

Chapter 1

THE SARPO-KRAHN TRIBE

I was born into the Sarpo-Krahn people, one of the Kwa-speaking tribes in Sinoe County in southeastern Liberia, in Western Africa. The ancestors of our tribe were warriors who believed in conquest. After conquering their opponents, they made them relinquish their sovereignty by entering into a treaty with them. The reason for this treaty was spiritual.

These ancient warriors understood the power in spoken words, and held it in high esteem. They believed they could be bewitched or cursed if the defeated opponents themselves did not verbally renounce their authority over their people and properties before turning them over to their captors. Thus, the victors led their defeated opponents through the following declarations to nullify the spiritual control of the land's gods and turn it over to their own gods:

1. Agree that the gods of our fathers that empowered us to conquer you shall have access into

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the hidden places of your gods, and even if you go there to take refuge, we are entitled to bring you back.

2. Agree that the blood and water we used in conquering you and your land have nullified the blood and water you used in founding this land and its preservation.
3. Agree that you will be our servants and everything that belongs to you by nature and achievements belongs to us.
4. Agree that our blood and water used in conquering you have nullified the blood and water that was used in getting your crops and livestock.
5. Agree that our blood and water used in conquering you have nullified the blood and water that your parents used in bearing you.
6. Agree that our blood and water used in conquering you have nullified the blood and water you used in bearing your children now and unborn.
7. Agree that as of now you shall come under the gods of our fathers and it shall render you useless if the blood and water from your body ever cease responding to us in the affirmative.

Because of this tradition, our ancestors made it their whole purpose never to be defeated, and built the tribal culture around ensuring that the tribe was always growing braver and stronger. One of the ways they did this was by giving headship of the tribe, not to the eldest, but to the strongest. Every year, the head would

have to defend his position and prove his strength in an annual fight, a fight decided by wounds, broken bones, and even death.

THE PEACEFUL SON

From his youth, one of the sons of the Krahn tribe was not interested in fighting for land or headship, and always managed to escape the annual fight. Though he received insults for his position, he did not change it. Finally, he decided to leave. He and his immediate families set out to find a suitable place to settle, a place that would not interest or threaten his kinsmen.

The family eventually arrived at the Atlantic Ocean, and from there they journeyed along the coast until they found a plain land in which to build a settlement—the site of present-day Greenville, Liberia. They multiplied as the years passed, and after about seventy years, the family had grown into a multitude now known as Sarpo or Sarpo-Krahn.¹

Greenville was established with the peaceful spirit of the Sarpo father who did not believe in rivalry and conquest. In those days, even escaping slaves sought refuge in Greenville, confident that their masters would not seek them in a city so far from the regions valuable to warriors. Up to this day, the city accepts every tribe and people.

MISSIONARIES ARRIVE IN GREENEVILLE

One morning, the inhabitants of Greenville woke to see a large object on the Atlantic Ocean. They began to gather each morning and evening on the seashore to look at it. Some said it was a water cow, some a water elephant, and others a house that the water had carried from somewhere. Each day the object increased in size, and at night produced lights very unlike the fire

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they used. When the object drew nearer, the natives discerned moving objects on the ship, which they finally realized as people—people with a different color complexion and who waved to them whenever they came out to the shore. This frightened the natives. They began to make a plan to meet these intruders.

Finally, the day came when a lifeboat arrived onshore carrying a team appointed to meet the land dwellers. As they disembarked, the strong faces of the natives surrounded them, each holding a spear. But the smiles and innocent faces of the visitors, along with their ready compliance to do whatever was asked of them, quickly discouraged the natives. It became clear, particularly when the visitors began offering them sachets of food, that they had not come to fight, but to fellowship.

After a week, the elders of the settlement decided these visitors were harmless and welcomed them as good people. As a matter of fact, they were missionaries bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ. The missionaries pitched their tents beside the seashore and set about their first task: learning the tribe's language and culture. The female missionaries began working with the women and the male missionaries did the same with the men. They worked on the farm, went on hunting trips, learned traditional music, and bathed and ate with the natives.

After two years, the missionaries had mastered the dialect and began to share the gospel, convincing the natives of the salvation plan of God for humankind through Christ Jesus. The only problem was that the Sarpo fathers misunderstood the missionaries on one particular point, which later brought disaster on them. They got the idea that because God left His home in heaven and came to the home of the missionaries, and the missionaries left their home to come to them, therefore they must also leave their homes to let others know the Good News. After

the missionaries went home, the natives made up their minds to spread the message to their brethren. They left Greenville with all their people and went back to the homeland from which their peace-seeking father had brought them.

