

War in the Town

I was ten years old almost a seventh of my father's age. I was the youngest in the family and you can imagine how parents get frustrated looking after their last-born. I attended school in primary three, and after school I liked to spend time listening to my father's stories. I always walked with him when he visited relatives and friends.

One day we went to see my elder sister Ayen. Her house was at a distance of one kilometre from ours. We spent some time drinking tea and coffee while we chatted. After an hour we decided to leave and said good-bye to her. On our way home the noise of gunfire erupted in the town. It was the first time I had ever heard such colourful sounds: some deep, some sharp and others flat, as the bullets whistled in the air. It was a great entertainment to me but my father's feelings were quite different.

"God cannot want me to bear the same situation we suffered at the time of the Anyanya One (*the first southern guerrilla movement*)," my father said sadly.

"What is wrong father?" I asked.

"I have no time for questions now. Let's hurry home, let's hurry up." he repeatedly instructed me.

When we reached the house, we found my mother worriedly waiting for us in the doorway.

"El hamdu-lillah (*Praise be to God*)," she said as she opened the door for us.

In the afternoon the gunfire stopped and I asked my mother why she was so sad. "Dear son," she said to me. "The gun-shots reminded us of our past troubles. Your father lost two sons who were strong men during the Anyanya movement. As for me my relatives were slaughtered like goats. Throughout the village our houses were burnt. We escaped death through God's will otherwise I would not be here today." The town didn't stay peaceful but continued to be shelled with big guns. Due to the stress, my father became ill and died the same year.

The fighting intensified and there were frequent raids in the town. Ambushes were laid on the roads. Innocent civilians were killed and many others injured. This was either in crossfire or in deliberate attacks by angry soldiers.

On Christmas day morning, the 25th December 1985, my younger brother and I decided to go to church. Unfortunately the road going there passed near an army barracks. Worse still their force had fallen in an ambush at Bhar el Naam River

the day before. They had retreated to Rumbek with many losses. The situation was so bad. They blocked the roads around their barracks but we didn't realise any of this. As we were passing by, one of the soldiers called us. His manner was aggressive.

"You!" he called as he pointed at us and continued by asking, "Where are you going?"

I sensed that there was something wrong. I quickly thought of a suitable answer, though not the truth. "We are going to see Mulazim Abdul-hamid at police head quarters." I didn't want to say that we were going to church because he might have become even more annoyed.

"These are Anyanya messengers," commented one of the injured soldiers. My eyes were drawn to the white bandage on his arm where blood was melting through. He tried without success to grab a gun from his friend. I felt shocked with fear as we ran away. My heart was still pounding as I told my mother all that had happened and she said we were lucky to have got back safely.

The town was surrounded for a period of three months. In March 1986 people quietly deserted Rumbek by night. We left everything in the house except the clothes we wore. That was the fall of Rumbek for the first time.

Hunger in the Village

I found myself in a strange environment. Village life was completely different from what I was used to. There was hunger all over the land. There were no schools and no health centres; no salt, no sugar and no soap. We looked for wild greens to eat like goats. I knew more than twenty wild vegetables and fruits that were edible. Some of these were poisonous and could kill us if not prepared and cooked well. Elders taught us how to prepare them. Thorough washing, drying, cooking or mixing the greens with sour stuff made them safe to eat. We had to chew them in-order to eat and survive the day. Mothers and children had the greater share of the work in getting food for their families.

Like other children I used to wake up at 4:00 am. There were no clocks or watches to tell me the time. But black-bills alerted me instead of a cock crowing. No chickens were left in the village because they had all been eaten. Each morning I picked up my calabashes and rushed together with my cousins, to collect some lulu fruits in the forest. Many people filled the forest collecting the lulu fruits. I thanked God for protecting us from the danger of wild animals.

One morning we found a lion sitting like a man under the lulu tree. On seeing the blinking eyes we screamed and ran. Everybody climbed a tree including my

uncle's wife who was lame. Even today I cannot understand how she made it with her paralysed leg. She climbed up by herself but later she was unable to get down and needed help from other people.

Not only lions frightened me but also snakes often crept under the lulu trees. We risked walking with bare feet in the dark. By 9:00 am I had to come with the fruit for my mother and younger brothers. We ate the fruits and went to dig in the garden. In the afternoon I helped to fetch water from the well. It was not easy to get water especially during the dry season. Though the well was 17 metres deep it could still run dry. This was because of the large population using it. We queued for more than three hours waiting for water to leak from its holes.

My mother cooked the mixture of wild greens we had collected from big trees and small shrubs. I cannot describe its taste at all. But I had to swallow as much as I could in order to fill my stomach.

"Eat so that you survive. There will be a time when the war and hunger will stop and we will have a better life," my mother told me. She encouraged us, but her words sounded like a dream. But truly, months later we had enough food from our crops. There was no longer any hunger. Similarly after a few years the war stopped and there was peace. We settled into a happy life and past events became stories that we told our children, just as my father had told stories to me.