

# WHAT IS THE WHAT

by DAVE EGGERS

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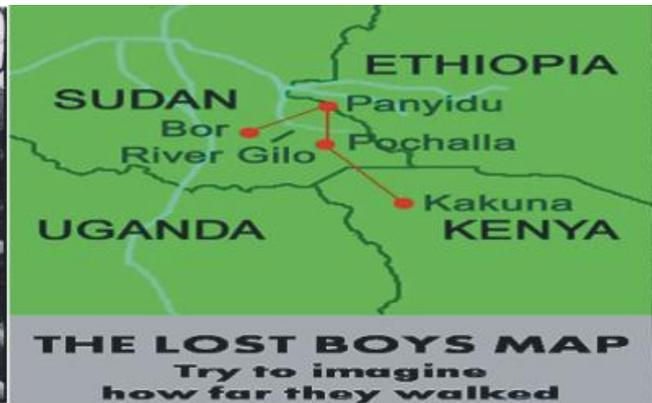
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**Reviewed by:** Olatoun Gabi-Williams



*The Lost Boys of Sudan*



On the 14th November 2015, I participated in the 17th edition of the Lagos Art & Book Festival hosted by CORA, the highly esteemed Committee for Relevant Art led by renaissance men Toyin Akinoso and Jahman Anikulapo. The 3 day programme (13th – 15th November), was staged across the lovely spaces of Freedom Park. Toyin had invited me to serve as a book reviewer at a session entitled “African Chronicles of Self-Determination” with the theme “Our Land, Our Resources”. Dr. Bunmi Oyinsan presented an excellent review of Ike Okonta’s ‘When Citizens Revolt: Nigerian Elites, Big Oil and The Ogoni Struggle for Self’. The book picked by the LABF team for me to review was the internationally acclaimed “What is the What” by Dave Eggers. A major distinction of the book is that proceeds from its sale go to the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation which, inter alia, distributes funds to Sudanese refugees in America and to rebuilding Southern Sudan beginning with Achak Deng’s native village of Marial Bai([www.valentinoachakdeng.com](http://www.valentinoachakdeng.com)).



**Late Dr. John Garang**  
Former 1st Vice President of Sudan (1983 - 2005) &  
SPLA leader died in a helicopter accident in 2005

**Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir**  
Former President of Sudan (1993 - 2019)

**President Salva Kiir Mayardit**  
South Sudan since Independent 2011

The following is more or less the review I presented to the audience gathered for the colloquium at Kongi's Harvest Gallery, Freedom Park: "What is the What" chronicles Sudan's civil war from the perspective of

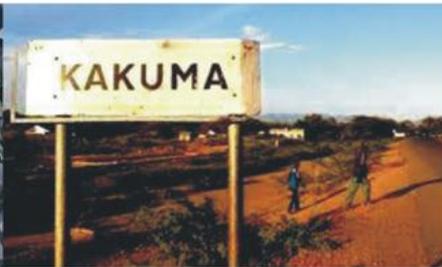


children and is narrated by Achak Deng, a boy from the village of Marial Bai in Sudan's south. The book maps Achak's childhood from the age of 7 into young adulthood. As I turned leaf after leaf of its 535 pages, I shook my head in disbelief. This is a coming of age with signposts from hell: Sent by Khartoum's Arab dominated government which is determined to retain control of the oil rich South, the murahaleen unleash horrors on the humble villages of the South decimating entire village populations. The murahaleen are dogs of war, fierce soldiers on horse back. Their merciless plunder and carnage are witnessed by Achak and his best friends, William K and Moses, boys half my own son's age. Terrified, they run for their lives, ending up on a trek of thousands of miles, joined by other boys in flight and soon their numbers grown into thousands. The children stick together and keep walking, hoping desperately for safety anywhere but they are denied refuge in villages populated not by Arabized Sudanese but by Acholis, Nuers, Dinkas, Madis - like themselves. Enemies of the North like themselves but upon whose villages the murahaleen are yet to descend. Feeling safe in their villages, they refuse their brothers safety, pouring contempt on their abject condition, fear and desperation. With broken hearts, and in confusion, the boys keep walking, escaping death in the jaws of beasts of the jungle; death in the jaws of crocodiles infesting diseased rivers through which they are forced to swim if they can and drown if they can't. Thousands of starving, dying children as young as 7! Tiny things enduring betrayal by brethren, jungles, sun scorched deserts; the kind of dangers you and I can't begin to imagine. I kept gasping at what they were forced to go through, marvelling at the resilience of the human spirit in even the smallest child who survived, who didn't choose to curl up, sit down and die like some of their friends had to – too tired to walk

anymore. When they finally reach refuge in the camps, Pinyudo, Kakuma, they are “aid bait”, spending their time fending off exploitation and treachery at the hands of rebel soldiers. It is the strategy of the SPLA (Sudan People’s Liberation Army) to hide in close proximity of the camps for the purpose of raiding food rations and recruiting boys as young as 11 into the war against Khartoum. But who is the enemy when much of the maiming and killing of the boys takes place at the hands of the rebels?



