

Profile

The father of the lost boys

By Atem Yaak Atem

Most anthropologists tend to be romantic and a curious lot. This statement is largely true about some European and American anthropologists who travel to parts of the world and sometimes live with peoples whose cultures and ways of life are very different from those found and practiced in the industrialized societies. In the early part of the last century students would travel to Africa, parts of Asia and islands in the Pacific Ocean to observe traditions, belief and practices of what used to be pejoratively referred to as “primitive peoples”. The British anthropologist Evans Prichard, for example, travelled to study the Azande of Equatoria and the Nuer. His stay with the Nuer and his close observations of their value system influenced him to the extent that student developed liking of the people and their cultures. However, not all such visitors changed their mind as some of them persisted in their preconceived views and condescending attitudes towards their subjects. In that category are people like Seligman the author of *The Pagan Tribes of Southern Sudan*. But over the years anthropology became of age when a new generation of young students from the developed world began to argue forcefully that the fact that two given societies and their cultures does not mean that one is superior to the other. Kwacakworo, the subject of this profile belongs to that class who look at societies and culture objectively.

Kwacakworo whose real name is Condin Perner was born in 1943 in the Swiss town of Davos. His nickname for which he is known by many Sudanese is an Anyuak sentence that translates into “the leopard that fears nothing”. Naturally, giving European African names is common in Sudan. It is an expression of intimacy and affection for a foreigner that stays with the people he loves or helps in different ways.

Dr Perner developed interest in these Nilotic people who live in Sudan and Ethiopia when he was a lecturer of French Literature at the University of Khartoum from 1974-1976. During the same period he was with the Institute of Afro-Asian Studies. Apart from his teaching job he immersed himself in literature about the Anyuak. In 1975 the academic visited Anyuakland, marking the beginning of what later turned to be a life-long passion for the people and their society. His choice of the Anyuak as a field of study was a result of his awareness that the people have not been studied before by any one.

But before we look at the man and his work and experience, a digression is necessary. The scholar who earned a doctorate in Comparative Literature from Zurich University in 1970 has a CV that is famed for his visits and stay in some of the world’s exotic and inaccessible places. The first of these was the Congo where he taught in Kisangani, later moved to Celebes in Indonesia, also as a teacher. As a representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Kwacakworo was posted to Chittagong, Bangladesh in 1972. A year later he was transferred to India where he served briefly before moving to Viet Nam, all as ICRC delegate. From 1995 to 1997 Kwacakworo was coordinating the

activities of ICRC with Red Crescent Societies in Afghanistan. In the same capacity he was from 1998 to 1999 responsible delegate for Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan.

Kwacakworo says when he first went to the area of his research which began in Akobo, he faced many difficulties. He almost starved to death because nobody was ready to give him food. The Northern merchants in the town could help, but he says he did not like them for no apparent reason.

Later the researcher went to Anyuak country where spent three years without interruption. It was at that time he was able to learn the Anyuak language which enabled him to compile a dictionary in that medium in addition to oral literature, history, traditions and other aspects of culture. These documents which Kwacakworo says are the biggest collection on any people in Africa are the main sources of most of his writings. The best known of these books are the two volumes: *The Sphere of Spirituality: The Anyuak: Living on Earth in the Sky and Human Territory*. These tomes are so expensive that they are out of reach of many people. But he has written some books which are cheap. They include *But you know... the Darkness is the Big Thing*, a publication about sexual attitudes of some Southern Sudanese communities.

After the end of his field work he packed a huge load of documents. There was protest by some Sudanese that this foreigner was taking away people's culture. On the other hand, he thinks he has done the right thing because he has not preserved the ways of life in writing but also he has made the knowledge about the Anyuak available to the rest of the world.

Dr Perner who was a friend of the late king of the Anyuak Agada Akwey used to pay a yearly visit to Anyuak from 1980 to 1984.