Due to the large numbers of women and children, the journey lasted about two months. When they arrived, their tribal brothers could not recognize them. Though they sounded like their brothers, they could not be sure they were, for their intonation had slightly changed. This left their brothers with one option: to use the special traditional greetings. However, the Sarpo fathers could not respond because such traditional greetings were expressions of war. The tradition was that the person greeting would hit his brother, who would then hit back, and this began an aggressive wrestling match. After that, they exchanged pleasantries and showered praises on themselves:

“I’m the devil,” says one.

“I am the first to strike,” responds the other.

“I am complete.”

“The child that has no mate.”

“The one enthroned.”

These warring acts were among the reasons the Sarpo father had left for a strange land in the first place. Moreover, the gospel preached by the missionaries had confirmed and deepened their value for peace. When the leader of the Sarpo fathers and his entourage could not respond to the Krahn greetings, they were proclaimed enemies. Seeing their numbers, the Krahn fathers released their best fighters upon the travel-weary, peaceful Sarpo families. The Krahn injured and killed nearly 90 percent of the men, along with many women and children. Those who survived were scattered into the bush.

ENTER NYA-GHE-A-WEH

Eventually, the Sarpo managed to regroup and plan their journey back to their coastal home. In those days, travelers did not sleep on the plain for fear of wild animals. They would find a tree, a big rock, or any high structure where they could sleep safely. One night, after many days of travel, they came to a huge rock where they decided to pass the night.

The strong men among them stayed awake to keep watch. In the middle of the night, a wind arose, blowing the trees back and forth for almost two hours. A cloud of fear and heaviness grew over the men, causing all but one, Saydee, to fall asleep. An unknown voice came strongly to Saydee's ears, saying, "The warrior without equal."

Saydee sat frozen for some time, but finally stirred and quietly whispered, "Who is it?"

"The one whose bosom you have come under," the voice replied.

He pondered over this strange voice, which had described him as a warrior without equal. How could that be true? He had just lost almost all his people. Surely this voice was mocking him. After a while, he broke the silence again by asking, "You have not told me what you want from me and I cannot see you. Will you keep talking to me from the dark?"

"What do I want from you?" the voice echoed. "I need your friendship, which will enable me to help you and your people. I will not speak with you in the dark once you understand me and know that I am here to help."

In that moment, Saydee realized that the men keeping watch with him were no longer speaking. Frightened, he called for them in the darkness, asking, "Did you call me 'warrior'?"

“Yes, you are a warrior,” said the mysterious voice. “A great one too. This is why everyone else has fallen into a sleeping spell except you. Moreover, you are going to humble those people, the ones you called brothers, the very ones you are running from. You are going to walk on their blood.”

“What! I must be talking with a god!” Saydee whispered.

“You have rested under the shelter that will remain till your last generation,” said the voice.

As the old man heard these last words fade away, he shouted, “Don’t go! I have not understood some things yet.”

“I am not gone from you,” the voice replied. “Meet me behind this rock tonight, and I will tell you everything you need to know.”

Thus did Nya-ghe-a-weh first speak to old man Saydee, who afterward ran to the rest of the men and woke them up to explain his experience. “He said I should meet him behind the rock tonight, but how are we going to do this? If I should meet him tonight, we will spend the entire day here again.”

“Yes,” said one of them, “if you believe that he is a god, then he might want to help us. It is worth spending another day here.” They agreed to stay, spent the day hunting for food, and returned to the rock when night fell.

NYA-GHE-A-WEH’S EMPOWERMENT AND DECEPTION

Saydee went behind the rock as the voice had instructed him. After about twenty minutes of walking around the rock, he asked himself, “Where am I going to meet him?”

“You are welcome, my brave and strong warrior!” said the strange voice to Saydee.

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Counting his words and stuttering, Saydee replied, “I came as discussed. But I didn’t know what to call you.”

“Nya-ghe-a-weh is what you and anyone after you shall call me. I’m going to empower you to take revenge for the massacre your people suffered in the hands of your Krahn brothers. Take this talisman (a catlike animal tail, with carrot shell) and touch all of your able men with this. The ones who remain awake will be empowered with strange fighting skills. They will be able to fight like any fighting animal, including birds. They will disappear and reappear. Not only that, metals will not be able to penetrate them. Let them follow you. Now stretch out your left hand!”

When the old man did as he was told, a cutlass² entered his hand from nowhere.

