

A LONG WAY GONE – MEMOIRS OF A BOY SOLDIER

Ishmael Beah

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“This is how wars are fought now: by children, traumatized, hopped-up on drugs and wielding AK-47s. Children have become the soldiers of choice. In the more than fifty conflicts going on worldwide, it is estimated that there are some 300,000 child soldiers”

The relevance of a book review of a fictional account of the life story of a child soldier in Sierra Leone for a journal such as *Scientia Militaria* is twofold: a) Truth (reality) remains stranger (more horrific) than fiction; b) Based on national foreign policy, the truth (realities) of Sierra Leone is by continental affiliation a South African reality, and by micro-affiliation an SANDF reality.

This book challenges contemporary society, which is continuously bombarded and often jaded by faceless or nameless graphic news scenes. Those portions of society that remain blinded by prejudice and self-centred socio-political gaze to the severity of these scenes, are now confronted with a face and a name: Ishmael Beah.

Physical combat methods to end human-on-human atrocities are well-documented. These methods, augmented by root-level resistance and general human tenacity to overcome, often brought ends to what were at the height of their existence perceived as endless oppressive reigns of varied proportions (World War II, Apartheid, the Berlin Wall, Serbian rule, etc.).

Fiction in its various forms (film, novel, drama, visual and creative art, storytelling, etc.) as a method of mobilising comrades psychologically and physically, and of influencing the minds and hearts of external participants in conflicts of varied significance, are less well-recorded. The prevailing darkness (*Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad) of the human mind and hand is probably why reality-based fictional and semi-fictional accounts of human-on-human atrocities in Africa, like *Amistad*, *Hotel Rwanda*, *So Long a Letter*, *Long Walk to Freedom*, among others, are “stories” that continue to reach mainstream audiences. Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone*, memoirs of a boy soldier, is likely to achieve the same

This book review, however, seeks to target another audience: the military professional or civilian associate involved in any capacity in the well-being or suffering of people in general, and in Africa and Sierra Leone in particular. Sebastian Junger, author of *The Perfect Storm*, describes *A Long Way Gone* as “one of the most important war stories of our generation” that reveals one of the “greatest evils” of our time, the “arming of children” to reach selfish socio-political objectives. It challenges readers to soul-search their own ignorance of acts as extreme as this in a country with which South Africa “established diplomatic relations in August 1998, just prior to the NAM XII Summit” (DFA on-line, 2003). It also challenges the military professional who romanticises deployment in Sub-Saharan African states and who sees it as a means of stockpiling easy cash; of killing boredom as a career soldier in a defence force with a non-aggressive or peace-oriented objective; and, of taking time out from family and partner at home to engage in unsupervised self-satisfying activities (as reported in national newspapers in 2009). It challenges trainers and educators of these peace-operators to inform them in width and depth of the complex socio-political realities of the native inhabitants of the host nation, whether Sierra Leone or any other country visited by our forces. It ultimately challenges the reader to ask the fundamental question: What is the human currency of a child soldier in Sierra Leone versus one in the USA or UK, and what is the currency of a child soldier “a long way gone” in the streets of South Africa?

A feature of the memoirs is the extent to which the adult Ishmael Beah engages in non-agentive descriptions of his own and other children’s actions as either victim or perpetrator while still a child soldier. He speaks of “daily activities” (p. 121), “more soldierly things” (p. 121), “implement[ing] his techniques” (p. 121) which, at close reading, reveals a reality too disturbing (strange?) to verbalise.

Criticism exists that Ishmael Beah’s particular account of events has chronological flaws and is thus irrelevant. If real events are indeed stranger (worse) than Ishmael Beah’s fictional account, the reality of Sierra Leone and the South

African National Defence Force's engagement in peace operations in Sub-Saharan Africa will be felt for generations to come. This memoirs should thus form an essential part of an information toolbox "issued" to South African soldiers prior to peace mission deployment anywhere in Africa.

Bibliography

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