



Connecting people, agriculture and the environment through appropriate technologies

Names of the Acholi People <Part 2>

When working abroad, sometimes we are given a local name. It might be due to the difficulty in pronouncing unaccustomed Japanese names, but it also feels good – as if we are accepted in the local community. As I mentioned in a previous issue, in the northern Uganda, Acholi Sub-region, where I work, each Acholi name carries a specific meaning. I looked forward to getting my Acholi name!

My female Japanese colleagues were given good names like "Laker," meaning "princess," "Lakisa" for "heartful," "Lamaro" for "love," "Aber" meaning "beautiful," and so on. "Atim," meaning "a girl born far away," seemed fitting for a woman coming from a distant country like Japan. On the other hand, naming the men seemed a somewhat rougher process! Due to similar pronunciations, Mr. Ohno was given the name "Onono," meaning "a man with nothing," and Mr. Yuki was given the sobriquet "Oyugi," meaning "garbage." The names were so unflattering that we even doubted whether they were genuine names for people (though they are in fact actual names used in Acholi). Of course, my colleagues disliked these names and refused them for themselves! Eventually they also were given better names!

Another young colleague of mine was named "Oyoo," meaning "a boy born by the roadside." "Oyoo" also means "mouse," though it is pronounced a bit differently. Farmers gave him the name because he was always seen hurrying and running in front of farmers.

Surprisingly, he seemed to like it and accepted the name "Oyoo," saying, "This name suits my impatient nature!"

My Acholi name is "Mwaka," meaning "Year." It is a name often given to boys born around the New Year, but is more commonly given to boys born late. When I introduce myself in Acholi as "My Acholi name is Mwaka," I'm usually met with laughter: "Do you know the meaning of that name?" or "Oh, you liked your mom too much!" However, even though I wasn't born around New Year's or as a late birth, I have a special reason for using this name.

About a year into working in Acholi, while on a solo field monitoring visit to a village, I encountered a member of a farmers' group and she guided me to the field. She was pregnant at that time and later named her baby after me, "Sawada." The fact that a member of the community gave my name to their child made me feel that my work was acknowledged by the farmers, and I was truly happy. The baby's name is "Mwaka Sawada." So, this time, I decided to take his Acholi name for me. After sharing this story, people no longer laugh at me; instead, they fondly call me "Mwaka."

Now, there are five children in the Acholi sub-region with the name "Sawada" named after me. Sometimes, when I bring used clothing from Japan for the children, they show happy faces. It's delightful for me to see Acholi children with the same name wearing clothes that were once worn by my own son.

(November 2023, Sawada)



The first baby Sawada wearing Japanese traditional clothing I brought from Japan.



The second baby Sawada. I'm looking forward to watching him grow.



The third baby Sawada plays with soap bubbles brought from Japan.



The fifth baby Sawada, born in 2022.