“Keep your hand up and don’t allow it to fall,” Nya-ghe-a-weh commanded the old man.

Standing there, the old man began to shout and shiver as he endeavored to keep his hand raised with the cutlass. He quickly became soaked in sweat, as it was not an easy task. Then suddenly, power charged his limbs.

Early the next morning, he returned to his brothers with the shout of a warrior. The rest of his brothers were all astonished when they saw him. They could tell from his countenance that something strange had taken over him. He requested that all the strong men be summoned so that he could carry out the instruction of Nya-ghe-a-weh. As he touched them with the talisman, all but thirteen of the men fell asleep. When the talisman touched these thirteen, they began sneezing unusually. After this sneezing had gone on for a while, they raised the warrior’s shout and took off running through the thick bush behind the old man Saydee.

After this dramatic act preparing the men for battle (which holds today as a ritual), Saydee sent the thirteen men ahead of him to begin their revenge mission against the Krahn, saying, "Go and subdue anyone who rises against you. You shall return untouched."

He went back to the rest of the men and encouraged them to take care of themselves, make provision for food, and take special care of the wounded men among them. Then he bid them goodbye and promised that he and the thirteen men would return.

Then mysteriously, though he had set off behind them, the thirteen men heard the old man Saydee ahead of them on the trail, calling them to follow him as he led them to the battle. They got to the land of their kinsmen the next day, but waited around the town for nightfall before attacking. When the entire town was asleep, Saydee was mysteriously led to the houses of the strongest men, in descending rank. He beheaded each of them.

THE GREAT PAYBACK

Early in the morning, there was confusion and lamentation all over the town. "Evil has befallen us," people cried. "Great father, didn't you remind the gods to watch over us as they did for you?"

"Leave our fathers to rest with your vain cries!" Saydee announced. He was perched in a tall palm tree in the middle of the town. "*You* have chosen that we waste the blood of our fathers' house. They are going to watch us continue the blood-bath. You asked for it, and now you must get it."

He commanded the thirteen men to go after villagers and make sure they lost as much blood as they had shed. Shouting, the men jumped down from a huge cotton tree in the middle of town and began thrusting spears into people. The men of

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the town noticed that the men fighting them were few, so they decided to come together and fight back. However, they discovered that their Sarpo brothers could change into all kinds of creatures during the battle—flying from tree to tree, disappearing and reappearing. Seeing these warriors, the Krahn fathers then realized that they had murdered their own brothers. They signaled for peace, crying, “We are sorry, brothers! We are wrong. We will take the blame for everything, both the blood that we wasted then and our own blood now.” Saydee called off his warriors, and the war stopped at once.

Every man, woman, and child gathered at the town square to pay tribute to the lost souls. There was a long period of silence as the Krahn fathers waited for the conquerors, the Sarpo fathers, to pronounce the covenant for them, the victims, to repeat. Finally, Saydee broke the silence and said, “We should not be considered as victors in this battle, because we are from the same household. Both parties are victims, because we killed ourselves. If we were to measure the blood wasted a few weeks ago, we would find it equal to the blood of your own people shed today.

“We do not understand why you did not believe us in the first place. You know well that none of the Kwa-speaking tribes around here will be subject to another person, because they got to where they are by their own strength and not by birthright. But it is not so with us. Our father told us that we came from you. We are the descendants of one of your brothers who refused to fight for the right of headship. Our father refused to continue the tradition of his ancestors and left to find a land that would be free from war. We were living peacefully and happily till our peaceful spirit attracted foreigners who came to show us true and good reasons for living. Our founding father died a peaceful death, at a very reasonable age, too.

“He always told us that every man should recognize his origin, as that is the only way he will appreciate who he is. He then told us about you, our people of origin. He begged us to recognize you and encouraged us to identify with you anytime you need us. Our father established it in our hearts that we should never see ourselves as greater than you, and that we should share with you anything that seems good to us. This is why we were led to come and share the things our foreign friends gave to us. But see what it has turned out to be. However, you are our elders. Whatever you want us to do now, we will do.”

Saydee bowed to them and asked them to take over. For a long time, they were silent, looking at one another and weeping. The eldest stepped in and thanked Saydee for listening to his father and obeying his wishes. “Not many sons will obey their father’s wishes, but you are different. Please allow us to withdraw to reach a consensus. We will join you later.”

