

# Identity, Memory and Gender in Child naming Among the Acholi people of Northern Uganda

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## **Abstract.**

This paper examines child naming among the Acholi people of northern Uganda with a view to expose salient features of identity, memory and gender embedded in the names. By way of qualitative discourse, predicated on both primary and secondary sources, the paper observes that Acholi child names bear specific meanings which are reflective of the feelings of the parents at the time of birth. To the Acholi, name is as much a part of a man's being as his soul and his body. They regard a man's name as an essential part of him so that the blotting out of the name of an individual is synonymous with his destruction. Acholi names are given according to physical marks on the baby, the nature of birth, the time of birth as well as the prevailing social, political and economic conditions. The paper recommends that traditional Acholi child names should be maintained in spite of the rapid transformation and de-culturalisation that the people are confronted with.

**Key Words:** Identity, Memory, Gender, Child Naming, Acholi, Uganda

## **Introduction**

The law governing the naming of babies is surprisingly difficult to ascertain. In some societies, there is a complete absence of any law on the subject while in others; there are patchwork statutes that address the subject (Carlton, 2011). Names carry a lot of information. They can be diagnostic of social categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, and class; they can influence impression formation on a range of attributes including success, warmth, morality, popularity, cheerfulness, and masculinity and femininity (Laham et al, 2012). Among the Acholi people of Northern Uganda, names are used for continuity, identity, memory and to reveal the sex of the child. Acholi child names carry meanings deeper than the observable to reveal the genealogy, the circumstances of birth, the kind of

reception the mother got and the feelings of the parents at the time of conception and birth of their child. This paper sets out to discuss the meaning of Acholi child names with the view to reveal how the names portray identity, memory and gender differences.

The Acholi are a River-LakeNilotic people of the Lwo stock, who migrated to northern Uganda from *Rumbek* in the Barh-elghazel region of South Sudan. Lwo history traverses several ethnicities, states and polities without being confined to any single one of them. The Lwo are found in northern and eastern Uganda, southern South Sudan, western Kenya, eastern Congo, western Ethiopia and northern Tanzania. Today, the Acholi of Uganda, are found in the northern districts of Gulu, Amuru, Nwoya, Kitgum, Lamwo, Pader and Agago.

**Methods**

This was an ethnographic study. Ethnography originated from two Greek words “ethnos” meaning “people” and “grapho” meaning “I write”. It is a research design meant to explore cultural phenomena. Ethnographic studies reflect the knowledge and system of meanings in the lives of a cultural group. Its data collection methods are meant to capture the social meanings and ordinary activities of people (Brewer, 2000). The goal is to collect data in such a way that the researcher imposes a minimal amount of their own bias on the data.

Multiple methods of data collection were employed to facilitate a relationship that allowed for a more personal and in-depth portrait of the informants and their community. These included participant observation, field notes, interviews, and surveys. Interviews were taped and later transcribed, allowing the interview to proceed unimpaired of note-taking, but with all information available later for full analysis. Secondary research and document analysis were also employed to provide insight into the research topic. The secondary data reviewed included the works of earlier historians, anthropologists and even Christian missionaries as well as the notes of colonial administrators among the Acholi of Uganda and South Sudan.

The study targeted 70 respondents which included cultural leaders, elders, Local Government leaders, traditional birth attendants, grandparents and parents as seen below:

S/NO	CATEGORY OF RESPONDENTS	FREQUENCY
1	Traditional leaders	7
2	Elders	10
3	Local Government leaders	14
4	Grandparents	16
5	Mothers	10
6	Fathers	10
7	Traditional birth attendants	3
	<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>

*Resources: Total Research Sample Size, 2013.*

The sample population of 70 respondents was subjected to a simple random sampling for the Survey. This was because the researcher intended to avoid elements of biasness since every unit has equal chance of being sample. Traditional leaders and birth attendants were got by means of snowball method.

### The place of Identity in Acholi child naming

Acholi names were meant for identity. The prefixes “Wod” and “Nya” mean “son of” and “daughter of” respectively eg. Wodomal means son of Omal, Nyakoc means daughter of Koc. Other names stem from the Jok or god of the clan.

Name	Meaning
Lagoro	The jok of Pajule
Mwa	The founder of Pamwa hence hails from Mwa genealogy
Mogi	The person hails from Lamogi Clan
Pauma	Offspring of Uma
Wod-	Prefix for son of eg. “Wodkoc” is “son of Koc”
Nya-	Prefix for daughter of eg. Nyakweyo is “daughter of Kweyo”

### The quest for Memory in Acholi child names

Most Acholi names are intended to ensure memory of the past. Acholi remember the past in a combination of ways including songs, adages, oral tradition and child

names. The phenomena to remember include what happened at the time of courtship, marriage, conception and birth. It may be what happened to either of the parents or their respective societies. If during courtship, people discouraged the lady from accepting the advance of the man but she ignored them and proceeded to marry him, her first born would be named Amito if it is female (Personal communication with Olga Auma on 20/12/2013).

