

Acholi Royal Messengers: Mobility of Information and Goods in Northern Uganda, 1870s to 1920

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Abstract

This article examines the position of *la or Pa rwot*, or what I refer to as the royal messenger, to show the complicated nature of mobility of information and goods in late precolonial and early colonial Acholiland. Using a wide range of sources, such as mission and colonial archives, local histories by both Acholi and missionaries, and the author's doctoral field research notes, I argue that understanding this office and its holder allow us to comprehend the complex ways through which information and goods moved between subjects and leaders called *rwodi* (singular: *rwot*), and from one *rwot* to another. This article has dual goals: first, to examine the nature of the training of *la or Pa rwot*, delving into the knowledge and skills of the office holders, and second, to demonstrate the roles of *la or Pa rwot* in his chiefdom and the transformation of the office, beginning in the 1890s with the British conquest of Acholiland, to 1920. Overall, the article seeks to draw attention to a unique group of men who facilitated the traffic of administrative and diplomatic information and goods in Acholiland and beyond.

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Introduction

On December 31, 1878, Eduard Carl Oscar Theodor Schnitzer (Emin), the third governor of the Equatoria Province of Sudan, set out to visit the area surrounding the post of Patiko. The first governor, Sir Samuel White Baker, had built the post as his headquarters in 1872. Based on travelogues written by his two predecessors, Emin expected to find a densely populated land. However, as he began his tour eastward, Emin was shocked to find the region deserted, the crops burned, and the buildings demolished. He later learned that the desertion and destruction were the result of the oppressive regime of Egyptian troops that Baker had left behind in Patiko. Baker had brought Egyptian troops to Patiko to fight the slave trade operated by Arabic-speaking traders from Sudan; many Acholi chiefs, *rwodi* (singular: *rwot*), seeking protection from slave traders, moved their capitals close to Baker's headquarters. But when Baker left Acholiland in March 1873, the Egyptian troops subjected the nearby *rwodi* and their subjects to forced labor and saddled them with a corn tax. When Rwot Camo of Payira, the leading *rwot* in the area, protested, the Egyptian soldiers arrested and beat him.¹ After Camo's release, he and other *rwodi* destroyed their villages and fled Patiko.

After three lonely days touring Patiko, Emin, to his astonishment, received an invitation from Rwot Camo to visit Payira. "All the more surprising to me," Emin wrote, "was a visit from his *son* [italics mine] and an invitation from him to visit his father, who had heard of my going to Kabarega [the ruler of Bunyoro] and wished to speak to me, but was afraid to come himself." Emin saw in this invitation an opportunity to repair broken relations in the area and allow his administration to function effectively; so, he "willingly assented." Along with the person he assumed was Rwot Camo's son—but who was most likely a royal messenger—Emin arrived at the *rwot's* court after traveling east for one day. When he approached the court, the welcome unfolded in grand style. "A guard of honor awaited us," he wrote, "consisting of about twenty of the chief's servants, in gaily-coloured dresses and armed with old guns; he [Camo] himself stood a little to one side of the escort, in the centre of a group of ... [subjects] dressed in skins and freshly painted with red paint" (Emin Pasha 1898: 69).

Before Emin could enter the compound, he experienced something even more astonishing. The ritual specialist, the royal wife or *daker*, stopped Emin and subjected him to a short ritual intended to cleanse strangers so as to prevent them from harming the *rwot* and his subjects. "We were requested to wait a

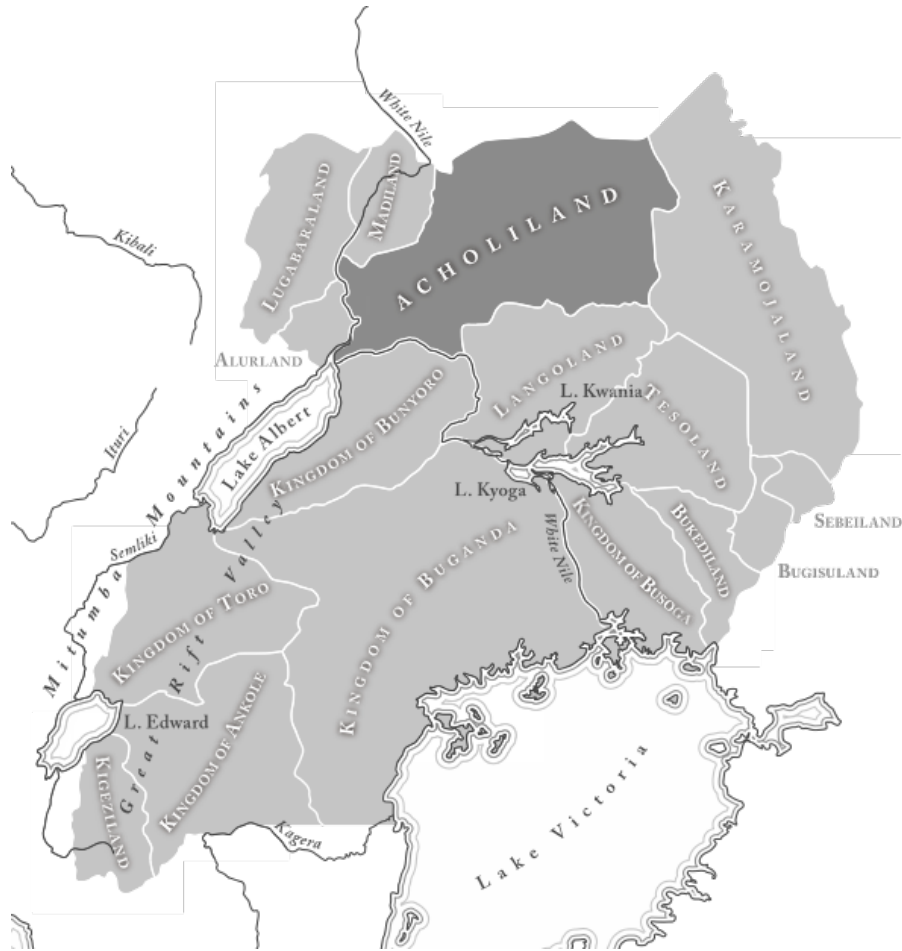
¹ Early works referred to this chief as Rwotcamo, as if it were a personal name, but the correct rendering is *Rwot Camo* (Chief Camo).

