“The best compatriots of any militia are those who are tough, ruthless and above all, loyal,” he had explained to his new recruits. “What has happened here today was not the intention of my men but was a direct consequence of the war that was started by your so-

called protectors. But where are your protectors now? Where are your political Guardian Angels? Have they bothered themselves to take care of you today? No, my brothers, they have not and that is why they do not deserve your loyalty!”

He looked up and down the line of bowed heads, nobody daring to move more than their trembling bodies already were. Suddenly, one of the recruits standing in the line fell to the floor, as sheer exhaustion finally took its toll on his young body. Irritated by this unnecessary interruption to his pep talk, Tombura immediately signalled to a couple of his men leaning nonchalantly against the Nissan pick-up truck, smoking. Seeing the anger on their Boss’ face, they quickly discarded their cigarettes, ran across to the collapsed body and dragged it away out of sight.

A few moments later, each and every person that remained in the line, spontaneously flinched, as the daunting sound of a single gunshot reverberated loudly around the darkening village. Yet, despite the added trauma of knowing what had just occurred, not one of them dared to raise their head. Not one of them wanted to be next.

“Weakness,” Tombura suddenly growled, wagging an accusing finger in the direction that the report had come from. “And with weakness comes failure!”

He shook his head in dismay, glanced towards the ground to ponder a while and then spat.

“Do not mourn your comrade brothers,” he continued loudly, looking back up at the line. “His spirit became weak and broken by what has happened here today!” He began to pace up and down the line, frantically gesticulating with a raised finger.

“But you must not weaken,” he went on. “You must remember this day for the rest of your lives. Remember how your hearts were filled with pain, how your souls cried out for vengeance and believe me, those memories will soon become your strength, your independence and your reason to fight against the tyranny of politics that have taken the lives of your families and friends here today. Give me your loyalty brothers and I promise you now, before Allah, that your day of retribution will come. As soldiers of the SFL,

you will learn that General Tombura keeps his promises to those that are loyal!”

The General continued to look at the silent group for a while longer before spitting onto the ground once more and then gesturing to one of his men to load the recruits into a truck. He allowed himself a wry smile as they were led away, knowing that it wouldn't be long before these timid, frightened Kukus would be regular and proficient users of the AK47 assault weapon. After all, he thought, twelve-year-old Sudanese males are resilient little bastards.

Once they had been taken away, he turned sharply towards the boy standing behind him and grinned. “And you, my great warrior,” he began. “Will ride in my vehicle with me, yes?”

The boy said nothing, too afraid to speak. He quickly bowed his head hoping that the man wouldn't see the tear rolling down his cheek. Even at eleven years old he had quickly learned that Tombura, regardless of age, wouldn't tolerate *any* signs of weakness.

“Come,” the General said, placing a large hand on the boy's skinny shoulder. “It is not every day that a new recruit gets to ride with the Boss-man, but you have earned it my friend!”

The boy walked forward, his legs almost buckling under the weight of shame, grief and confusion that was consuming his mind, body and soul. Why was he being rewarded for what he had done? And why had his father spurred him on? He had lost his mother whilst she was giving birth to him and his father was all that he had. His father was his hero and his world but now, he too was gone. In later life - if he survived this war - the boy might come to understand that the actions of his father were a display of unconditional love towards his child, but not now, not today.

Earlier that day, Tombura had placed a gun into the child's hands and instructed him to shoot his father. The boy had screamed his refusal, becoming hysterical with both fear and sadness at the merciless suggestion. An impatient Tombura had slapped the boy's face hard and given him a grave ultimatum.

“If you do not shoot this man and prove to me that you are worthy to be a soldier, I will have him killed slowly in front of your very eyes and then put a bullet into your own head!”

Hearing the atrocious threat, the badly beaten father had pleaded with his son to do as he was told, knowing that his child’s life would be spared if he could just find the courage to carry out this madman’s instruction.

“Please son,” he begged. “Please do this and let me pass knowing that your life will be spared. I need you to do this for me, my son. I need you to be brave!”

Eventually, the boy held up the gun, his hands shaking uncontrollably as he cried. His father suddenly reached up and grasped the barrel with his fingers, placing it against his own forehead whilst encouraging his son to pull the trigger. Just before the hammer of the gun slammed forward to deliver its inevitable conclusion, the father smiled at his son and spoke his last words. “I love you Loro!”

*

As the General’s Jeep began to drive out of the village, Loro, sitting in the rear seat, glanced back to where he and his father had once lived, where earlier that same day they had sat and eaten breakfast together as the sun rose over the mountains. Holding back the tears he so desperately wanted to shed but dared not, he thought about the world he had lost.

“I love you too papa.” He whispered.

VI

The sun rose on a new day casting a felicitous hue of blood red light across the blackened embers of Nyanyar Ngun. Of the people that were left, some walked around like zombies - aimless and without purpose - whilst others lay prostrate or crouched upon the ground lamenting the dead.

From a hillside field of maize that bordered the village, a terrified sixteen-year-old boy finally emerged and began to walk slowly and cautiously back towards the scene of forced decrepitude. When the militia had arrived the previous day, he had instinctively run into the tall crop and had remained there in hiding. He had seen the soldiers, like a pack of rabid wolves, run wild through his homestead, indiscriminately attacking whoever they came across. He saw homes razed to the ground, people shot or hacked to death with machetes where they stood, whilst others (mainly women) were thrown to the ground to be systematically raped and beaten. He had witnessed the innocent get slaughtered, the elderly abused and humiliated and the children defiled. He had watched in horror as his own younger sister was snatched away and bundled into a truck whilst baying youths, no older than he, set fire to his house and then shot his parents dead as they ran screaming from their home engulfed in flame. From the sanctuary of the maize, he had seen all these atrocities take place and yet, even when his own kin had been in trouble, he had done nothing to help. This is how he saw it and whilst logic dictated that any attempt to help would have been incredibly futile, it did not prevent the overwhelming surge of shame that now infected the boy's mind.

He walked tentatively across the bloodstained dirt that surrounded the charred skeleton frame of his home and immediately expelled the contents of his stomach when he saw what remained of his mother and father. Overcome with sorrow and wracked with guilt, the boy fell heavily onto his knees, lowered his head and began

to pray. He hoped that God would grant him forgiveness as that was the one thing he would never grant himself.

*

It was nightfall by the time the boy had buried his mother and father but the hours spent laying his parents to rest had given him time to reflect and plan. Earlier, he had asked God for forgiveness but now, standing beside the primitive graves of his parents, alone and cold, he doubted that a God even existed. After all, where had God been when his family had needed him the most? Where had God been whilst the people of his tribe were being massacred? He lifted his head up towards the stars, hoping to see some kind of sign that would restore his dwindling faith but knowing that none would come.

“You have nothing to say?” He shouted out, with tearful, bitter anger. “Then fuck you!”

He crouched down, kissed both of his hands and placed one on each of the graves. “I’m sorry,” he began, quietly. “I was scared ... and I didn’t know what to do. I just...” He broke off, becoming choked with emotion and wiped the tears from his eyes with the sleeve of his filthy shirt.

“Mama ... Papa,” he continued, through his woeful sobs. “Please don’t hate me!”

*

An hour later, the boy was walking away from the village with a pouch containing a dozen or so unripe cobs of corn, some bread, a flask of water and a pocket knife, slung across his shoulder whilst a rolled up blanket was held under his arm. He was heading north and though his journey would be a hazardous one, he didn’t really have a choice. He needed to follow the path of the militia and attempt to rescue his sister if he was to ever gain the respect of his dead parents’ spirits. He needed to earn his absolution ... or die trying.
