

A NEVER-ENDING STORY IN SOUTH SUDAN

WRITTEN & DRAWN BY ELLA BARON
IN COLLABORATION WITH MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES



IN THE PIBOR REGION, SOME EXPECTANT MOTHERS TOWARDS THE END OF THEIR PREGNANCY LEAVE THEIR REMOTE HOMES AMONGST THE NOMADIC CATTLE HERDS TO SLEEP IN THE MOTHERS' WAITING HOUSE WHERE THEY ARE JUST METRES FROM MSF'S MATERNITY WARD. ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE IN THE REGION IS SO LIMITED, THAT THIS IS ONE OF THE ONLY WAYS THEY CAN ENSURE THAT THEY'LL HAVE THE SUPPORT OF TRAINED MIDWIVES WHEN LABOUR BEGINS. MOST MOTHERS WHO TRAVEL HERE MUST WALK BAREFOOT THROUGH THE BUSH FOR DAYS.

IN MY CASE, IT WAS A PLANE, HELICOPTER, 4x4 & PAIR OF GUMBOOTS THAT CARRIED ME FROM MY HOME IN THE UK TO THE MOTHERS' WAITING HOUSE IN SEPTEMBER 2019

MANY OF THE WOMEN IN THE WAITING HOUSE HAVE HAD LITTLE INTERACTION WITH MODERN TECHNOLOGY. THEY MAY NEVER HAVE ENCOUNTERED FOREIGNERS & VIEW US & OUR CAMERAS WITH ANXIETY.



MSF INVITED ME & MY SKETCHPAD TO THE MOTHERS' WAITING HOUSE IN THE HOPE THAT WE'D BE MORE WELCOME...

BABY MARIA'S MOTHER LAITO & GRANDMOTHER CHACHA WERE CURIOUS TO SEE ME SKETCHING, & SOON HAPPY FOR ME TO DRAW THEM.

AS I SKETCHED, THEY TOLD ME THE STORY OF MARIA'S BIRTH...



IT WAS THE MIDWIFE WHO DELIVERED MARIA WHO TRANSLATED THE STORY OF HER BIRTH FOR ME. LOCAL TO PIBOR, SHE TRAINED WITH MSF TO BECOME A MIDWIFE.



HELLO! WE'VE BEEN EXPECTING YOU, I SEE YOU'VE ALREADY MET LAITO & CHACHA



I'M MIDWIFE MARIA

ISN'T THAT THE BABY'S NAME?

THEY NAMED HER MARIA AFTER ME!



COME! SIT WITH US! LISTEN! I'LL TRANSLATE FOR YOU

WE COME FROM THE VILLAGE OF MALLODIN; MANY DAYS WALK FROM PIBOR



LAITO WAS PREGNANT WITH HER FIRST CHILD...

MARIA, I'M SORRY BUT THE SWATTING SOUND IS DISRUPTING MY RECORDING...