moment until the two goats brought by ... [the ritual specialist] had been killed." After the animals' throats were slit, Emin recounted, "their blood was sprinkled on our road." Thereafter, Rwot Camo welcomed him "by touching my hands and [he] led me to a village close by where an *angareb* (a bedstead covered with a web of plaited thongs) was placed for me under the tree." Emin then held discussions with Rwot Camo and spent the night in the *rwot's* compound. The following day, Emin returned to Patiko, his base (Emin Pasha 1898: 69).

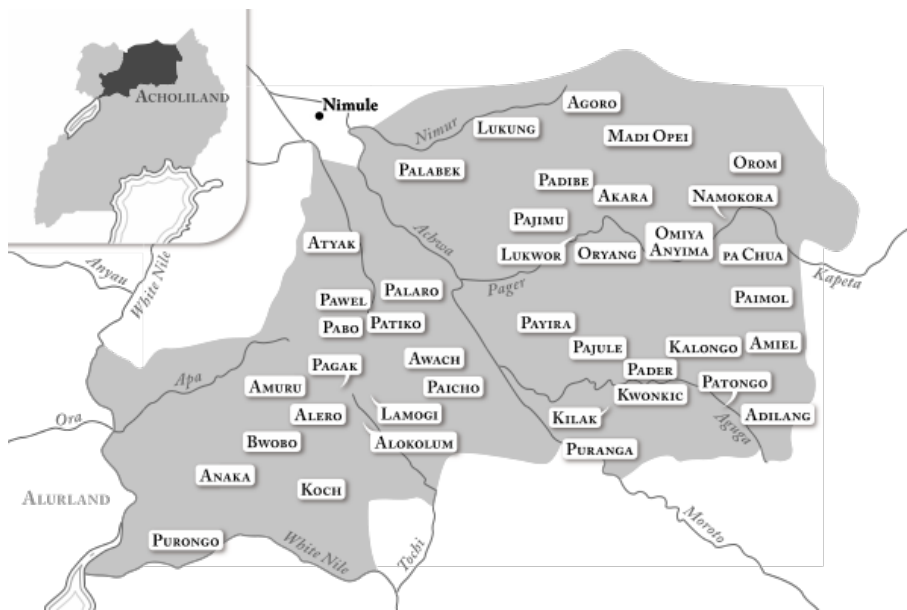
Emin's travelogue—his arrival in Patiko and his reception at the *rwot's* compound—provides insight into the structure, etiquette, and operations of Patiko and Payira chiefdoms. Particularly, it introduces us to several court officials and to court decorum. But the travelogue does not tell us much about the person whom Emin referred to simply as the *son of the chief*, who led him from Patiko to Payira. This person—given his role to invite Emin, the distance and time he traveled with Emin, and Emin's description of his welcome ritual—I argue, was not a son of the *rwot*.² Rather, he was a far more complex person: *la or Pa rwot* (plural, *lu or Pa rwodi*), whom I refer to hereafter as a royal messenger, one of the most important court officials in the Acholi political system.

Drawing on primary and secondary sources as well as qualitative fieldwork undertaken between 2013 and 2015 and in 2018, this article shifts the focus away from *rwodi*, who have long dominated scholars' attention, to a different group of Acholi leaders—court officials. In particular, it focuses on *la or Pa rwot*, who, until recently, has remained one of the least understood courtiers (Otim 2016; Otim 2018). This article, therefore, seeks to shine some light on *la or Pa rwot* and his role in the mobility of royal information and goods in Acholiland.

² This is not to say it was impossible for a son of a *rwot* to become a royal messenger. A son could become a royal messenger if he had been selected and completed the training of royal messengers, which will be elaborated on later.



Map 1. Location of Acholiland. Map by Daniel Huffman.



Map 2. Acholiland's major chiefdoms before 1911. Map by Daniel Huffman.

Acholiland: Recovering the Acholi Royal Messenger

The term *Acholi* refers to one of the numerous ethnic groups in northern Uganda, and, as Ronald Atkinson noted, it has been used in the region since the 1860s (Atkinson 1994: 270). However, most scholars today agree that the Acholi “tribal” identity was largely the creation of the colonial state and missionaries, beginning in the 1910s (Behrend 1999: 14; Finnström 2008: 54; Amone/ Muura 2014). But the Acholi elite also played vital roles in creating this “tribal” identity. They articulated an Acholi identity to the masses; formed associations, such as Acholi Associations; and, most importantly, wrote local histories that have raised people’s consciousness about their identity as a distinct group (Girling 1952: 203).

