

AYUELMALUAK AYUEL ATEM (posted on [11 Feb 2020](#) by [ayuelphotography](#))
<https://thenomadsjourney.travel.blog/2020/02/11/kwachakworo/>

Kwachakworo

Have you ever met someone who embodies the name he's been given? If you can answer this question then my pseudonym should tell you, you're in for a wild ride. Kwachakworo is a Swiss man, who has seen some of the most critical times in the history of South Sudan, a time that precedes my knowledge, a time when South Sudan tried its first attempt at self-governance. He has since developed an intricate web of relations that made me ask this second question, where does a man choose to make his home?

Our journey starts at Juba international Airport awaiting the arrival of 3 people from Nairobi, amongst them, an old friend, like a tale reminiscent of a Tolkien's Lord of the Rings. Years after setting off on a similar journey, *Conradin Perner* PhD, the man who came to be known as *Kwachakworo*! Had come back to visit the tomb of an old friend and document his story for a feature on the ethnographer and writers life. Conradin Perner, PhD. is renown for more than his writings as both a delegate and a consultant. He taught French Literature at University of Khartoum in the 1970s when he decided to undertake a study on the Anyuak in 1975, a project that took nearly 8 years and sponsored by various organisations starting with the University of Zurich for 3 years, followed by the Swiss National Fund for Scientific Research for 3 years, and his friends also chipped in contributions to sponsor the project.

Kwachakworo was a name given to him by Chief Ading Okway of Dikole Clan from Akobo, as a bull name, a practice common amongst nilotic communities. In this case unique colors of the bull resemble the color pattern of 2 animals, a leopard (kwac) or a Serval (which looks like a smaller leopard, but for the pointy ears). It's a name that has over the years evoked much respect to its bearer as he looked through the map of our first destination to the land of the Anyuak. Having written 8 volumes of an anthropological study on the Anyuak and an autobiographical memoir of the time he spent amongst them. He traces his fingers reassuringly and gently through an aged map tracing the journey we were about to undertake, the map dated 1983 bears his name and Stephen Ogut Obongo Ocong Nyigwo Oconyi, an Anyanya veteran and currently a representative in the council of States.

The small aircraft that was to ferry us on this adventure took off from Juba International Airport and landed in Pochalla nearly 2 hours later as we met with a small gathering awaiting us at the airstrip, young and old alike awaiting to see Kwachakworo. It was there that we caught the first glimpse of the work machines Toyota's Land Cruiser, battered yet working somehow. These were the cars that would take us through the vastness of the points between the maps. But the distance is nothing when you're in fascinating company. Travelling with us on this journey were the most diverse collection of people, who for security reasons i would only refer to by their nicknames given during the adventure we undertook together.

Traveling from Switzerland to Juba, Kwachakworo came with a nurse to assist him and a ethnographer and camera man who was to document his story. The nurse, Simona, spoke little english, but had a zeal to travel to Africa for the first time. The camera man Roman, curious with his eyes darting from from camera to the plane window, trying as I was to take pictures of the Nile after take off. The two chatted in Swiss German as I and Akol chatted in Swahili.

Connecting us was a thin thread of common languages and curiosity for what awaited us on the journey. Awaiting take off back to Juba the Cargo plane ferrying telecom equipment for MTN, which recently announced the expansion of its services to other regions, stood next to a smaller plane dwarfed by its enormity. The cars ferried the equipment and luggages back and forth to its destination, as Kwacakworo left the airstrip towards the town, the cheerful children followed him leaving me and Akol to observe the lush green in every shade. Around us were curious eyes only distracted briefly by the departure of the planes, the firmly fixated to know who we were.

The first thing that stood out for me and Akol were the hairstyles, both male and female had finely threaded lines on their heads and surprisingly a Rasta. Yet my fascination couldn't possibly compare to Akol, whose mother is Anyuak from Gambella, and having come for the first time to Pochalla. Our virgin eyes curiously following every motion around us trying to figure out how to communicate with the residents, all too aware that we were strangers.

A strange realization dawns on you when you are disconnected from a telecom network hours after you were using it. Taking pictures and videos and having no means of posting them. Social media has certainly had its influence on our modern lifestyles, creating a need to showcase the new places explored. Slowly it crept in that for a week we were offline. Suddenly I was more aware of the challenges that lay before us. Even more distressing was the realization that no language connects you with the person whose home you are in. After all the planes had taken off, we started walking around I looked for familiar things, finding vines growing on-the abandoned road construction equipment near the airport and remnants of the Sudan civil war, like a used rocket shell lay on the ground, among other artillery which fell into disuse. The commissioner welcomed us to sit outside his offices, the first vestige of British colonialism I noticed, a wooden cabin constructed similarly to the police stations I had seen in Kenya.

The first dawn in Pochalla came with a multitude of greetings. Word had got around that Kwacakworo was back in town almost 40 years later. The early morning visitors got us after finishing breakfast. Having learnt about Anyuak Kings from a previous interview I was curious to ask Kwacakworo more about the anthropological studies he did, answering only as much as my question could have framed and trailing it off with, 'its all in the books' referring me back to the specific titles of each of the 8 volumes published research on the Anyuak. It was here that he made his name, certainly having heard so many visitors with whom he had communed with visiting and chatting in confidence brief spates of Anyuak in recognition of a familiar face or name. Many of the young girls who came to see him had now aged and yet he complimented them as you would an old friend, between smiles, the gestures of being welcomed back.