When they returned, the eldest brought a plate of kola nuts and pepper, signifying peace, brotherliness, and friendship among the entire Kwa-speaking tribes. The eldest began his speech, “We are truly sorry for everything we have caused you. The elders have reached an agreement for all the troubles and the blood wasted. We will not share them with you. We are fully responsible and will bear the expected calamity. You did not take us as victims, but we want to know the god you worship, the god that has given you such powers. We are not denouncing our fathers’ gods, but we want to worship the gods your fathers left with you. We agree that you are our brothers and you came from us as your father said. We agree to identify with you anytime and in anything.

“But we want to ask you for one favor, and please do not let us down. We do not want you to go far away from us again. You

have finished our warriors, and other tribes will soon take over us once they notice. We will need your help at any moment. The only problem is that the blood we have shed is too much and cannot go unnoticed, so there is no way we can live together in the same town. Therefore, we will use this big mountain as our boundary. You should stay on that side where you came from, while we stay on this side.”

“Truly, we cannot ignore the blood we wasted among ourselves,” Saydee agreed. He accepted the request of his Krahn fathers, and asked them to embrace each other in appreciation and acceptance of their reunion. Thereafter, they set off for the journey back to the big rock where they had left their families, bringing with them livestock they received as gifts from their Krahn kinsmen. Saydee and the fighting men returned to the big rock with sad expressions on their faces. They did not look like people who had conquered their opponents. However, the rest of the people were happy, because Saydee and the other men came back from the battle without injury. They celebrated by dancing and singing, and stopped at one point to hear Saydee tell the story of the battle.

THE COVENANT INITIATION

As night fell, Nya-ghe-a-weh’s strange presence induced Saydee to dance around the big rock.

“Didn’t I tell you that you would be my warriors?” Nya-ghe-a-weh said.

“Yes, you said so; and your shelter is truly great. My tribe and I wish to stay under it forever,” Saydee said.

“My shelter is already yours, my great warrior. You, your people, and your generations unborn will benefit from it. My request is that you and your generation remain faithful to me and pass me on to your future generations.”

Saydee declared, “We are now under your control. Only you know what we need to do if we will remain under your shelter forever.”

Nya-ghe-a-weh, quick to respond, said, “First, you need to know that this rock is my throne. It has been kept sacred until you came with your multitude and defiled it. You will bring your people from that side of my throne and take them farther down this side. You can build your homes and live right here with me as long as you wish. First thing tomorrow, you will move to the side allocated to you and barricade the side between you and me. *You will then cleanse my throne with the blood of four of your female babies.*”

“Consider all you said done,” Saydee said. He did exactly what Nya-ghe-a-weh commanded him to do.

Afterward, Nya-ghe-a-weh said, “I love you and your people so much, and I will not allow your people to leave this world like other tribes. I will prepare a place behind this rock where you rested on your arrival here. I shall make it a place of eternal rest. I will take all my faithful ones from this world when their time of rest comes. I know they need to rest, and I will have them stay in this specially prepared place. I will make sure you have access to your children when you are resting with me, and they shall have access to you as well. But I need you to send ahead nine of your able young men who are still virgins to be your servants whenever you or any of the faithful come to rest.”³

Saydee met with the second demand, killing nine young men, just as he had the four infant girls.

In response, Nya-ghe-a-weh said, “Tomorrow I am going to take you to my place, where I will formally empower you to be my chief priest. You will be there until I am completely through with you, and it will take us a little time. The men who were able

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to stand when you returned in my power from the battle will be the elders of the tribe as from now on. When you return to them, you will still need them to be heads over the people, as you will be a god to them all. Your presence before the ordinary men and women could harm them, so those elders will stand as emissaries to your people. When you come tomorrow, you are to bring an infant between the age of one day and three years for a covenant between the tribe and me. Tell your people to start a feast that will continue until your return.”

When Saydee came the next day with the child, Nya-ghe-a-weh was standing at the gate of the fence to meet him. Saydee turned the child over. Holding the child, Nya-ghe-a-weh asked Saydee to repeat everything he said. “Everything said in this place is accepted by me and my tribe.

Everything accepted shall be implemented by my tribe to the letter. If I, my tribe’s men now, or the generation yet unborn go against any of the things I accept here today, all the unborn generations shall not reach the age of this innocent child with whom we are making this covenant in this great shelter.”

The old man recited every word spoken by Nya-ghe-a-weh, and they entered into covenant. Then Nya-ghe-a-weh gave the old man his laws.

