



Freeing the Child Soldiers of Salva Kiir

Among many tragic examples, the murder of South Sudanese national, Lost Boy and Canadian citizen Richard Lokeya, and the abduction of journalist Clement Lochio Lomornana (whose whereabouts are still unknown) by state actors, testify to the life-threatening risks implied in refugee justice work in South Sudan today.

Essay / Matt Hanson February 28, 2019

Abraham of Ngatuba

At the flick of a wrist, his hand traveled the better of the human story. In a Chinese teahouse in the dead of a Calgary winter, Abraham told me his. “You’ve fallen into history,” I said, astonished. The eighth hour passed. We ordered the last round from a touch-screen tablet embedded in our table.

Local nonprofits and the media had been after his story. “I wasn’t able to tell them, like I can tell you now,” he said, in his usual soft-spoken voice. His mother tongue, the Didinga language of Eastern Equatoria, South Sudan, remains thick in his accent, as do traces of Arabic and Swahili. He spoke with the authenticity of a great storyteller, full of testimony and vision.

In his earliest memories, Abraham accompanied his uncle and a small band of elders as the youngest member of what can only be described as a cow camp. From ages six to twelve, he survived almost solely on fresh, raw cow’s milk, occasionally blending in the cow’s blood. Rarely, about once every few months, the camp would be close enough to a village to barter for cornmeal to mix with the milk, stirring it into a thick, porridge-like consistency.

To this day, Abraham’s village, Ngatuba, in Budi County, is a long haul from the nearest road. One must walk from the township of Chukudum for about twelve hours, straight into the lush and mountainous rural extremities of South Sudan. “They don’t use electricity, gas, oil. They don’t even have bikes,” Abraham reminded me with a buoyant grin. The cattle camps migrate seasonally throughout the region, as they have since time immemorial.

His momentous storytelling began with a curious question.

“Where did you pierce your ears?” I wondered, naively. Once, when camped close to a village, his cows in tow, Abraham remembered seeing a traditional dancer. The man had an immense presence, dressed as he was in feathers, jewelry, and paint. He danced passionately, and the girls swooned.

Abraham fled to the bush to pierce his ears. The thought of attracting so many young women and uplifting the village simply by dancing stole away his young heart. Yet, his uncle reprimanded him. Abraham maintained profound respect for his uncle, the man who raised him during his years in the cow camps. Although a traditional Didinga man, his uncle spoke out for youth education, and exuded a distinctly characterful and peaceable humanity.

“What are those marks?” I asked, unable to look away from the deep scarring on one of his wrists.

“Polio. I was cured by a traditional remedy.”

It was the first time he ward off death. After spending his childhood in the cow camps, he returned to his village, where he was determined to finish high school in Torit, the state capital of Eastern Equatoria. It was there where he was nearly crippled for life by the debilitating symptoms of Polio. Aided by an herbal remedy, Abraham simply acted on his iron resolve to walk to school again. And as he did, the cure miraculously took effect.

On the morning of his final exam, the sounds of war erupted. Everyone ran for the forest. Thunderous gunfire shook the ground as the air filled with smoke and debris. Then, a loudspeaker



sounded. The rebels spoke of their mission to bring justice and peace to the land. After that morning, Abraham could only mourn for his uncle, who had been murdered by the advancing rebels. So began his terrifying, and awe-inspiring journey on foot to Kenya, an adolescent fending for himself in the bush, surviving carnivores, thirst, heat, starvation, and war.

He describes his experience as unique from the Lost Boys, who were part of a later exile. His accounts are no less dire, as he survived by resorting to his primeval upbringing, shooting wild animals with a bow and arrow, and hiding from armed boys who wandered with bloodlust throughout the sun-stricken countryside.

South Sudan in Diaspora

Conflicts have ensued in South Sudan since civil war broke out in the winter of 2013, resulting in the death of almost 400,000 people, with nearly 200,000 sheltered in six UN sites across the country. More than five million people are facing food insecurity, 36,000 of whom are on the brink of starvation. Only one mental health program, with eight beds and a solitary psychologist, addresses the nationwide war traumas that afflict the country's population of 12 million people.

