

## BOOK REVIEW

Patrick W. Otim. *Acholi Intellectuals: Knowledge, Power and the Making of Colonial Northern Uganda, 1850–1960*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2024. 302 pp. \$34.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780821411469.

Patrick William Otim's *Acholi Intellectuals* interrogates the importance of Acholi intellectuals' roles during the late precolonial to postcolonial eras in Uganda, and it problematizes how historians address power in Africa by focusing on a place with decentralized power and men who did not inherit power. Otim defines Acholi intellectuals as men and women who worked the land but did not depend on it for their livelihood. These were Acholi citizens from nonroyal lineages who received some sort of formal training through missionary schools during the precolonial period and occupied leadership roles within the colonial administration, but they also "commanded public appeal and shaped the people's discourse and actions" (20). The book highlights the work of men like Lacito Okech, an Acholi historian and cofounder of the Acholi Association, who learned how to navigate the colonial structure while retaining his influence among Acholi citizens. Otim engages colonial archives such as the Gulu District Archives and the Uganda National Archives, missionary archives such as the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) Archives at the University of Birmingham, and oral histories he recorded during his field research in Acholiland.

Chapters One through Three pertain to the roles of Acholi intellectuals before the British colonization of Uganda significantly impacted the Acholi. In Chapter One, Otim details the changes in Acholiland from 1850–1911 as the British forced Arab traders out of the region. Otim further argues that the British-appointed chiefs, who were not sons of chiefs, did not achieve success through brute force alone. Their success was due to the court positions they held prior to their official positions with the colonial administration as they built positive reputations publicly prior to their work with the British. Chapter Two challenges ethnographers', such as F.K. Girling, assumption that Acholi commoners who attained positions within a chief's court did so because of their family's association with the royal lineage group. By examining missionary records, Otim highlights different trajectories of commoners to court positions which "reveals how the Acholi cultivated knowledge and skills as well as the status they gave to people who held such knowledge and skills" (4). Chapter Three delves into the roles of Acholi intellectuals such as priests, royal healers, war leaders, and royal messengers within the chief's court. Otim explains how the Acholi exercised power prior to colonial rule and how Acholi intellectuals maintained power during colonialism even as the power of chiefs were increasingly challenged and curbed by the British Administration. These

first three chapters define Acholi intellectuals, how they ingratiated themselves to Acholi civilians and established their value among the Acholi elite.

Chapters Four and Five consider Acholi intellectuals' roles in the transition into foreign rule and examines their part in spreading Christianity through missionary work as well as their official positions in the British Colonial Administration in the early- to mid-twentieth century. Otim argues that indigenous intellectuals were not ordinary people and were more instrumental to conversion efforts than European missionaries credited them for due to their valuable connections to chiefs and their courts as well as their knowledge of the language and culture of the Acholi. Chapter Five looks into the history of Acholi intellectuals who assisted the British as they expanded colonial rule in Acholiland. Intellectuals such as Otoo Agoro had the skills and relationships that made them extremely valuable to the British but also made them vulnerable to repudiation by chiefs for their roles in the subjugation of traditionally appointed leaders. What is most interesting about this period is how the intellectuals learned to access and engage with power to elevate their status within three sources of power whose goals sometimes stood in opposition: chiefs, British Administrators, and missionaries.

Historiography tends to focus on formally educated young men as the first generation of intellectuals, but, in Chapter Six, Otim argues that the “old men” who were disregarded by the British in the 1930s–50s were active participants in shaping Acholiland. One of their most important contributions was the founding of the Acholi Association in 1944 and the biennial magazine they published, which contained precolonial histories of the Acholi. These magazines inspired public discussions and debates about issues in Acholiland, which intellectuals like Lacito Okech and Matago Ojok would lead. These old men were able to connect with younger, educated Acholi as they rose into positions in the British Colonial Administration. The Epilogue calls our attention to the present-day work of the intellectuals. Otim paints a somber picture of the struggles Acholi intellectuals encountered after Uganda achieved independence. He contemplates the complicated and sometimes contentious relationship between Acholi intellectuals and the leaders of the postcolonial state. Otim highlights their continued efforts to address important issues in Acholiland and credits them for producing the histories that made writing this book possible.

*Acholi Intellectuals* pushes the “analysis of power and authority” to help us “understand how the Achoil forms of power and authority” engaged with the colonial and postcolonial state (213). Otim’s narrative illustrates the significance of Acholi intellectuals who merged their indigenous knowledge with their formal education to serve as mediators between traditional, modern, and religious power structures.

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