Historically, Acholiland was composed of over sixty similarly organized chiefdoms (Finnström 2008: 42). The chiefdom was the largest political unit, and every chiefdom had a hereditary male ruler called *rwot*, often referred to in English as a chief. The *rwot* was responsible for making rain, ensuring the health of his subjects, and land fertility. To accomplish his roles, the *rwot* brought in competent court officials to share decision making and authority.

Two of these court officials were women. When a *rwot* was installed, his mother would automatically become a court official, *min rwot*, and his favorite wife who was installed with him became his royal wife, another court official, called *daker* (sometimes referred to as *dako ker*). These two women played important roles in rituals, like the aforementioned ritual performed to welcome Emin. Another vital court official was *ajwaka ker*. This role was reserved for men, and there was only one holder of the position at a time. He was responsible for planting and hunting rituals. In addition, there was *latumpiny*, always referred to as the priest. The position of *latumpiny* could be occupied by either men or women, and the chiefdom could have many priests. Beyond these ritual specialists, there were two other important officials: *oteka* and *la or Pa rwot*. *Oteka* was a war leader, while *la or Pa rwot* was a royal messenger. As with the office of priests, chiefs could have as many war leaders as they wanted.

The position of *la or Pa rwot*, which is my focus in this paper, was neither hereditary nor reserved for one person at a time. Each chiefdom had at least one, but a *rwot* might have several in his retinue. Early European visitors, missionaries, and colonial administrators paid little attention to this title. Some understood it to mean “native runner,” and others interpreted it simply as “messenger” (Postlethwaite 1947: 69; Crazzolara 1951: 241).

To better understand the title, it is worth looking at each of its parts. In the Acholi language, the noun prefix *la-* (plural *lu-*) is a definite article, *or* is a noun that means “verbal message,”³ *pa* is a possessive pronoun, and *Pa rwot* (plural *Pa rwodi*) means “of the chief.” Thus, *la or Pa rwot* means “someone who carries the message of the chief.” Perhaps the most significant part of this title is the phrase *Pa rwot*. It underscores the fact that there were other types of messengers—who were not royal messengers—and that *lu or Pa rwodi* were at the top of their profession.

In 1952, F. K. Girling, a doctoral candidate in social anthropology at England’s University of Oxford, became the first English scholar we know of to shed some light on the Acholi royal messenger. In his dissertation, which was revised and published as a book in 1960, Girling made the first attempt to explain the royal messenger position, though he dedicated a mere paragraph to it.

According to Girling, every chiefdom had a “subordinate official” called “*la-oo* [*la or Pa rwot*].” Girling added that *la or Pa rwot* did not come from the royal lineage—*kal*. Rather, he came from “one of the commoners’ lineages”—*lubong*.⁴ Girling explained that, unlike other court officials, *la or Pa rwot* “lived in the *Rwot*’s household,” although he did not tell us why. The main role of *la or Pa rwot*, he continued, was “to carry his [the *rwot*’s] decisions throughout the area” (Girling 1952: 186; Girling 1960: 97). Girling’s brief account raises two fundamental questions: How did one become *la or Pa rwot*? What roles did he perform?

The Training of Acholi Royal Messengers

A royal Acholi messenger emerged from the talent pool of young men that a group of elders had carefully identified as potential leaders (Otim 2016). Usually, from around the age of thirteen to sixteen, all young men, except the disabled, trained to become productive members of their communities (Ocaya-Lakidi 1977: 155). They were introduced to a wide variety of games and activities to develop their knowledge and skills, but these games and activities also enabled adults to identify children with unique talents (Apoko 1967: 62).

Physical strength, stamina, courage, good memory, and the ability to defend themselves against aggressors were all useful attributes that elders looked for in

³ This verbal message could be instructions, ideas, thoughts, and dreams from a *rwot* to his subjects, his court officials, and to another *rwot* in Acholiland and beyond. I will discuss these verbal messages later in the article.

⁴ This was one of the strategies a *rwot* used to bring the most talented commoners into his court and give them a stake in his administration.

young men. Those who proved skillful at this stage, regardless of their backgrounds, were identified as potential leaders. These boys became known as *lugwok paco*—“those who will take care of our homes” (singular: *lagwok paco*)—indicating that they were expected to assume leadership roles (Odongo 1979: 62).

They were subjected to training, which began at the clan council. Led by the clan leader, *ladit kaka*, this council had three major functions: it served as a clan court, it played the role of a legislature, and it was a training institution for potential leaders (Odongo 1979: 62). The training of *lugwok paco* began by introducing them to clan history, laws and norms, and skills, such as mediation. Trainees started by performing simple tasks, such as serving summons or calling witnesses. Thereafter, they were invited to observe the hearing of court cases and mediation sessions.⁵ The court cases included, for example, domestic violence, land disputes, murder, theft, and adultery (Webster 1976: 349).

With time, after attending many court cases, *lugwok paco* were called on to give their opinions on certain cases. Acholi historian Onyango Odongo explained that, during court sessions and mediations, “elders would purposely ask any young man they wanted to groom to give his opinion on many complicated issues,” to evaluate his astuteness (Odongo 1979: 62). At this stage, a young man was expected to display a range of knowledge and skills to impress clan leaders. If he consistently excelled at these clan events—articulating his ideas, demonstrating mastery of history and norms, and citing legal precedents (*ongon*) to support his arguments—he was eventually identified and promoted to the chieftom assembly to represent his clan and undergo further training (Odongo 1979: 62). This was one of the most prestigious achievements for any young man, his family, and clan.