Today, Abraham lives in Canada, where some 50,000 South Sudanese reside, a fraction of the more than two million of fellow citizens in exile. Residing abroad, he directs the Maji Peace Centre in Eastern Equatoria, through which he has successfully reopened trade between the Didinga and Toposa peoples, whose conflicts had claimed his brother's life and forced his community into the hills. His voice truly exemplifies life lived for the social ideals of education.

From Canada, backed by community resources, Abraham kept a vigilant watch on the current events in South Sudan, a common practice among his compatriots in the diaspora. In his country, youth are desperately vulnerable to militarization.

The crimes of enlisting and training child soldiers as young as ten, mostly between fifteen and seventeen years of age, have worsened in South Sudan since civil warfare returned to the youngest nation on Earth, for the first time following national independence in 2011. Beginning with an act of genocide in the capital, Juba, on December 15, 2013, the corrupt authority of the nationally elected, ruling government began placing the military burden of a nation on the shoulders of unwitting minors.

Following the massacre, the national government, led by President Salva Kiir Mayardit, began recruiting child soldiers into involuntary military service, purportedly to abate retaliation. This type of flagrant crime against humanity, unfortunately, is expected among insurrectionary rebel forces, yet soon after the state-sanctioned genocidal violence in Juba, in December of 2013, the unspeakable atrocity crossed civil lines. Since then, the longest civil war in Africa has resumed in the world's youngest nation, only to be exacerbated by the first independent government of South Sudan.

Many of the minors had never left their villages before, only to be coerced and abducted by government representatives, promised payment in the amount of 500 Kenyan Shillings (5USD), and taken into custody in the back of transports heading for undisclosed destinations. In one village, 400 children were taken to a camp that was training over a thousand youths, most in their early teens. There is an unknown number of government military training camps for child soldiers in South Sudan.

On Monday, January 26, 2015, two boys named Julius and Marko escaped one such camp, where they were to prepare for the front lines in the oil-rich Unity State. The day after their escape, Commander David Yau Yau of Jonglei State began surrendering child soldiers under his forces. That week, *Vice News* reported on the UN deal that led to the release of 3,000 boys, 11 to 17 years of age, from under the rebel command of David Yau Yau. But the abduction of Julius and Marko by state actors represents a then-unprecedented human rights violation perpetrated directly by the infamous failed-state regime of President Salva Kiir.

Abraham orchestrated the dramatic, successful escape of his two nephews from a government



military training camp near Eastern Equatoria. In the early hours of a winter day in the Canadian Midwest, Abraham phoned the two boys a week after they escaped to confirm that they were indeed free. They accomplished the daring act with his immediate aid.

At the time of the conversation, they were on the way to Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, where they could enroll in school. Abraham himself had once arrived on foot at the same refugee camp as a young boy of similar age, also tragically on the run from war-torn Eastern Equatoria. In a few years, he would climb the ladder of scholastic competence, and become an enviable beneficiary of humanitarian Canadian immigration policy.

They spoke in Didinga. After the usually lengthy South Sudanese greeting turned into a more serious tone, Abraham began to question the teenage boys, trying his best to filter out a vague racket in the background.

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[1]Still from a video photographed by Abraham of Ngatuba on his trips back to his homeland in Eastern Equatoria, S. Sudan

[Still from a video photographed by Abraham of Ngatuba on his trips back to his homeland in Eastern Equatoria, S. Sudan](#) [2]



[3]Still from a video photographed by Abraham of Ngatuba on his trips back to his homeland in Eastern Equatoria, S. Sudan

Child, Fugitive and Witness

“How did you get to the military camp?” asked Abraham.

The older of the two boys, Julius, responded first.

“When the civil war broke out in Juba, all the young people were forced to join the military. ”

“My half-brother and I were taken to train to fight for the South Sudanese government. ”

Abraham pressed the cell phone firmly to his ear, doing his best to bridge thousands of miles and decades of perspective over shoddy reception from a small town in South Sudan.

“Did you go there with Marko?” he asked, with a tone of concern about the younger boy.