“My identity and everything about me will never be revealed to anyone by you or other priests who will come after you, because only my priest will be given the ability to see me. *My priesthood shall be limited to your quarter* (the Julukon quarter) and no member of your quarter will ever eat kola nut or play with it.” (This law was intended to make the tribe selfish. According to the traditions of the Kwa ethnic group, the giving and accepting of kola nuts is the sign of approving a friendship or a visit. Having nothing to do with kola nuts meant we would

have no dealing with the entire Kwa ethnic group and would keep to ourselves.)

“Every member of the Sarpo tribe belongs to me. In fact, any person I choose to serve me as my priest should count himself favored. Every child born into this tribe must be dedicated to me, and I will thereafter register the child in the coven for full protection. If any man from this tribe dies and you wish to be in contact with him, you will shave the dead man’s hair and bring it to my coven.

“As I have found you worthy and chosen you to be my priest, nothing shall change that. I will always choose my priest when the former one passes on to glory, and every priest will make his sacrifice to me according to the power and influence he wants. If you keep my laws and immortalize me in the heart of your children and generation yet unborn, nothing shall stand before you. You will represent me in this physical world, and remain my delight forever.”

The tribe increased, and Nya-ghe-a-weh was worshiped and adored as their god, they trusted him as well for protection and even for provision. From time to time, they had one priest or the other. My tribesmen do not believe that their fathers die, but that they go to join their fathers if they were faithful. They hold this concept very sacred, and it contributed to their brave nature.

THE PATH TO BECOMING A PRIEST

As mandated by Nya-ghe-a-weh, the priestly mantle falls only on a first male child from the Julukon quarter. For this reason, every Julukon first male child is trained as a warrior and must pass through all the traditional practices and observe all the precepts of Nya-ghe-a-weh carefully. After the ruling priest is “taken

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by the fathers,” the elders will take him to the sacred place in the forest and wait for Nya-ghe-a-weh to select the next priest.

When he turns eight, each first male child begins to sit and contribute to every matter in his father’s house. His father will not make any major decision without his consent. He must be at every general tribal meeting where the tribe’s progress is discussed, and air his views on any issue being deliberated upon in the town square or at the elders’ secret closet. These privileges train first sons to attain wisdom and understanding of the issues pertaining to the tribe and their way of life.

According to Julukon precept, courtesy demands that every male child fends for himself as soon as he is eight years old. He is made a laughingstock if he still eats from his mother’s soup pot after he turns eight, so he learns to fish and hunt to prepare his own soup every day. Fathers teach their first sons to hunt with guns and traps on land, water, and trees, and to farm—to fell big trees, burn the farm, fence it against crop-destroying animals, and so forth. The elders strongly believe this is the only way to make the child mature for the priestly task. They believe hard work will make the boy successful, as he will have no time to play or talk with others. They believe it will make him independent and self-reliant, able to make decisions without the influence of his peers. They believe that by spending the day in the forest, he won’t be interested in distractions to the priesthood. They also believe so much solitude will encourage the boy to be a thinker.

Once a father is convinced that his first son is mature, he is respected among his peers and nobody interrupts him while he is talking. But if a first son is not turning out to be what is expected of a first son, he is called “useless” and other names of ridicule. If he tries to defend himself, he is mocked even more. Everyone in the tribe thinks it is better for the man whose first

son dies or is disabled, and is thus disqualified from the priesthood, than for the man whose first son is immature. The child who is not responding to the training could still be selected by Nya-ghe-a-weh, but doing so would threaten the traditional and cultural foundation built by the tribe's ancestors. The fear of a bad and weak priest who could pollute the land and hinder the visitation of their forefathers on a yearly basis inspires hatred for the fathers who cannot groom their sons. The fathers of weak boys are also called useless men. To avoid the stigma of having a weak son and show that they hold the tradition of their ancestors above their family, most fathers kill sons viewed to be incapable.

ENDNOTES

1. There have been controversies in understanding the difference between the Sarpo and Krahn tribes. Sarpo is one of the ethnic groups among the different Krahn groups. Others include Tchein, Kuanibo, Gborbo, and Gbarbo. The peculiar history of the Sarpo clan has projected it as a tribe on its own, and for this reason politicians from the clan are agitating to have their own county. The Sarpo clan grew into six different sub-clans: Kabadeh, Nimupoh, Putu, Seekon, Juarzon, and Wedjah. My parents are from Kabadeh, the seat of the ancient god of my forefathers known as Nya-ghe-a-weh, whose control and influence has spread over the entire Kwa-speaking regions of Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast).
2. A cutlass is a short, curved sword.
3. This is where the notion came from that the priest and other fathers do not die.