The training at the chieftom level was not radically different from that at the clan level. At the chieftom level, young men were introduced to their chieftom history, norms, and *ongon*.⁶ Here, *lugwok paco* were expected to exhibit superior knowledge and skills. Those who did not impress at the chieftom level were not selected for specialized training; they returned to their clans and villages and became known as *twoni* (bulls, protectors of a kraal). By virtue of their exposure to, and knowledge of, clan and chieftom history, norms, and customs, they became leaders at lower levels (Odongo 1979: 36, 63; Ocan 1971: 9).

⁵ Santo Ojok, interview, Gulu, July 4, 2018; Petero Ocan, interview, Gulu, July 18, 2018.

⁶ On *ongon*, see Girling 1960: 97; Atkinson 1994: 85.

Lugwok paco who excelled at the chiefdom level by demonstrating mastery of history, traditions, and norms as well as desired attributes, such as physical strength, mental soundness, deportment, and warfare skills, were selected and assigned to work with a royal messenger to develop the more specialized knowledge and skills needed for the position. Royal messengers embraced these mentorship roles because, through them, they would continue to exercise power and influence in the court after they had retired (Odongo 1979: 47).

From the moment a *lagwok paco* had been assigned to a royal messenger, his training often took the form of travel within and beyond Acholiland to introduce him to the *rwodi* and communities he was likely to visit during his future tenure. These travels were intended to acquaint the apprentice with diplomatic protocol, and trainees became part of a royal messenger's entourage wherever he went. The royal messenger's entourage consisted largely of porters, who normally carried gifts from one chief to another, or tribute from subjects to a chief. Once in a while, this entourage, as we shall see later, included *rwodi*.

These journeys afforded trainees the opportunity to observe, and become much more familiar with, the skills to travel overnight anywhere on the road, to deal with changes in weather, and to identify and navigate risks along the way. Royal messengers were expected to be in full control of such journeys and ensure the success of each journey. Once an entourage arrived at the court of any chief, trainees were expected to learn diplomatic protocol, especially the protocol of each chiefdom; courtly etiquette and language; the art of oral delivery; and appropriate gifts and taboos, or what Girling called "avoidances," of other polities (Girling 1960: 95; see also Anywar 1948; Anywar 1954; Otim 2021).

Gifts played various roles in intra- and inter-chiefdom affairs of Acholiland and in the relations between Acholi chiefdoms and non-Acholi polities. They often took the form of tribute, partly meant to cement diplomatic relations. But gifts had to be appropriate to the receiver; otherwise, they could generate conflict. Therefore, trainees had to learn which gifts were appropriate for each chiefdom. For example, different chiefdoms avoided eating different types of animals. If a royal messenger was ignorant of a particular chiefdom's taboos and offered its chief a forbidden kind of meat, the royal messenger and his chief could be accused of trying to demean or harm the chief, which could set off a war between the two chiefdoms. So, mastering the taboos and gifts appropriate for each chiefdom was very important, and it set royal messengers apart from other messengers and ordinary people.

But the mastery of courtly etiquette and protocol was not enough to ensure royal messengers executed their roles effectively. Royal messengers were also required

to be fluent in many languages so they could mediate between their *rwodi* and other leaders, including foreign ones (Ngomlokojo 1999: 73). Novices learned non-Acholi languages from older messengers; from foreign wives of their *rwodi*, who had been either given to their leaders to cement interpolity relations or acquired as war captives; and sometimes from enslaved non-Acholi—*opi*—in their chiefdoms.⁷

In addition, novices had to develop or practice the critical skills of long-distance walking and running and had to master the region's geography. This was because there was no animal transportation in precolonial Acholiland; missionaries who brought mules to Acholiland lost them to trypanosomiasis within the first ten weeks of their stay.⁸ Because of the royal messengers' running skills, Europeans who saw them wrongly called them mere runners. Perhaps the first European to recognize royal messengers' running abilities was Guy Eden. In 1903, Eden wrote that the colonial state had become dependent on *rwodi* because "they have runners," and they had become "the most efficient means of transporting mails."⁹ In July 1914, J. R. P. Postlethwaite—a British colonial agent who had been put in charge of Gulu District—reported that he had once traveled with Rwot Olya's royal messenger from Atyak Chiefdom to Gulu Town. Postlethwaite, who rode a donkey, reported that it had taken him five and a half hours to cover about fifty miles (eighty kilometers), while it had taken Oloya's royal messenger six and a half hours on foot.¹⁰

Questions about these insights and many other references to "native runners" led me to travel to northern Uganda. I had done my dissertation research in Acholiland between 2013 and 2015, and in the summer of 2018, I had an unexpected opportunity to return there and interview people about the running abilities of royal messengers. Santo Ojok, whom I had worked with during my dissertation research, explained that from childhood onward, running was embedded in most activities. According to Ojok, "By the time a young man could go hunting, he already had some running abilities. But to be a royal messenger," he added, "you have to be even faster. Royal messengers learned the skill of running and walking by being part of the entourage. Those who cannot manage walking and running had to drop out."

Ojok then shared a common saying to educate me on the speed of royal messengers. "Before the *rwot* sends out his royal messenger, he [*rwot*] spits on the

⁷ CMHLG/1435: The Letters of A. B. Lloyd and A. L. Kitching, 1904–1908.