*Child soldiers in Sudan's civil war*



*Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya*

Throughout the story of the lost boys of Sudan, fate has called the shots, manifesting cruelty more shocking than any example from mythology, but when she plays her hand, this time with the joker in the pack - it was so unexpected - I was floored. My thoughts: Lord, aren’t these your children too? They thought they were free. At last!

I couldn’t believe it! Of all days to fly to the US seeking final sanctuary, why the day Osama Bin Laden has set aside to bomb the Twin Towers and the Pentagon? Why that day?

I read on, thinking that if the “What” of the title points to a multitude of possibilities - as the riddle suggests - this must be the limit. What now? Achak Deng gives voice to the crushed hopes of the boys: “Why would a country under attack need people like us? We (are) added trouble for a troubled country”.



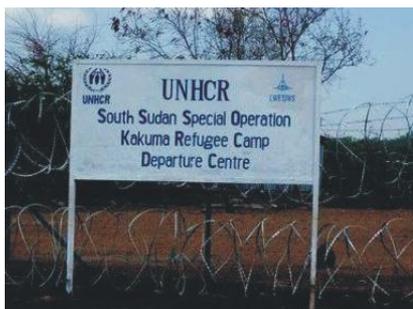
*Emma McCune and Riek Machar  
Rebel SPLA Leader & Former Vice President of South Sudan*



*Riek Machar,  
Former Vice & First Vice President  
South Sudan (2011- 2013, 2016)*

Children are the greatest casualties of any kind of war: marital wars, religious wars, oil wars, civil wars, world wars. Save the Children – the international charity was conceived in response to the need to protect children during and after World War I. SOS Children’s Village – with branches all over the world

and which provides long term formal care was created in response to the large numbers of children orphaned by World War II. The Nigerian Red Cross operates a Motherless Babies Home here in Lagos established in response to Nigeria's civil war. What are we going to do



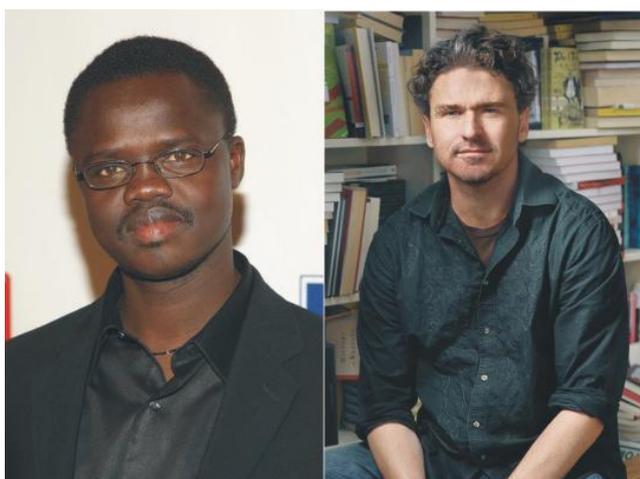
**UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF A CHILD**

The *Optional protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict* to the Convention that came into force in 2002 stipulates that its State Parties: "shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons below the age of 18 do not take a direct part in hostilities and that they are not compulsorily recruited into their armed forces".<sup>[8]</sup> The *Optional Protocol* further obligates states to "take all feasible measures to prevent such recruitment and use, including the adoption of legal measures necessary to prohibit and criminalize such practices." [Art. 4, *Optional Protocol*.]<sup>[9]</sup> Likewise, under the *Optional Protocol* states are required to demobilize children within their jurisdiction who have been recruited or used in hostilities, and to provide assistance for their physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration. (Art. 6(3) *Optional Protocol*).<sup>[7]</sup> Under war, civil unrest, armed conflict and other emergency situations, children and youths are also offered protection under the *United Nations Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict*.

Source: Wikipedia

with all these babies?! It was an epidemic in our land: so many babies and children orphaned by our own tribal struggles for primary commodities – for wealth and power - and Biafra's struggle for secession.

Reading "What is the What" is harrowing but you must read it because we must remember that even if life in our own little corners of the world is peaceful or appears to be, is orderly or appears to be, and life appears to make some sort of sense, there are parts of our world caught up in so-called struggles for self-determination, where all peace, all order and all sense have been consumed in hell's raging fires.



**Achak Deng**  
Narrator, *What is the What*

**Dave Eggers**  
Author, *What is the What*

Thankfully the lost boys make it to America where they are resettled in various cities. Achak Deng, our narrator, takes up residence in Atlanta. Author, Dave Eggers so fully inhabits Achak's soul as he writes his memoirs, that a major newspaper has hailed the book a "triumph of ventriloquy". Only the author's awareness of Achak's story as a God given, sacred trust could have produced a result like that. So, let me end my review of Achak's

story, the story of the lost boys of Sudan, in Achak's own words:

"When I first came to this country.....If someone cut in front of me in a line, ignored me, bumped me or pushed me, I would glare at them, silently hissing my story to them. You do not understand, I would tell them. You would not add to my suffering if you knew what I have seen". [Click Here to get a copy](#)



*Reviewer, Olatoun Gabi-Williams*