In some cases, the parent may want to remember natural occurrence such as famine (Okec/Akec) or manmade problems like war (Omony/Amony). The parents may also want to remind themselves about what they went through at childhood or during the period that preceded marriage. If one of the parents had taken too long to get married, the child would be named Oyinya/Ayinyo signifying that he/she delayed because they were looking for the best partner. If on the other hand, they delayed to get a child, the first born will be named Olur/Alur. “Lur” is impotence or sterility. The name is given to remember the nonsense people talked about the parents that they were unable to produce a child.

Like in every society, bad things are remembered more than the good ones. The Acholi will remember bad conduct more than the good ones. They remember war more than peace. They also remember their time in exile or in the hands of an abusive partner. They also want to remember how the baby was born. Since early

marriage used to be common, a girl could conceive before seeing her first menstruation. She would not know she is pregnant until at an advance stage. Such a child would be called Okumu/Akumu. It may also happen when the next child is conceived before the mother resumes menstruation (Personal communication with Santa, 12/2/2010).

The place, time and method of child delivery are also reflected in child names. Any birth outside the norm is regarded as the power of jok (god). A child must be born head first and facing up. The baby must have five fingers and toes. Outside this, the child will get a *jok* name. If the pregnancy takes too long (longer than the normal nine months), the baby is named Oruni/Laruni. Seen from the modern perspective, one may discover that such pregnancies don't actually last longer than the normal, but it's because people expected the woman to be pregnant and took her to be so when actually she was not pregnant. Then, when she conceived and delivered, they began counting from the time when she was not pregnant. I have confirmed from Midwives that there are cases when girls think they are pregnant when indeed they are not. False cases of pregnancy are reported in all major hospitals in Uganda.

**Jok Names**

These names are given to children born under circumstances that the Acholi consider abnormal. The abnormality can be about the circumstances of birth or physical marks on the baby. They attribute these

abnormalities to jok (god). In traditional Acholi society everything was determined by jok.

Male	Female	Meaning of Child name
Oruni	Laruni	Jok delayed child birth
Okumu	Akumu	Jok made the woman conceive before menstruation
Opiyo	Apiyo	Elder of twins
Ocen	Acen	Younger of twin
Okello	Akello	Follower of twins
Odong	Adong	Second follower of twins
Ojara	Lajara	Born with more than five fingers or toes
Odoc	Adoc	The legs came out first during delivery
Ouma	Auma	Born facing down
Oyite	Ayite	Born with some unusual mark or feature on the ear/ears
Ojok	Ajok	Born with some unusual mark or feature on some body part
Owino	Lawino	The umbilical cord covered the neck, almost strangled the baby
Okot	Akot/Lakot	Some unusual liquid was found in the umbilical cord

**Names showing place of delivery**

Male	Female	Meaning of child
Oyoo	Ayoo	Born on the road as the mother was travelling
Ongwec	Angwec	Born when parent were running away during turbulence
Otim	Atim	Born away from ancestral home eg. for migrant workers
Odwar	Ladwar	Born during the time of hunting or the father is great

		hunter
Lowila	Lawil	Born in the market place when the mother was shopping
Okullu	Akullu	Born at the water point such as a well or river
Olum	Alum	"Lum" is "grass". Born outside the house on the grass
	Lagang/Latwa	Born at the bride's home before formal marriage
Odero	Adero	"Dero" is granary, born near the granary
Wokorac/Woko	Lawoko	Born on foreign soil eg. in exile

**Names showing time or period of delivery**

Male	Female	Meaning of child name
Okec	Akec	Born during famine
Oceng	Aceng	Born during clear sunshine such as around Midday
Owor	Awor	Born at night or total darkness such as at Midnight
Otyeno	Atyeno	Born in the evening
Owot	Awot	Born when the mother had travelled somewhere

Onyango	Anyango	Born when the sun was rising such as at 7:00 am or 8:00 am
Olaroker	Alaroker	Born during succession dispute over the throne
Obaloker/Obalo	Abaloker/Abalo	The mother wrestled the favour of the man from co-wife
Oryem	Aryemo	Born when the mother had been chased away from home
Mwaka	Lamwaka	Born on the eve or at the beginning of the new year
Obonyo	Abonyo	Born when there was locust swam
Ongwen	Langwen	Born when white ants were flying

**Names signifying death of a relative during the time of delivery**

The names below are related to death. The baby may have been born during the time of mourning (Ocola/Acola) or when there was life threatening situation (Aloyotoo).