⁸ CMHLG/1435: The Letters of A. B. Lloyd and A. L. Kitching, 1904–1908.

⁹ UNA/A16/2: Shuli (Acholi) Correspondence, *Inward*, Volume III, 1903–1904.

¹⁰ Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MSS.Afr.s.2007: Papers of J. R. P. Postlethwaite.

ground in the presence of his royal messenger, who has to run and come back before the saliva dries.” If the royal messenger returned after the saliva had dried, Ojok explained, “he was not fast; he would lose his job.” Unprompted, Ojok added, “It was the introduction of bicycles in Acholiland that killed this kind of running. Once bicycles were introduced, all messages were delivered on bicycles, and running started dying slowly.”¹¹ Petero Ocan, another informant and Acholi historian, repeated the same story but added another common saying to illustrate the messengers’ speed: “A good royal messenger can catch his shadow.”¹² Based on European writings and Acholi oral sources, we can conclude that running—and, with it, the political expediency of efforts to collapse space by shrinking the time it took to cover it—was an essential part of messengers’ training.

Perhaps the most significant form of knowledge that novices learned was augury. A royal messenger, although not a healer, had to be able to identify and interpret events to ensure his safety and the safety of those in his entourage. The best insight into this knowledge comes from Girling, though he does not appear to have understood it very well. In 1949, he wrote that whenever “the *Rwot* traveled abroad [outside his chiefdom] he was preceded in the path by *la-oo* [*la* or *Pa rwot*].” “By slapping his thigh,” Girling explained, the messenger “pointed out stones and tree stumps which lay in the way and which might cause the *Rwot* to injure himself” (Girling 1960: 97). Girling, however, did not delve into the significance of this gesture.

When I first encountered Girling’s account, I was intrigued, and I began reviewing early ethnographies and dictionaries, as well as Girling’s field notes, in search of an explanation. After this proved fruitless, I translated Girling’s account into Acholi and read it aloud to my elderly respondents, hoping they might recognize the act of a royal messenger slapping his thigh. Luckily, seven of my informants recognized the act and were able to elaborate on it. They told me that this was unique knowledge—a simple type of divination taught to non-healers, such as royal messengers, to enable them to foretell any bizarre incident that might adversely affect a journey, so as to protect themselves and their entourages. The “stone and tree stumps” that Girling mentioned, they told me, represented anything that could threaten the safety of those traveling with the

¹¹ Santo Ojok, interview, Gulu, July 4, 2017.

¹² Petero Ocan, interview, Gulu, July 18, 2017.

royal messenger, including rainfall. Novices learned such skills by being in the entourages of experienced messengers and observing them.¹³

By the end of the training, novices who emerged as *lu or Pa rwodi* were not mere “runners,” as early Europeans implied. They were far more complex figures. They were well versed in customs, legal precedents and procedures, clan and chiefdom history, and several languages, and they possessed important skills, such as power-walking, running, and augury. They were also skilled in diplomacy, which required good manners, oral eloquence, and courtly etiquette.

To facilitate the work of conveying diplomatic information and goods in Acholiland and beyond, each *la or Pa rwot* received, from his *rwot*, two special insignia. The first item was a lion or leopard skin, which he donned around his neck, covering his upper body, that marked him as a court official. The second item was an *Olek-ker*, a short walking stick. The best insight into *Olek-ker* comes from Obong Odoki, a former assistant editor and frequent contributor to *Lobo Mewa*, the Acholi Catholic newspaper in the 1950s and 1960s.

In 2014, Odoki told me that he had once written about *lu or Pa rwodi* but had lost his manuscript during the war between the government of Uganda and the Lord’s Resistance Army (1986–2006). He described *Olek-ker* as a short walking stick with a large knob at the top. This knob, he continued, signified the holder’s power, and it was what distinguished *Olek-ker* from other walking sticks of old people. After my interviews with Odoki, I showed him pictures from the Church Missionary Society (CMS) archives that I had carried for my fieldwork, and he asked if he could keep some. I agreed, albeit reluctantly because I knew it would be difficult to print them again. A few days after my interviews with Odoki, I received a phone call from his son, calling me back to their home. During that visit, Odoki told me that one of the pictures showed a royal messenger. When I asked how he knew this man was a royal messenger, Odoki pointed at the man’s stick, and said, “This is *Olek-ker*, and this is a *la or Pa rwot*.”

¹³ Oloyo Obong, interview, Gulu, March 2, 2014; Anderea Omal, interview, Gulu, March 8, 2014; Anna Aporo, interview, Gulu, March 14, 2014; Aget Apiyo, interview, Gulu, April 14, 2014; Martha Adong, interview, Gulu, May 2, 2014.



Figure 1. Dr. Albert Cook giving medicine to patients during his tour of Acholiland (with his wife, Bishop Alfred Tucker, and A. B. Lloyd) in 1904. This picture also shows a royal messenger (behind the man with the black hat) observing Cook dispensing medicine. The royal messenger's *Olek-ker* is marked with a star. Reprinted from Lloyd, *Uganda to Khartoum*, 216.

These objects signified the royal messenger's position and power, and they identified him to the people he encountered along the way, who then could lend him support (for example, by offering him food or accommodations). Indeed, these two items allowed the royal messenger to travel relatively unimpeded throughout the region.

Royal Messenger: Mobility of Oral Information and Goods

The royal messenger played vital intermediary roles, both internally (between the *rwot* and his subjects) and externally (between his *rwot* and other leaders outside his chiefdom). His primary role was to carry his *rwot*'s verbal messages and goods to different kinds of people (Girling 1960: 97).

