LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Acholi is a tonal Luo language belonging to the Nilotic branch of African languages. It is spoken in Acholiland in northern Uganda and some parts of Sudan. The Acholi are part of the Luo-speaking Nilotic peoples who moved into Uganda from southern Sudan between 1400-1800 AD.

Moving in small clans, the Luo-speaking Nilotic peoples wandered around Uganda, in search of pastures for their cattle and goats.

Oral legend holds that a conflict arose between the leader, Gipir and his brother Labongo over a bead eaten by a child.

Gipir moved west. His descendants include the Alur. Labongo’s group moved east of the Nile by AD 1500. It is from this group that the present day Acholi and Langi emerged.

Acholi clan members live in a homestead clamped around the compounds of their kin. The Acholi traditionally build round mud and wattle huts. These huts still have beautiful graduated grass roofs. Today there is increasing use of bricks.

The compounds boast of granaries filled with staple foods like simsim, millet, peas, beans and groundnuts.

The Acholi are also keepers of cattle, sheep, goats and chicken and green fields of cassava and potatoes. Residents of the Koc Goma areas in southwestern Gulu grow cotton for cash when conditions are appropriate.

Traditionally, Acholi were organized into clan groups led by a rwot or chief. Some of the big clans had sub-clans and lower chiefs under the great chief. The rwot is responsible for dispensing traditional justice. The Acholi value communal values although these have been somewhat eroded by the conflict in northern Uganda.

STUDYING ACHOLI IN THE U.S.

Below is a list of universities in the United States that currently offer Acholi. For further information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC web site at http://lang.nalrc.wisc.edu/nalrc

Michigan State University
The Acholi people live among patrilineal kin. They keep sheep, goats and cattle but are not as committed to pastoralism as some other Nilotic peoples are. Millet is the staple food of the Acholi, and tobacco is grown for trade. Corn (maize), sorghum, beans, squash, peanuts (groundnuts), and other savanna crops also are grown. Hunting tracts are owned by clans. Stream and swamp fishing are important. Traditionally, the Acholi were skilled hunters, using nets and spears. In war they used spears and long, narrow shields of giraffe or ox hide. The traditional dwelling-places of the Acholi people were circular huts with a high peak, furnished with a mud sleeping-platform, jars of grain and a sunk fireplace, with the walls daubed with mud and decorated with geometrical or conventional designs in red, white or grey.

Acholi is a language primarily spoken by the Acholi people in the districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, a region known as Acholiland in northern Uganda. Acholi is also spoken in the southern part of the Opari District of Sudan. Acholi, Alur and Lango have between 84 and 90 per cent of their vocabulary in common and thus are mutually intelligible. The language is spoken in three dialects: Labwor, Nyakwai, Dhopaluo (Chopi, Chope). The number of speakers is believed to have grown to a total of more than a million people at the turn of the century.

Most Acholi are Protestant, Catholic and, in lesser numbers, Muslim. Nevertheless, the traditional belief in guardian and ancestor spirits remains strong, though it is now often described in Christian or Islamic terms. The traditional chief (the Rwot) was a link between the living and the dead and offered sacrifices to the ancestors on behalf of his people. The Acholi also believed in a supreme being called Jok and in another god, Lubanga, who was the cause of evil.

The Acholi are known for their variety of communal dances: bwola, lalabaloba, otiti, myel awal, apiit, labongo, myel wanga and atira, which are performed on different social occasions.