Male	Female	Meaning
Otoo	Atoo	Born when a relative had just died
Oburu	Laburu/Nyaburu	Born during a funeral right
Ochola	Achola	Born during

		mourning Pray that death takes me away otherwise I will do it
Ogentoo		
Lamtoo	Latoo	Pray so that death does not strike
Lam/Kilama	Lalam	They have cursed my children so they die
Ongom	Angom	This one is likely to be buried again!
Oyik	Ayiko	I have buried too many
Obol	Labol	This is to be thrown to the gods again
Otika/Tootika		Death follows me all the time
Okema/Tookema		Death is directed to me only
Toolit		Death is painful
Oloya	Aloyo/Aloyotoo	I survived death narrowly
Obwot	Abwot	I survived death

**Names relating to hardships**

Male	Female	Meaning
Ocan	Acan	Born during hardship or poverty
Ocira	Aciro	The parents were enduring some form of hardship
Okanya	Akanyo	This child shows that hee/she has tolerated me
Onencan	Anenocan	I have faced problems all through
Ocora	Acoro	I have married a person of undesirable quality

**Common names depicting gender**

Male	Female	Meaning of child name
Omara	Lamaro	I am highly loved
Ogena	Ageno	I trusted him or she trusted

		me
Obwoya	Abwoyo	I have defeated him/her
Odoki	Adok	She intends to divorce and go back home
Oyenyia	Ayenyio	I looked earnestly for the right partner
Okwera	Akwero	She/he rejected me
Kibwota	Abwoto	I was abandoned
Obalo	Abalo	I am blamed falsely for spoiling the goodness of this home
Olweny	Lalweny	Short tempered father or mother who often picks a fight
Orac	Arac	One of the parents is told he/she is a bad person
Akera	Laker	The royal child

**Child Naming Ceremony**

The Acholi people recognized two distinct birth customs namely the normal birth and the JokAnywala (godly) birth. When signs of labour were detected, a Lacol (midwife) was sent for. The Lacol was in most cases an old experienced woman. If a Lacol was not available, two of the women present were called upon to assist. If the expectant woman happened to be inside a hut, she could hold the center post (Wir/Awinyo) for support. A woman would support her from behind. The Lacol knelt in front of the woman and, if it was a straight forward birth, she would receive the baby in her outstretched arms.

The baby was then washed with cold water. The Lacol would then cut the umbilical cord with any available instrument. Knives, spears, arrowheads, bamboo, slices

of reed cane or sharpened stones could be used. The remaining part of the cord was tied with fiber. The placenta would be buried outside the home under the woman's granary, in the bush or by the river (Uganda culture, 2014).

Upon birth, both mother and baby are confined to the mother's hut which is surrounded by a fence, poles or asymbolic rope. The mother leaves the dwelling only to use the toilet or to wash and no one enters the home. This prohibition sometimes includes the baby's father. Normally a young girl helper is assigned to the mother who is responsible to meet the mother's needs, preparing food and carrying necessary messages, although she is encouraged to keep direct contact with others to a minimum. The seclusion period varies according to the sex of the baby - three days for a boy, four days for a girl. In case either the mother or the baby is sick, this period can be extended for two or three weeks (Glenday, 1980).

Most authorities on the Acholi agree that this seclusion is meant to protect the newborn child from potentially harmful influences. Some clans, for example, believe that if a person who has eaten salt touches the child during the time of seclusion the baby will go blind. Others believe touching the genitals will cause the baby to be infertile. Thus, seclusion emphasizes the delicate condition of the newly-born child, a precious being to be guarded from harm. Surprisingly, the Acholi birth

ceremonies have been found to be similar with that of the Jews:

Several years ago when I was teaching religion in a boys' secondary college in northern Uganda among the Acholi people I was struck by the way in which the students I was teaching were able to describe the beliefs and customs of the traditional Acholi religion. They were especially familiar with what their families and clans did, thought and said when a child was born. There appeared to me to be similarities between these traditional Acholi birth rites and Christian baptism. Could this resemblance, I wondered, help the Acholi understand the sacrament of infant baptism? (Glenday, 1980).

Some contemporary scholars like Dr. Terence Okello Paito have linked the Acholi to the Jews and have stated that the two may have lived together for some time in Egypt. This needs further research and authentication. But it's true that Acholi or Lwo names like "Acan" are in the Bible.

## Conclusion

No Acholi name is meaningless. It is appalling that some contemporary Acholi parents cannot legally name a child with the surname that depicts their culture. Some parents have introduced family names so that all the children carry the surname of the father. This has no basis in Acholi tradition since different children are born under different circumstances. We historians should be able to fix this problem.

Names are rich sources of information. They can signal gender, ethnicity, or class; they may connote personality characteristics ranging from warmth and cheerfulness to morality. But names also differ in a much more



fundamental way: some are simply easier to pronounce than others (Laham et al, 2012). Acholi names have different meanings and are always given with different interest. The commonest name is Okello or Akello because it is given to any child who follows the *jok* birth as explained earlier on in this paper. Acan and Ocan are also common because they depict hardship as felt by the parents at the time of the birth of their child. "Aya" and "Okeny" are uncommon names because they are for lone female and male children respectively born in a family of many siblings of the opposite sex.

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