“No. I went to the training camp before Marko. I did not know that Marko was also taken from the village.”

“While I was at the training camp, some people from the government came to pick up their children to send them to school in Uganda and Kenya. After December of 2013, the government officials said, ‘If you are a male, you have to get a gun to fight.’”

“How old do you have to be to get a gun to fight?” Abraham asked.

“The government officials did not care how old.”

“How many of you were taken from Juba?”

“We were very many,” Marko responded.



"I did not know anything until I was informed that we were in Juba. Since I was born, I have stayed in the village. I had never traveled anywhere, not even to town."

"[When I arrived in Juba], I was told that I needed to be trained to become a South Sudanese national. But I did not know anything much about the training."

"When my friends and I arrived in Chukudum, there were five cars ready to take us to Juba. We were taken right away from Chukudum to Torit and then Juba. We spent three weeks in the military barracks in Juba."

"I had no idea where my friends and I were,"

"The camp looked very different from the village. We were isolated."

Abraham then asked Marko to describe daily life at the camp.

"Our daily activities were to march and train every day from 5 a.m. to 12 noon."

"It was rough training. We ran every day. Often our bodies were soaked in muddy, unhealthy water and then we ran."

"We were treated very poorly. Most often, we were beaten for nothing. We slept in very poor conditions. There is nothing I can compare it with. Every day we ate beans with corn meal, without salt or oil. There were over a thousand boys, all of them under age and a few adults." "I realized that I was treated like government property. I had no rights at the training camp. I had to follow everything I was told to do. When I failed to follow, I was beaten."

"Most of us were under eighteen years old. My friends and I are fifteen years old."

"Was there talk of fighting in Unity State?"

"We heard that there was fighting in Bor, Malakal and Bentiu, but we did not know much about it because nobody talked about it openly. The government officials told us that if you are a man you must get a gun to fight, but we did not know whom we had to fight."

[Still from a video photographed by Abraham of Ngatuba on his trips back to his homeland in Eastern Equatoria, S. Sudan \[4\]](#)



[5]Still from a video photographed by Abraham of Ngatuba on his trips back to his homeland in Eastern Equatoria, S. Sudan

[Still from a video photographed by Abraham of Ngatuba on his trips back to his homeland in Eastern Equatoria, S. Sudan](#) **[6]**



[7] Still from a video photographed by Abraham of Ngatuba on his trips back to his homeland in Eastern Equatoria, S. Sudan

Child Soldiers' Escape

"When my cousin [Julius] found me, I was relieved. When you reached me, I was hopeful that my cousin and I could escape the training camp," said Marko, remembering how surprised he was when he realized there was a way out of the horrifying camp.

"It was very dangerous. There were many roadblocks along the way. It was very difficult for many to escape the training camp. We had to remain calm while traveling. We had rough times where we had to walk on foot for many kilometers because it was dangerous."

On March 4, 2015, Abraham wrote to his colleagues around the world: "Hope all is well. Another child soldier escaped right from the battlefield after how many battles he survived in Bentiu. He is still hiding in South Sudan and he will be out soon." He has continued his efforts, reminiscent of the righteous ones who risked their lives to secure safe passage out of Europe for Jews during WWII.

Last month, as Abraham endured the bitter Calgary winter, he received a call from South Sudan, on the 26th of January. It was the chief of his native village in Eastern Equatoria, who informed him that his community was very close to completing a feeder road from Napotipot to the Maji Peace Center. He was told that it would only take five days to pave the road, providing greater access to the Maji Peace Center, where locals would then drill for water.

"The Peace Center will create so many opportunities," Abraham wrote in the days that followed, excited and hopeful. "The two communities, the Didinga and the Toposa, will share the local resources. The people will develop trust and peace-building towards sustainable projects together."

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[4] <https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/still-video-photographed-abraham-ngatuba-his-trips-back-his-homeland-eastern-equatoria-s-0>

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[6] <https://www.tohumagazine.com/file/still-video-photographed-abraham-ngatuba-his-trips-back-his-homeland-eastern-equatoria-s-1>

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