The first intermediary role was between his *rwot* and the *rwot's* subjects. The information he took to the subjects could include schedules of important chiefdom rituals, timelines for paying or receiving tribute, and different kinds of news from the court, such as death announcements. On the other hand, information that the royal messenger took back to the *rwot* included news, pleas, and complaints from the subjects. This could include news of deaths, outbreaks of epidemics or famine, and any other important information subjects felt their *rwot* should know, such as reports of abuse of power by lower-level leaders. Royal messengers also carried goods, such as goats, chickens, and agricultural produce, usually tribute or gifts, from the subjects to the *rwot*. Such items were carried publicly into the *rwot's* court by the royal messenger and members of his entourage.

The royal messenger's second intermediary role was between his *rwot* and lower-level leaders of the chiefdom, such as clan heads far from the capital. Here, the kind of messages royal messengers transmitted from the court were similar to those conveyed to ordinary subjects, and they also took goods from these leaders back to the court. Usually, gifts from leaders were meant to cement their relations with the *rwot*.

The final intermediary role of the royal messenger was between his *rwot* and other *rwodi* within Acholiland and beyond. In this case, the royal messenger carried information—for example, announcements of sickness or death—and goods such as meat, spears, and skins, which were commonly exchanged among chiefdoms.

In all their intermediary roles, royal messengers had to memorize the messages. Unlike royal messengers in literate societies, who conveyed letters and did not need to (and often were not supposed to) know the contents of the messages they carried, precolonial and preliterate messengers in Acholiland conveyed oral messages. They had to memorize the messages and, more importantly, couch them in the most appropriate terms, depending on the nature of the message and the status of the receiver. This task called for a sharp memory and outstanding oratory skills.

In times of war, a royal messenger's duties became even more complicated and delicate: he played a key role in initiating military alliances on behalf of his *rwot*. For example, if his *rwot* needed an alliance with another *rwot*, which was common in Acholiland, the royal messenger initiated the alliance by delivering information, appropriate items, and humans to the other *rwot*. Specifically, he delivered a firestick, a spear, and a girl to the *rwot* whose help his chiefdom

sought (Okech 1953: 19; Ocaya-Lakidi 1977: 151). Each item had its own significance.

The firestick was featured in the first important ritual that a royal messenger performed after he had explained the rationale of the proposed military expedition to the *rwot* whose alliance was sought. Specifically, the messenger gave the *rwot* two firesticks to inspect and ensure that they had not been lit. After the *rwot*'s inspection, the royal messenger rubbed the two fire sticks against each other to spark a flame. If the sticks caught fire, it meant that "the cause [of the war] is just and has the necessary spiritual [ancestral] support; if not, then a war cannot take place, as it would have disastrous effects" (Meier 2013: 39; see also Girling 1960: 105; Behrend 1999: 40). After this ritual, the royal messenger left the firesticks behind and returned to his *rwot* to report on the outcome of his mission.

If the stick had caught fire, the royal messenger returned to the other *rwot* with a spear and a girl to seal the alliance (p'Bitek 1971: 151). Upon arriving, the messenger gave the *rwot* the spear. If the *rwot* accepted the spear, then the royal messenger gave him "a young but mature girl who became the wife of the receiving chief" (Ocaya-Lakidi 1977: 151). While it is well known that the *rwot*'s receiving the spear signified he had accepted to join the war, the use of girls in building war alliances is not as well known (Meier 2013: 39; Girling 1960: 105).

Girls were associated with fertility, and the offer of a girl or woman of reproductive age was meant to indicate that the donor was ready to compensate the recipient for any eventual loss incurred in the proposed war. Put simply, the girl was expected to reproduce and replace the *rwot*'s lost subjects. Usually, the girls who were used as gifts in building war alliance were captives who had been raised in the court or by the royal clan. Those who had reached puberty were usually used as gifts in building war alliance. According to Girling, there was "no objection to a *Rwot*'s wife being a slave girl" (Girling 1960: 108). Ultimately, it was the role of the royal messenger to create a military alliance.

After creating an alliance, before the war party set out to attack the enemy, it was the royal messenger who had to send a "notice ... to the enemy" about the intention to attack (Grove 1919: 163–164). Failure to give an adversary advance notice of an impending attack violated the Acholi code of war and sense of honor, and the spirits of those who died in surprise attacks were thought to "haunt their killers."¹⁴ Thus, in times of war, a royal messenger played three important roles. He was responsible for the movement of goods, humans, and

¹⁴ CMHLG/10: P. H. Lees, 1914–1915; see also Girling, *The Acholi*, 155.

information between a *rwot* seeking an alliance and another *rwot*; he was responsible for performing rituals to seal war alliances; and because he was the bearer of news about impending war, he often acted as a spy.

These roles in times of peace and war demonstrate the importance of the royal messenger in the delivery of both information and goods among Acholi chiefdoms. Because of these roles, royal messengers, unlike other court officials, lived in the same compound as their *rwodi*. Although both Girling and Ocan observed that royal messengers lived in the same compound as their *rwodi* (Girling 1960: 97; Ocan 1972: 21), neither of them explained why.