In an answer to the question of the attitudes of white anthropologists, Condin Perner said he does not like most of their attitudes towards the Africans and their societies. He took issue with their silence instead of condemning racism. They always point out all negative things while ignoring the positive and the beautiful. Asked about his political credo, the academic says he is always on the side of the oppressed.

This does not come as surprise. He is a citizen of a country, Switzerland, which is made up of three linguistic groups who if they were Africans would be called tribes. These are German, French and Italian speakers. Despite this diversity, the country has a system of rule which protects the rights of minorities. It appears the House of Nationality which was launched in Kenya five years ago under the theme of "Governance in Southern Sudan" was inspired by the Swiss experience. The plan which falls under the Swiss ministry of foreign affairs section of conflict resolution, aims at empowering and giving minorities voice to be heard in the running of Southern Sudan. Some members of the SPLM leadership are not amused by a scheme which some view as a way of reversing the trend from the rule of majority to that of minority. Kwacakworo vehemently disagrees. There is no loser in this plan, only that there will be no one under-represented, he explains.

Kwacakworo worked for many years with the International Committee of the Red Cross. From 1990 to 1994 he was the ICRC head of delegation sometimes based in Kenya and most of the time in Southern Sudan. Within that time he also served as adviser to the UN children agency Unicef and the 40 strong NGOs consortium, Operation Life-line Sudan, OLS.

But humanitarian work in war zones can be a thankless undertaking as the parties in the conflict try to accuse NGOs personnel of siding with the enemy. After the fall in 1991 of the regime of Mengistu Haile Selassie and the subsequent influx of the Sudanese refugees into Sudan Kwacakworo was quick to realise that what taking place was a humanitarian disaster in the making. He flew to Pochalla, main Anyuak town, where over 200 000 persons mostly women and children had assembled. There was no food or shelter or medicine while the seasonal rains were falling everyday. On arrival at the spot, he called Nairobi's office of ICRC to send emergency assistance, but there was feet dragging as the officials wanted approval from Geneva. Finally relief arrived. The planes which were supplying relief items were used to carry to Kapoeta families of the SPLA soldiers.

The title of this piece is misleading in that even Kwacakworo were to be an African chief with many wives, he could not possibly be father to thousands of young children who were known at that time as "unaccompanied minors" and now dubbed by sensational journalists as "lost boys". Most of those people are fathers in their right.

Lost or unaccompanied these young people presented a problem to both the SPLA and the humanitarian community. The SPLA wanted them to be taken to Narus. That meant moving through a hostile territory which also did not have water. Kwacakworo then pressured the ICRC to hire trucks to transport the boys to Narus. They agreed and the youths were transported to Narus and finally to Kakuma refugee camp. Mission accomplished but at a cost. Khartoum was furious with the ICRC and Kwacakworo for helping people the Government of Sudan regarded as future rebels. But the Swiss who saw these people in need as human beings, no more. After the success of the evacuation, the President of Sudan General Omar el Bashir flew to Pochalla which just been taken by the Ethiopian army and handed over to the Government of Sudan. To his utter disappointment Bashir found only a dozen of sick and disabled young men he took with him to Khartoum.

In operations in war zones, Kwacakworo recalls two scary situations he has so far experienced. When the Ethiopian attacked and overran Pochalla he and some members of ICRC had to escape for their lives as shooting was every where. The SPLA commandeered their relief vehicles and would not allow them to board the cars. They had to walk long distances to safety. (He joked that when he visited Khartoum some years later, the immigration staff allowed the men the Government loved to Khartoum because his passport is in the name Condin Perner, not Kwacakworo they would have not hesitate to declare him as persona non-grata.)

Another ordeal happened to him while in Afghanistan. When the regime of the Taliban was being driven out of Kabul, the capital, there was shooting every where. He and his colleagues had to take cover to avoid be killed. (Contrary to widespread belief that the Taliban were a bunch of uncivilized brutes, Kwacakworo says most of them were nice people and that he had friends among them.)