

Interview in
"The Pioneer" (daily newspaper in Juba),

by Gabriela Jacomella

If you'd ask people in South Sudan whether they know Dr Conradin Perner, only a handful would probably react with something different than a puzzled frown. But try and inquire about Kwacakworo instead, and that flicker of recognition is likely to ignite broad smiles of appraisal. Kwacakworo is the name by which this Swiss scholar, now in his late sixties, is known all around the country. In Anyuak language, it means "man-eating leopard". "But it really doesn't imply anything. Anyuak traditional names are all supposed to be scary," explained Dr Perner, his ironic smile lingering in the air.

The Pioneer met him during his last visit to Juba, just before Christmas holidays; after receiving the Yellow Star Medal on the year of South Sudan's independence, Kwacakworo was given honorary citizenship and is now waiting to receive his passport. That's how President Salva Kiir officially acknowledged the role of Kwacakworo - "the father of the lost boys", as he is also known, and one of the founders of *Gurtong* Trust - played throughout the history of the new nation.

Your relationship with South Sudan is indeed deeply rooted in its past. How did it begin?

It all dates back to the middle of my life. I was a professor of French literature - although I had spent some time working for the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) in Bangladesh, Vietnam, India - and got a job at the university in Khartoum. After two years, I submitted a project on oral literature in Southern Sudan, for which I obtained a scholarship from the university of Zurich. As my research subject, I selected the Anyuak tribe because nobody had ever lived with them. People from outside just came for short visits, usually during dry season; I came in 1975, and I ended up staying with them for three years.

What are your memories about that first trip?

I wanted to stay in the place where the Anyuak king was based, and back then the place was completely isolated from the rest of the world. No roads, no communications, no shops. My money were beads and tobacco, brought from Ethiopia. Food was made by women and girls, and they needed beads; men and boys came to me because of tobacco. That's how I established my first contacts.

Did you speak the language at the time?

No, and that was the main problem: there was no book on Anyuak language. It took me at least one year to become quite fluent. The problem, of course, was also to engage in a relationship with the king, who at the beginning was very suspicious. At the end, however, we became very good friends.

When did you realise that your relationship with the tribe had developed a step further?

I first lived there for two years without interruption, then I went briefly to Khartoum. When they saw me coming back, they really understood that I was their friend. On top of it, I had become the "doctor" of the village. Plenty of children in the area had diarrhea or malaria, and I was the only one who had medicines. Pregnant women came from afar just to see me. I managed to get medicines and antibiotics from Switzerland and transport them freely to Khartoum, and from there all the way down to the South. I ended up having from 50 to 100 patients a day. So people realized that I was not there just to get their stories.

Did you ever feel lonely?

Despite the fact that I was very busy, I had nobody during all this time to really discuss with. So yes, I felt lonely. At the beginning I didn't want to have so many servants, so I hired only one boy and one girl for cooking. They got so bored! Only after a while I discovered I should employ more: so I had seven girls and six boys, and in the evening more came, until my compound became a sort of small village in the village. We listened to Pink Floyd's songs, and I translated the lyrics it into Anyuak: "you are just a piece of straw in the fence" instead of "another brick in the wall"... They really enjoyed it. After those three years, I went back to Switzerland and started writing; but for another five years I kept going back and forth, and every year I lived with them from December up to May, in the dry season. That was from 1978 to 1983, up to the war.

Where you expecting it, when the war broke out?

Our place was very remote, far from everything. I used to travel with the commanders of the army posted at the border, and at that time I was supposed to board the last truck leaving before the rainy season. But instead of going to Malakal after Akobo, the truck went to Bor - and that's of course where they started the mutiny. Back then, however, I was completely naif: I was there with Kerubino and the others, and I noticed some excitement, but I was just asking myself, "why are we not continuing to Malakal?" My concern was about my research, not about politics. But of course, I also had noticed the way people from the North were treating Southerners. It was just disgusting.

What happened afterwards?

From Malakal I left for Switzerland through Khartoum, with a huge collection of material which I brought to the Museum of Ethnography in Geneva. Back home, I worked on my book ["Living on Earth in the Sky: The Anyuak"] and started looking for a publisher – which is another story altogether, because nobody wanted to publish a book of 4,000 pages... In 1988 I went to teach Anthropology in France, at Paris Sorbonne University. Then the ICRC asked me to help them in working with South Sudanese. I was for one year in Yirol, for another year in Ler, and until 1992 throughout all of South Sudan. When Mengistu fell, refugees came in from Ethiopia. I was in Pochalla before they arrived: almost 200.000 people, with 10,000 minors - those we nowadays call "lost boys". We had to organise food delivery for them, without an airstrip and with soldiers shooting against our trucks. When Ethiopian and Sudanese troops attacked Pochalla, I helped these "lost boys" to reach Kenya. We sent them off just three days before the attack. The car I was fleeing with, together with 10 children, was hit by 23 bullets; by miracle, they just hit the engine and the car's body. It was very dramatic. That's why people remember me. But in the end, I was just helping the victims. I was doing what was reasonable.