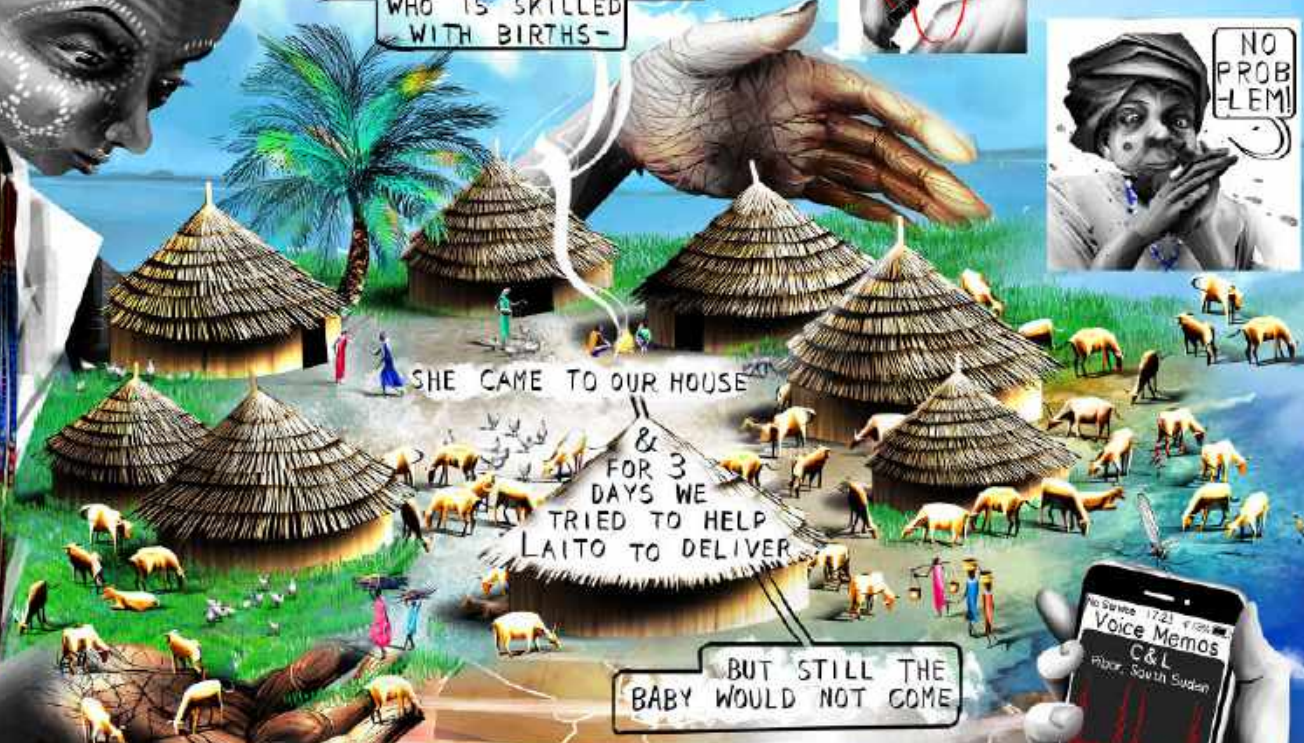
WHEN HER CONTRACTIONS BEGAN I CALLED OUR NEIGHBOUR WHO IS SKILLED WITH BIRTHS-



QUIETER?



NO PROBLEM!



SHE CAME TO OUR HOUSE

& FOR 3 DAYS WE TRIED TO HELP LAITO TO DELIVER

BUT STILL THE BABY WOULD NOT COME



WHAT'S HAPPENING? IS SHE GOING TO BE OKAY? IS THE BABY OKAY

I'M SO SORRY I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S WRONG. IN GUMURUK TOWN THERE MIGHT BE MSF MIDWIVES WHO CAN HELP...

BUT IT'S MANY DAYS WALK FROM HERE... I DON'T THINK SHE'LL MAKE IT...



LAITO IS STRONG - WE'LL GET THERE

BEFORE
SUNRISE



WE STARTED WALKING THE CONTRACTIONS WERE SO BAD THAT LAITO COULDN'T WALK ALONE SO I HAD TO SUPPORT HER ALWAYS. IT IS RAINY SEASON, & THE PATH WAS FULL OF WATER SO THAT SOMETIMES WE WERE WADING UP TO OUR WAIST



"WHEN DARKNESS CAME, WE WERE STILL WALKING & I WORRIED THAT WE'D HAVE TO SLEEP BY THE PATH."



"BUT THEN WE SPOTTED A HOUSE."



"THEY WERE STRANGERS TO US-BUT WHEN THEY SAW LAITO WAS PREGNANT THEY WELCOMED US INTO THEIR HOME"

THE NEXT MORNING

BY NOW WE WERE VERY WEAK. FOR DAYS WE'D HAD NO FOOD

SINCE THE CONTRACTIONS BEGAN LAITO COULDN'T DRINK MUCH WATER OTHERWISE THE BABY'S HEAD WOULD HAVE GROWN SOFT

HERE SHE GOES AGAIN WITH THESE SILLY IDEAS

OUR HOST BLESSED OUR JOURNEY

THEY BLESSED US LIKE THIS

WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE? TO BE HUNGRY LIKE THAT?

YOUR HEAD BECOMES SO HEAVY

LIKE THIS, EVERYTHING SPINS OUTWARDS

DOTS DANCE IN YOUR EYES

I REMEMBER HUNGER WHEN LAITO WAS A CHILD

BUT WE ARE NO STRANGERS TO HUNGER

THE GROUND FALLS AWAY UNTIL EVERYTHING FADES TO BLACK

THERE WILL BE HUNGER AGAIN

WHEN LAITO FAINTED, WE'D STOP TO REST IN THE SHADE OF A TREE



DESPITE LAITO'S WEAKNESS, I KNEW WE HAD TO KEEP WALKING

(HOW WAS THE PATH?)

