

Gambila

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Gambila was impossibly old. Old enough to remember the building of Lado, Gondokoro, Rejaf and Mongalla. He knew many things in the history of his people.

Our enemies were jealous. They had no river land. The government came and told us to move across the river. People went as far as Malakia, and on the land we had left behind they built a new Juba. They did not compensate us for the land. They said we must pay taxes. For what? For the stone houses of the government? Had we not sacrificed enough? They took our land and gave us nothing in return. It was only a small village before. The stone houses, the offices, the barracks and the fine roads. They look as if to last, but where are they now? They grow up and fall down again. Where are they now? Their only inhabitants are poisonous snakes. Even the stones are covered with grass and the names all but forgotten. It is better I stay here and watch. What will cause me to change? I am still here.

Gambila lived like a hermit in a solitary tukul just outside the markings for the perimeter fence of the new airport. He could stand on one lean leg for hours like a stork, gazing out of his weakened eyes as the construction progressed, both arms looped over the ebony

stick across his back. He smoked a long black stemmed pipe with a dull brass band before the bowl. Every day he would walk naked the length of the new strip, politely treading his own path in the upturned earth at the sides.

Before the sun went down in the evenings, the labourers gathered outside the fenced-in compound to wash at the tap on the side of the construction office. Their bodies emerged shiny and black from under the day's grey dust. They were young men who had left behind the cattle camps in remote areas, too impatient to remain there watching the seasons pass like so many cattle crossing the river, each one resting its head on the back of the one in front. They wanted to choose their own wives, and the money they earned in towns from selling their strength could silence the protests of their elders. One of them shouted to Gambila as if they thought he was deaf.

- Old man! Cover your nakedness, or are you looking for a new wife at your age?

That evening Gambila rooted through the heap of rubbish waiting to be burnt outside the French workers' compound. He found some material he liked the feel of. Next day he strode again the length of his domain in solitary grandeur wearing a pink see-through negligee not even long enough to cover the nonchalant swing of his manhood.

Khamis, the light-skinned youth who had drawn Gambila's attention to his nakedness, managed to persuade the old man, who could have been his grandfather, to swap the negligee for a more modest dress with a breast pocket, very convenient for holding pipes he pointed out. It was a jellabia that he had stolen from Emmanuel, the Greek tailor in Malakia, and had not dared to wear in case he was recognised and arrested.

The garment had been customised by cutting off both arms above the elbow and amputating the hem to the knee whereupon it had been dyed from a dazzling but impractical white to a deep shade of purple.

As a boy herding cattle, Khamis himself had never worn clothes. He still remembered the feeling of envy when an important man from the government was due in the area and in advance of the visit fifty brand new pairs of red, yellow and green shorts were distributed to all the men in the village. The important man, thinking this was the normal dress of the villagers, wished to impress upon them his common humanity. He cast aside his military uniform and was pictured in the Northern press leaping up and down in his underwear as if participating in a giant's sports day.

The freshly laid tarmac strip was like a black river sweating under the hot sun. A thin straight line to guide the planes down from north to south. At the southern end, where the planes came to a halt, the strip appeared to melt into the distant foot of Jebel Kujur, rising behind it out of the otherwise flat treeless landscape. Juba's poor forests had disappeared over the years to be made into charcoal for the cooking fuel needed by an excess of humanity trekking to the towns. Buried in funeral pyres of ashen earth, the suffocating smoke squeezed the last hint of green moisture out of the wood.

Gambila had known the time when it was the only airstrip in the South. He had been there another August day nearly three decades ago when the British were due to leave, just before Independence. The southern men of Equatorial battalion had mutinied in Torit, refusing to be sent to the North. He had watched as plane after plane landed spilling out northern troops to be driven in trucks to crush the rebellion. The town of Torit had emptied itself as people escaped to forests, mountains and

across rivers and borders. Countless numbers of his generation were never to return, as many dying from famine and disease as from the bullet and spear. The mutiny had spread throughout the South like burning lines of grass before the hunting season; and it was during the subsequent years of darkness and war that Gambila's eyes had gradually clouded over. If he had still been able to see properly he would have witnessed, under cover of night, the unloading of the trucks, as they returned with dead bodies removed from the battlefield to fly them back for the families waiting in Khartoum.

The stones that had been subdued by massive rollers, to lie passive under the tarmac carpet, had been blasted out of the mountain whose jagged edges rose like a livid scar on the landscape. Danger signs around it were obscured under the layers of dust that settled following each fresh explosion. The silence of afternoons shattered further by the demonic roar of huge trucks thundering up and down hammering a new road out between the airport and Jebel Kujur. Occasionally the shadow of a driver was glimpsed on high as though in a mountain mist. The old grazing grounds were abandoned as cattle had to retreat to more peaceful pastures where the grasses could breathe. People said that the god of the mountain was not happy with the destruction, and that thunder would reply with thunder.

When the last truck of the day was locked behind the compound gates and the engines began to cool, the evening wind carried a single Colubus cry across the exhausted gullies, and the troubled mountain's complaint was heard in the snapping of knee-high grasses and the sound of insects roused to devour the fallen stalks. The jebel was silhouetted in a desperate ritual, as a fistful of coloured fingers of light reached up but grasped only changing shadows cast down like so many moods on the mountain's exposed side.

The last stages of a journey were stamped on Gambila's features as he turned his face each night towards the setting sun. His eyes nearly closed against the smoke from his pipe. The warmth on his wrinkled skin a memory of spent strength. When he reached the airport building he took the skinny pipe-stem from between his yellowed teeth and tapped the bowl on the newly whitewashed wall to empty it of ash before putting it carefully in his pocket, and heading for the ramshackle tea-shed on the old road into the airport.

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