

Names of the Acholi People <Part 1>

Names are interesting because they reflect the country, ethnicity, and culture of a people. In the Acholi region of northern Uganda, where I work, the Acholi language is spoken, which belongs to the Luo language family used by Nilotic ethnic peoples.

Acholi names are typically composed of an Acholi name followed by an English name. For instance, Nyero Philip has only a given name and no family name. English names can be given relatively freely based on religion, celebrities, acquaintances etc. Each Acholi name carries its own meaning. Nyero means "smile" indicating that the person was born smiling. It also has additional meanings such as "people around him smiled when he was born" and "mockery." Additionally, if a boy is born with warts on his fingers, he is named "Ojara," while a girl is named "Lajara." Furthermore, if a boy is delivered with his legs first, his name is "Odoch," and a girl's name would be "Adoch."

Some names are predetermined at birth. The older sibling of twins is named Ocen/Acen, while the younger sibling is named Opiyo/Apiya. The next child born after the twins is called Okello/Akello, and the following baby is named Odong/Adong. Interestingly, if one parent dies before the child is born, the child is also named Odong/Adong, making the situation further complex.

Another fascinating aspect is that many names have negative meanings. For instance, Nyeko means "jealous." In the polygamous Acholi society, it is not uncommon for children to be exposed to jealousy from other wives. Babies born during difficult times were named Ocan/Acan, meaning "poverty." Kilama, meaning "curse," and Komakech, meaning "unlucky man," received their names due to unfortunate events that occurred in the family before or after their birth. Of course, in everyday life, people usually don't pay much attention to the negative meanings of names. Nevertheless, I was curious about the background of these names, so I asked my Acholi friends.

According to my friends, traditionally, in Acholi culture, elders of the family are responsible for giving names to the children, and names with negative meanings may be given regardless of the parents' wishes. Additionally, I have also heard that from a cultural anthropological perspective, people who did not have a written language, like the Acholi, often named their children after significant events of the time to record them. When I asked my Acholi friends about this, they replied, "There may indeed be such a connotation." For example, Komakech is a rather common name, but it is often given to a child when the child's previous sibling has died. The reason why the name Komakech is so common is probably that there are many cases where the children who are born die. On the other hand, there is a habit of "giving names with negative meanings to protect against evil spirits," not only in Africa but in many countries around the world. However, this is not the case with Acholi names.

However, the trend of names is changing with the times. Many children of my friends have names with positive meanings, such as Laker "Princess" and Oteka "Hero." One of the Komakechi even changed his name to Komagun, which is said to mean "lucky man."



Every child has a beautiful name

I have entered over 2,000 Acholi names to make a farmers' list at work. Initially, it was monotonous work, but after learning the meaning behind each name, I felt as if I could see the face of a stranger behind each name, and I could enjoy the work a lot.

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