NORMAL.

WOULD YOU DESCRIBE IT?

WELL...



HE HE HE

CHILL! THESE ONES DON'T BITE!

"EVENTUALLY WE REACHED A RIVER TOO DEEP TO WALK.
I PAID TWO MEN TO HELP US CROSS.
THEY HAD NO BOAT - ONLY A PLASTIC CLOTH
THE MEN PLACED THE PLASTIC ON THE WATER & SWAM IT ACROSS-

WE ARE NOT ABLE TO SWIM-

ONLY THIS ^{THIN} SHEET
SUPPORTED US-

THERE WAS TOO MUCH WATER-

I THOUGHT THE SHEET WOULD FOLD-
& WE WOULD FALL-

THEN THE CROCODILES WOULD COME.

OR WE'D JUST SINK DEEPER & DEEPER UNTIL

ALL THREE OF US DROWNED-



LAITO WAS SO AFRAID



No I WASN'T!



MAYBE JUST A BIT



IT TOOK US TWO DAYS TO WALK TO GUMURUK. BUT AT THE CLINIC-

THEY COULDN'T HELP US



I'M SO SORRY YOU HAVE TO GO TO PIBOR WHERE THEY HAVE BETTER FACILITIES. IT'S POSSIBLE SHE NEEDS A C-SECTION

THE PATH'S FLOODED. WE'LL NEVER MAKE IT.

I'LL MESSAGE MSF PIBOR THEY'LL SEND A BOAT



ALL WE COULD DO IS WAIT & HOPE

(PERHAPS THEY WILL NOT COME

(PERHAPS THE BABY IS ALREADY DEAD.

(PERHAPS I WILL LOSE LAITO TOO



WE WAITED TWO DAYS & THEN MARIA CAME!

MSF SENT ME INCASE LAITO DELIVERED ON THE JOURNEY. THE RIVER WAS TOO THICK WITH WEEDS-THE ONLY WAY WAS BY HELICOPTER

AFTER THE HELICOPTER ARRIVED, MANY THINGS STARTED TO HAPPEN VERY FAST



THEN, WHEN IT SEEMED THE CONTRACTIONS HAD LASTED EIGHT SEASONS INSTEAD OF EIGHT DAYS



EVERYTHING CAME TO A STANDSTILL- EXCEPT FOR HER-& SHE WAS THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERED.



LUCK! ENOUGH WITH THE MUD!

AFTER 8 DAYS OF CONTRACTIONS THE ACTUAL BIRTH WASN'T SO BAD!

BUT NOW WE HAVE TO GO HOME



LAITO IS MY ELDEST, BUT I ALSO HAVE 6 OTHER CHILDREN. MY CO-WIFE IS LOOKING AFTER THEM (ALONG WITH HER OWN 4) BUT MY YOUNGEST CHILD WILL BE NEEDING MY MILK



I ALSO NEED TO GO HOME NOW. I'D LIKE YOU TO KEEP THESE

BUT LAITO'S BEADS ARE NOT THE RIGHT COLOURS

HERE! YOU DRAW IT. I DON'T KNOW HOW

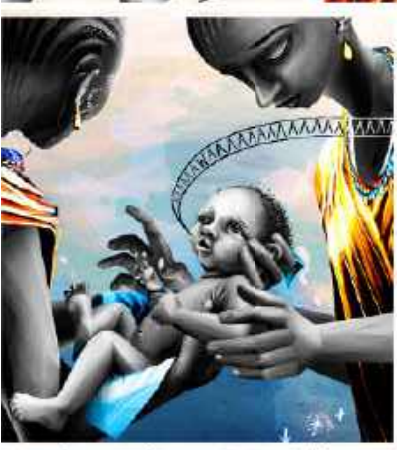
D'YOU THINK IT LOOKS LIKE LAITO?

& LIKE ME TOO. SHE IS MY DAUGHTER

I CAN DO IT!

YES

ALL OF HER IS ME.