There are two reasons for this. First, the royal messenger had to be in close proximity to the *rwot* to update him with public and confidential news and to be ready to deliver information from the *rwot* to clan heads, subjects, or *rwodi* of other chiefdoms. Second, and more importantly, given the importance of the royal messenger's roles, he needed protection, which the *rwot*'s courtyard provided. In 1904, Lloyd wrote that when someone committed a crime and ran to the *rwot*'s courtyard, the offended party could not follow the culprit and take revenge. For this reason, Lloyd noted, "all murder cases were resolved in the *rwot*'s court" because, while there, the aggrieved party could not take revenge on an offender. Whoever beat or killed anyone in the *rwot*'s courtyard, Lloyd said, was charged an exorbitant fine.¹⁵ Thus, the royal messenger's residence in the *rwot*'s court was for both practical and security reasons.

For all their roles, royal messengers, like other court officials, were rewarded with wives, usually slave girls, foodstuffs, domestic animals, and land. The slave girls were usually those who would have been under the custody of the *rwot*; the food was normally game meat and agricultural produce given as tribute to the *rwot*. All these rewards made many young men strive to become royal messengers.

Once appointed, a royal messenger held his position for as long as he could perform his role. When a messenger could no longer do so, he relinquished his role, but, because of his breadth of knowledge and skills, he became an adviser to the *rwot*, occasionally counseling the *rwot* and his active royal messengers (Allen 1984: 33).

¹⁵ CMHLG/002: A. B. Lloyd in Patiko, 1904–1908.

Continuity and Transformation of the Roles of Royal Messengers

The British conquest of Acholiland, beginning in the late 1890s, upset court positions in the region but did not initially transform them. From 1899, with the arrival of Major Charles Delmé-Radcliffe, who had been sent to “pacify” Acholiland, court officials, especially royal messengers and war leaders, began to join and work with colonial agents. Delmé-Radcliffe referred to them simply as “interpreters,” obscuring the backgrounds of many Acholi who joined him.¹⁶ These “interpreters,” however, were not just anybody, as they might appear in European documents. They were sent by their *rwodi* to mediate between the *rwodi* and colonial agents, and they held positions of relative power.

The first Acholi to join Delmé-Radcliffe were Okello Mwoka Lengomoi and Ogwang Labuc. Before the arrival of the British, Okello was a court official who had risen to the rank of *oteka*, a war leader in Puranga. His title, Lengomoi, designated him a military genius. Ogwang Labuc, who most likely joined Delmé-Radcliffe after Okello did, was also a court official, a *la or Pa rwot* in Pudyek. When Delmé-Radcliffe arrived in Acholiland, he built a small base in Pudyek, and it is likely he met Labuc there (Anywar 1954: 37).¹⁷

Labuc, Okello, and many others whose identities might never be known, played vital roles in introducing Delmé-Radcliffe to the region and different *rwodi*, which led to Delmé-Radcliffe’s reaching treaties with many *rwodi* and bringing them under British control. They also provided intelligence that led to the arrest of *Rwot* Awich in 1901.¹⁸ Finally, royal messengers delivered letters, telegrams, and goods among colonial officials. In his 1901 report on the expedition, Delmé-Radcliffe best captured the role of Labuc as a “trusted messenger, who is able to go anywhere” and deliver messages to chiefs and other Europeans in the region.¹⁹ Yet, despite “pacifying” Acholiland, the state did not establish any office there. After Delmé-Radcliffe left Acholiland, the colonial state retreated to Koba and Nimule and continued to rely on their Acholi “interpreters” to provide them with intelligence about the region. Men like Labuc, Okello, and many others continued to move back and forth between Acholiland and Koba and between Acholiland and Nimule, to provide colonial officials with intelligence on Acholiland.

¹⁶ UNA/A16/2: Shuli (Acholi) Correspondence, *Inward*, Volume II, 1902–1903.

¹⁷ See also UNA/A16/2: Shuli (Acholi) Correspondence, *Inward*, Volume II, 1902–1903.

¹⁸ UNA/A16/2: Shuli (Acholi) Correspondence, *Inward*, Volume II, 1902–1903.

¹⁹ UNA/A16/2: Shuli (Acholi) Correspondence, *Inward*, Volume II, 1902–1903.

In 1904, when the CMS established its first mission in Acholiland, the office of the *la or Pa rwot* began to undergo changes. Some royal messengers—either on the orders of their chiefs or on their own—joined the mission school and became literate and converts. Some returned to their old roles. Others did not. They joined the mission and began working as local evangelists. One such royal messenger was Lakobo Ameda of Patiko, who became the second Acholi to be baptized in 1905 (Okech 1953: 6). Ameda worked briefly for the CMS as a local evangelist before returning to his former role.²⁰

In 1911, when colonial rule began, the office of the *la or Pa rwot* continued to undergo changes. Some royal messengers became colonial employees because they had proved more appropriately skillful in interpretation, running, and knowledge of the leaders and geography than the rest. Initially, they began working as guides, leading colonial officials to courts of *rwodi*; working as “runners,” delivering mail for Europeans; and working as interpreters, translating colonial policies for fellow Acholi and giving feedback to Europeans. Others began working as clerks; they helped illiterate *rwodi* keep tax records. This work provided a platform for the Acholi men to distinguish themselves to colonial officials.

