



PHOTOS BY JOE GLODE

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The mere sight of the cartoon sent a shiver through Apala Barclay. He hadn't laid eyes on it in decades. It was a black-and-white caricature of a Liberian man sitting awkwardly on the ground. His arms bound tightly behind his back at the elbows – a form of torture known as tabay (pronounced "tuh-bay").

Victims of tabay often suffered severe pain and nerve damage as assailants pulled the ropes that bound them tighter and tighter – when pulled too tight, the rib cage would separate, according to a 1994 Human Rights Watch report.

Apala had witnessed it many times growing up in Liberia.

"If someone accuse you of something, first thing they want to do is tabay you," remembers Apala. "The government was doing it, rebels, even citizen vigilante groups."

A hand-written caption on the right side of the cartoon reads: "Tabay, an in-human act."

Outlined with a standard-black ballpoint pen, it was one of the first political cartoons Apala ever created. He'd drawn it for "The Concerned Women of Liberia" in the late 1980s for distribution at its rally in Monrovia against tabay.

One of the fliers had traveled from Liberia to North Carolina, where an old friend of Apala's spotted it in July when he was helping a friend move. He recognized it immediately and sent Apala a snapshot.

As Apala, now in his mid-40s and living comfortably in Portland, reflected on the relic, he was reminded of a former life.

Thousands of miles away in Liberia, he had worked as a political cartoonist during a 14-year-long civil war that resulted in the death of more than 200,000 Liberians between 1989 and 2003, including 21 members of his extended family.

His comics earned him popularity among civilians, but also made him a target of warlord Charles Taylor's rebel forces and the police.

Walking a thin line

Before emigrating from Liberia, Apala Barclay was targeted by authorities for his work as a political cartoonist



Apala was born and raised with his older brother and three sisters in Paynesville, a suburb of Liberia's coastal capital city, Monrovia. Growing up in the 1970s and 80s, the West African nation was relatively stable, aside from a coup in 1980 after a riot over food prices.

Apala's mother was an indigenous woman whose various enterprises included a restaurant, taxi, bakery and convenience store, and his father hailed from a long line of influential politicians.

Many of Paynesville's residents had received Western educations and sought to emulate a life they'd seen abroad upon their return. They were vocal activists and politicians, nurses and entrepreneurs.

"Later on people started to categorize this area as rich Liberians," says Apala. "I heard it in the Western media, but these were hard-working people who tried to build a community that they have seen as a better one for themselves and their children."

Apala and his older brother, Zulo Barclay, were artists at an early age. Apala would copy his older brother's drawings of DC and Marvel comic superheroes, but eventually Mad Magazine and its lesser known copycat, Cracked Magazine, became his greatest influences.

"I enjoy cartooning, because I think that's how I see things in my head, in my mind's eye," he says.

Word of the Paynesville teen's talent spread, and taxi drivers began to hire him to decorate their vehicles.

In Liberia, taxis often bear idioms known as taxi wisdom. Apala remembers stenciling phrases like "no die no rest" and "lazy man does not eat" on the back bumpers and rear windshields of cabs.

His brother, Zulo, spoke with Street Roots from his home in Minneapolis, Minn. Looking back, he says he is "very proud" of the community he and Apala grew up in. Both men reminisce about their childhood fondly.

"We came from a home – mother and father," says Zulo. "We had each other from day one, until we became boys, and from boys into men."

But as the boys approached manhood, Liberia was ripped apart by war.



In 1989, a rebellion led by warlord Charles Taylor overthrew the sitting government and the country was cast into turmoil. People living in Paynesville quickly became targets, including the Barclays.

Apala's father, Rufus Barclay, was the son

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of the prominent senator of Bong County, Botoe Barclay.

"Grandpa (Botoe) was a powerful man," says Zulo. "He had that jungle justice kind of ruling. Some papers and stuff that he signed, I look at it today and I am like, what on God's Earth was he thinking? But who am I to judge him? That was his time."

Like his grandfather, Apala says his father, Rufus, was also very powerful before the war. "He was the man that made the decision you know – put them in jail or do this." This is why, he says, so many people came looking for him once conflict broke out. "Some of the killing was not even rebels, just people that joined the rebels and had some grudge against your parents."

"Some of the politicians got killed, they got beaten," he says. "We were in the yard, peeking in the neighbor's house and seeing the soldiers come, so all during the crisis time I was able to see that."

"My parents suffered. I had to leave them to look for food because they were hiding."

As the civil war raged on, Apala continued to find work as an artist. Liberia's Minister of Education's School Health Division called on him to illustrate educational materials, and that led to contract work for the United Nations and Save the Children's United Kingdom branch.

Only an estimated 40 percent of Liberians in the mid-1990s were literate, so Apala had to come up with creative ways of explaining culturally sensitive topics, such as female genital mutilation and contraception, in a way the general Liberian public could understand.

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