WOW. THE WIFE IS BACK

WE DO THIS TOO

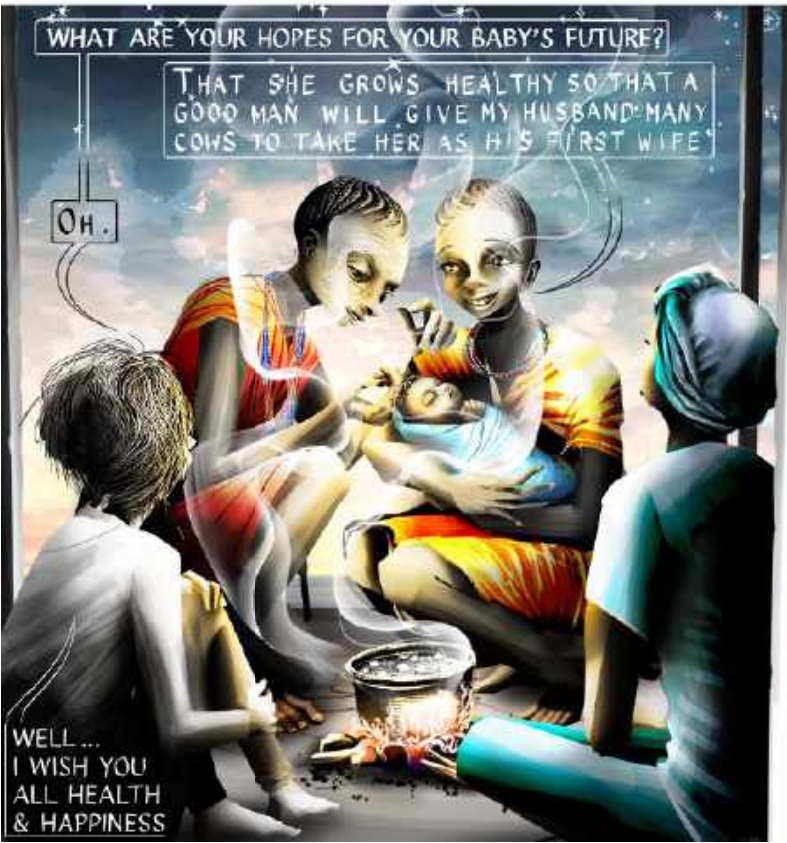
I WILL SING YOU ONE OF OUR LULLABIES

MY MUM USED TO SING TO ME WHEN I COULDN'T SLEEP

WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES FOR YOUR BABY'S FUTURE?

THAT SHE GROWS HEALTHY SO THAT A GOOD MAN WILL GIVE MY HUSBAND MANY COWS TO TAKE HER AS HIS FIRST WIFE

OH.



WELL... I WISH YOU ALL HEALTH & HAPPINESS



YOU'LL ALWAYS BE WELCOME IN OUR VILLAGE JUST ASK FOR LAITO & CHACHA.

YOU'VE JUST READ
WHAT WAS
INTENDED AS
THE LAST
PAGE IN
THIS
STORY.

BUT AS I WAS
DRAWING IT, I
RECEIVED AN
MSF FIELD
UPDATE:

THE WORST FLOODS IN
LIVING MEMORY HAD
HIT PIBOR, SWEEPING
THROUGH MSF'S CLINIC
& TAKING MY ENDING
WITH THEM.

IN THE
AFTERMATH
OF MY FIELD VISIT,
I'D TRIED SO HARD TO
SHOW PIBOR AS I'D
REALLY SEEN IT,
BUT FOR WEEKS NOW
I'D BEEN DRAWING
A PLACE THAT
NO LONGER
EXISTED,
LISTENING
TO RECORDINGS
OF PEOPLE WHO,
PERHAPS GOD FORSID,
NO LONGER
LIVED.

MARIA
INFORMED US
THAT CHACHA, LAITO
& THEIR BABY SAFELY
RETURNED TO GUMURUK 3
DAYS BEFORE THE FLOODS.

BUT AFTER THAT...
WHO KNOWS.



PIBOR TOWN
WAS ENTIRELY SUBMERGED
LEAVING ALMOST EVERYONE
TO SEEK SHELTER ON THE ONLY
REMAINING ISLAND OF HIGH LAND. INCREASINGLY
CONGESTED, WITH ONLY ONE BOREHOLE & NO
LATRINES, LIVING CONDITIONS RAPIDLY DETERIORATED

WHEN THE FLOODS EVENTUALLY RECEDE, A
RESURGENCE OF INTERCOMMUNAL TENSIONS WOULD
SPARK A NEW WAVE OF VIOLENCE, FORCING LOCAL
COMMUNITIES TO FLEE THEIR HOMES AGAIN



REAL STORIES DON'T HAVE ENDINGS -

AT A CERTAIN POINT WE JUST STOP TELLING THEM.