By 1915, when it had become clear to colonial officials that many of the *rwodi* they had co-opted to ensure a smooth transition and implementation of colonial policies—such as collecting taxes and extracting forced labor—had failed in the new tasks assigned to them, the state made a drastic policy change. Colonial officials began deposing underperforming *rwodi* (Bere 1955: 51). They had initially turned to the literate sons of *rwodi*, wrongly believing that their royalty and literacy endowed them with the necessary legitimacy and operational efficiency to implement colonial rule. Like their fathers, sons of *rwodi* struggled to come to terms with a rapidly shifting colonial Acholiland, and many of them also failed. Their failure paved the way for the state to appoint any Acholi who had excelled in their current roles with the colonial state—such as clerks and guides—as government chiefs regardless of their social standing.

By 1920, as the transition to colonial rule came to an end, some of the royal messengers who had distinguished themselves in colonial service had already been appointed chiefs, replacing *rwodi* and sons of *rwodi*. This initiative of deposing *rwodi* and replacing them with Acholi from non-royal backgrounds generated fierce debates and conflicts within Acholiland. *Rwodi* and their

²⁰ CMHLG/002: A. B. Lloyd in Patiko, 1904–1908.

followers pushed back against the colonial state, which is evident in the title they gave colonial appointed chiefs: *rwodi kalam* (*rwot kalam*, singular).

Rwot is, of course, the title of a chief, but *kalam* is a corruption of the Arabic term *qalam*, which means pen or pencil. Scholars have often translated *rwot kalam* as “a literate appointed chief.” But this translation does not evoke the metaphoric dimension of the noun: Acholi, especially the supporters of *rwodi*, coined the term *rwot kalam* (*rwodi kalam*, plural) to highlight the distinction between their *rwot* and the new colonial-appointed *rwot* (Finnström 2008: 42). Literally, *rwot kalam* was a pejorative title that meant an illegitimate chief—a usurper. It was thus an attempt by the supporters of *rwodi* to sway people away from the British appointed chiefs.

The careers of *rwodi kalam* (who replaced *rwodi*) were, therefore, not without challenges. Many *rwodi* tried to reclaim their lost powers and privileges, putting *rwodi kalam* in uncomfortable positions. To govern effectively, *rwodi kalam* had to satisfy both the colonial officials who had appointed them and the deposed *rwodi* in the chiefdoms where they were posted. Some savvy *rwodi kalam* adroitly manipulated these often-competing constituencies and built stellar careers in the colonial era.

One of these royal messengers who thrived as a *rwot kalam* was Lacito Okech. Okech was born in either the late 1870s or early 1880s. He began his career as a royal messenger of Koch. In 1912, he was baptized, and he became a local evangelist in 1913. In 1914, he resigned his role with the mission and began a new career as a colonial clerk before becoming a chief in 1923. His performance as a chief exceeded his bosses’ expectations, and he was promoted to financial assistant in 1937, the highest position possible for a native at the time. In 1946, Okech completed a manuscript. When published in 1953, *Tekwaro ki Lobo Acholi* (*History and Chiefly Tradition of Acholiland*) was the first history of the Acholi written by an Acholi.

But not all royal messengers thrived. Others ultimately failed, bringing their careers—and their lives—to a fatal end. One such person was Otoo Agoro of Padibe chiefdom. The best insight into Agoro comes from J. R. P. Postlethwaite, a British colonial officer. In June 1912, when Postlethwaite arrived in Acholiland, he met Agoro and called him the “runner for Chief Og[w]ok” of Padibe. He described Agoro as “a short old man with muscular legs,” who was “well liked” and “respected” by *rwodi*. “All chiefs responded immediately whenever I sent him.” According to Postlethwaite, Agoro had three attributes that earned him the role of right-hand man: “He knew all the chiefs in the area,” “he knew all

their capitals,” and he had “a gift of language.”²¹ Postlethwaite recalled that Agoro spoke Acholi, Arabic, Madi, and Swahili, which he had learned from the Swahili gunrunners who had operated in the region from the 1890s to 1910s.

On August 19, 1912, Postlethwaite received terrible news that Agoro had died that morning. The bearer of the news, another unnamed royal messenger, told Postlethwaite that Agoro had been poisoned by his *rwot*, Ogwok, for his role in the chiefdom’s disarmament, and had died after a short illness. Agoro’s death revealed the sort of conflict that emerged between royal messengers and their *rwodi* in the colonial state and how some *rwodi* dealt with those conflicts.

Conclusion

This article has focused on one of the most neglected Acholi court officials: *la or Pa rwot*. By exploring how one became a royal messenger and the roles royal messengers played in their chiefdoms, this article has revealed that royal messengers were highly sophisticated people, with complex knowledge and skills, and not mere “runners,” as some early Europeans had perceived them. They were vital figures in the movement of diplomatic information and goods in Acholiland, and sometimes beyond, in the old order.

The extension of colonial rule over Acholiland beginning in the late 1890s did not initially transform the office; royal messengers continued to move information and goods between their *rwodi* and colonial officials. However, beginning in 1904, when the CMS established its first mission and school in Acholiland, and 1911, when effective colonial rule began after almost a decade of hiatus following “pacification,” major transformations occurred with royal messengers. Some became local evangelists, and others joined the colonial state as low-level employees. But by 1915, some royal messengers had already climbed the colonial ladder, becoming *rwodi kalam* and displacing their own *rwodi*. These changes—deposing *rwodi* and appointing government chiefs—resulted in conflicts in Acholiland that did not only destroy the chiefship; they also destroyed the system of mobility of information and goods that had once thrived in the old order.

²¹ UNA/SMP/0227: Report on the Work of J. R. P. Postlethwaite in Chua District, 24 August 1912.

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