

1969: MEBÁ
BRINGS GRUMADII

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Mebá walked slowly through the dry savanna as the scorching sun cracked open the earth and compelled even the wind to be still. He had been making his way south for four days, fleeing the drought in the north and searching for fertile soil in which to grow yams. Trailing silently behind him were his wife Nadjo, four older children, three daughters-in-law and two grandchildren. Mebá carried his youngest son, Makanda, on his shoulders. Their destination was Koni, a remote village on the banks of the Molan River.

It was unusual for a man of Mebá's status to have only one wife for he was a witch doctor, the guardian



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of the Sanbol clan's fetish Grumadii, and as such would be expected to be a polygamist. Mebá carried the fetish in a small leather bag slung carefully over his left shoulder. While every Konkomba clan worships a fetish, the Sanbol fetish is considered particularly powerful. Known as a warrior fetish ('he who kills' or 'he who requires death'), Grumadii is feared by all the other clans. This fear has made the Sanbol extremely influential in some areas.

Suddenly, three-year-old Makanda broke the silence. From his vantage point on his father's shoulders, he had spotted an animal ahead of them.

'What's that?'

'A hyena,' answered Mebá, instinctively squeezing the bow that he kept ready in his left hand for any encounters with enemies or wild animals. At the mention of hyenas the whole group stepped up its pace. No one said a word but all wanted to find an inhabited place before dusk. A night-time confrontation with hyenas was something to be feared. Hunting in packs of up to sixty animals, they posed a serious threat to unprotected individuals or small groups. Mebá had just eight arrows in the quiver tied to his waist.

When they finally crossed a creek (which would later be named Nakpalbe, meaning 'a good place to stay') and heard voices in the distance, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. However, they had to sleep in the forest because night had already fallen and Mebá





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had not had time to sacrifice to his fetish. Without that sacrifice no Grumadii witch doctor was allowed to enter a new village.

Next morning, Mebá sacrificed a goat and poured its blood over the exposed roots of a large tree. Having left their homeland, these followers of Grumadii needed to ensure that distant spirits would come and transport the sacrifice to the land they had left, and would normally seek out a site at a crossroads close to the village that would become their new home. Having done all that was necessary to satisfy the fetish, the family could at last go into the village.

Situated in virgin forest and at that time home to 200 villagers, Koni is surrounded by tall, leafy trees. Neatly-thatched round huts are erected in a circle for greater protection, and grouped into three distinct areas each belonging to a different tribe.

When Mebá walked into Koni with his family, the villagers immediately identified him as a member of the Sanbol clan by his facial markings and dialect, so Laason, the oldest man of that clan, welcomed him. That night, as the Sanbols took Mebá round to the huts of the other clans, they announced, 'Grumadii has arrived!'

A special ceremony marked the coming of Grumadii to Koni and several trees on the edge of Koni were designated as a sacred place. Sankan, the local witch doctor, knew a sacrifice would be required. When





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he took the small white stones used to call up spirits and invoked Grumadii, the spirit responded by taking possession of Sankan's wife, whose body was overcome with spasms.

'What sacrifice does my lord desire?' asked Sankan.

'In order for me to look after you alone, separate twelve animals for me,' croaked the spirit in a quiet voice. 'If you want me to look after *all* of you, separate a child.'

There were various views about how Grumadii expressed his anger if a sacrifice was denied him, but all focused on natural calamities, epidemics and sudden deaths. Strangely, one proverb said that Grumadii never *asked* for a sacrifice, but merely *suggested* one.

Sankan sat down, bowing his head, as he pondered the implications of the spirit's instructions. He took great satisfaction in knowing that Grumadii had spoken on his compound and now he began to work out which member of his family it would be most appropriate to sacrifice. Konkombas normally chose younger children, especially if they were sick, because they might die anyway. At least, that is what one Binaliib proverb recommended! Sankan's decision was made easier when he heard that Una, his eight-month-old grandson, was coughing and burning up with fever. Una was the first-born son of Kofu and Ado.





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‘We will pacify Grumadii’s anger with Kofu’s son!’

When she heard of Sankan’s choice, Ado knew she had only two options: to flee or remain silent. She looked at Kofu with a mixture of sadness and bitterness but said nothing. That night Sankan took the sick baby from his mother’s arms. A few hours later the child was placed on a rock and killed with one blow from a club. Before burning their ‘offering’ to Grumadii, the people danced round and round the battered corpse.

Sankan was happy in the days that followed. This act inaugurated the era of Grumadii at Koni, which became a fetish centre for the region. As for Ado, she was given puna, the most delicious of yams, for six days as a recompense for the sacrifice of her child.

No one could publicly mourn Una’s death and his name was now taboo, never to be mentioned again. In the Konkomba culture, the living, the dead, the absent and the sick are identified by titles and occupy different levels on the social ladder. Those chosen for sacrifice receive no title whatsoever and are deleted from the family history as if they had never existed.

Other events accompanied the coming of Grumadii to Koni. Collective demon possession characterised Nnupan, the festival of new yams. During Namise, the festival of fire, sacrifices were offered to the earth. The village grew as more and more people moved to the region to gain the protection of the fetish.





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Because Mebá was so well acquainted with the Grumadii ceremonies, people began to call him the Guardian of the Dwarf and referred to him as the Friend of Grumadii when performing ceremonies for other fetishes. Dwarves were reputed to have the ability to forecast the future and explain the present. The mystic title of Guardian was reserved for those who not only understood the technicalities of the ceremonies linked to a specific fetish, but had also established a personal relationship with the spirits that guided it.

From 1969 to 1994, Grumadii reigned supreme, and because Mebá was greatly respected he was given good land and had many people working for him.

During those years, little happened to alter the way that Konkombas viewed the world. To be born into Konkomba society meant following a set of rituals and ceremonies that were an integral part of tribal life and survival. There was no distinction between sacred and secular, spiritual and material, or body and soul. The 'religious' was present in every expression of life: work, food, wars, procreation and rest. Atheists were non-existent. Everybody believed in the spirit world and in the fetishes (mountains, trees, rocks and even man-made objects) that represented the various spirits. They also believed in totems: animals or birds that were sacred to the clan. Often there were stories to explain the special relationship with the totem.





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Perhaps it had helped to rescue them in the past or it may have a characteristic, such as courage, strength or wisdom, with which the clan wanted to identify.

One of the spirits in which they believed was Kininbon (Satan), lord of all the evil spirits. The spirits also included the souls of the ancestors who demanded respect and sacrifices in return for withholding punishment.

There were no good spirits—the best were merely amoral.

Parallel to that vast universe of wickedness, everyone had heard about Uwumbor, an ancient God of a bygone era and distant dreams, who no longer had any relationship with the tribe. Uwumbor was the creator of everything: heaven and earth, and the first family. At first he was very close to earth but then, according to the Konkombas, 'One of our ancestors committed a wicked deed and because of that offence Uwumbor no longer wishes to be God of the Konkombas.' The details of that terrible crime have long since been forgotten, but because of it Uwumbor went far away and took heaven with him. There was no way back to meet Uwumbor any more, so the people had to seek other ways of minimising the suffering caused by his absence.