It was also a homecoming for a lady in red who had traveled back to South Sudan and had joined us on the journey back to her homeland having left 35 years prior. She was a fascinating mix of experiences having left as a teenager, she came back speaking more languages than her mother tongue. Talkative and excitable, her charisma was infectious as she picked different conversations with everyone at the camp, those visiting Kwacakworo certainly felt comfortable near her as we sipped tea. Fluent in Anyuak, English and having married a man from Rumbek, she spoke Dinka.

Leaving Pochalla for Otallo, we practiced closing the tents we spent the night in for loading. The tent label says it's easy to open but following the instructions on how to close it took us a while. After boarding the back of the car, to leave camp, the first challenge of our long ride showed, the thicket on the roadside slapped my broad back through the open window frame stayed glass less. Stopping for a moment outside the NPA compound to meet up with the

translators who had traveled with us, seated in front with Kwacakworo was a resident diplomat Joane. As Roman filmed the car the ride towards the compound, excited we were about to set off to an uncharted course.

The driver of our car had the most interesting Mohawk, with a bright yellow streak, having set off when the whole crew had gathered, the other cars chased after us. Finally noticing the flashing lights behind him, he slowed accepting the scolding the security officers traveling with us had to dish out. It was then that a scary revelation was made, the car had no brakes. Having purposefully driven in the front, he waited for the other cars to go before him. Only a few meters ahead the first car stalled and had to be pushed to start. Gotta love manual cars!

The drive was long, but I can't speak for the 3 young men who hang on to the back of the Toyota landcruiser with two benches facing each other. They held on to the door frame while ensuring the door remained so that none of the luggage fell off. Having the first chat with Amaliya, a beneficiary of Swiss education funds, we were more relaxed for the journey ahead, wide eyes with fascination as we drove on through the thick grasses and thickets that lined the clearing we passed, there's not much of a road says one of the travelers, as comparisons of the different places the car's occupants had lived in came to mind. Teasingly, I asked Simona why she would choose South Sudan as the first country she'd visit in Africa.

For Kwacakworo it was obvious, he had spent 15 years of his life with the Anyuak. For 8 years he lived amongst them and wrote books about them. Speaking at a welcoming ceremony, the commissioner of Otallo graciously welcomed him as a compatriot who had long left but came back home. Otallo had grown over the years as the population increased, pointed out the commissioner, there was Otallo 1 and 2. Kwacakworo however was more excited to talk to the Anyuak again, saying that the world has 'learnt that the Anyuak are a wonderful people and that they were not living in the wilderness at all and were in fact at the center of Humanity.' Pointing out the community values of respect, dignity, self-consciousness, courage, pride and beauty, jokingly referring to his younger years saying 'at least at the time they were beautiful.' Apparently he had been accused of presenting the Anyuak to be so beautiful, to which he responded that their beauty resides in their inner values.

After leaving Anyuak country, those many years ago, one Anyuak asked him, 'Why did you come, if you leave us again'. This became the title of his autobiography, which speaks of his travels and struggles while living alone in Anyuak land. On that day of giving his speech, he responded to the inquiry saying, 'but, in fact I've never left you. I've been talking about you, a little bit, everywhere.' Having worked as the head of delegation for the ICRC and then as a peace maker for the Swiss government, Kwacakworo spent 40 years of his life in the Sudans. He had thought he wouldn't come back again due to his advancing age, pointing out that like an aging tree he needs support.

Kwachakworo while in Switzerland had a dream which he couldn't forget, in the middle of the night, he got a smell into his nose of the 'piny' the smell of the land/earth. He also dreamt that he heard the sound of the 'akuru' (dove) which is normal for the Anyuak, but hearing that sound in Switzerland he couldn't resist and just had to follow the sound back home. The akuru bird had followed him during his travels all those years before, waking from Boma to Okwaa, Pochalla to Otallo, from Otallo to Akobo, from Pibor to Otallo, from Pochalla to Bor and other places. He always found the akuru (dove) in his travels, becoming a part of his own identity. He followed that dream and asked Adok if he could come back before it was too late.

Traveling with us was the Chief Executive Officer of the South Sudan National Gateway, a parastatal created by the Ministry of Information, Telecommunications and Postal services. Waiting at the Juba international Airport for the arrival of Kwacakworo, the excitement on his face as he awaited a long lost friend, I came to understand the bond that existed between the two men was forged years prior. Organizing the travels from Juba to Pochalla and onwards to Otallo and back to Juba, Adok was certainly efficient. Teasingly, Kwacakworo spoke of how Adok organized the plane to Pochalla and broken cars to Otallo.

Leaving Pochalla to go to Otallo, a distance of about 30 kilometers had taken us almost 4 hours due to the cars breaking down. At one point our car needed to be pushed to start, as the car rammed it from behind, as we stood on the side stretching our cramped knees.



Simona Sabljo Napoleon Adok Roman Stocker **Ayurl Maluak Ayuel Atem**