

# ACHOLI

## 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://www.nalrc.indiana.edu>.

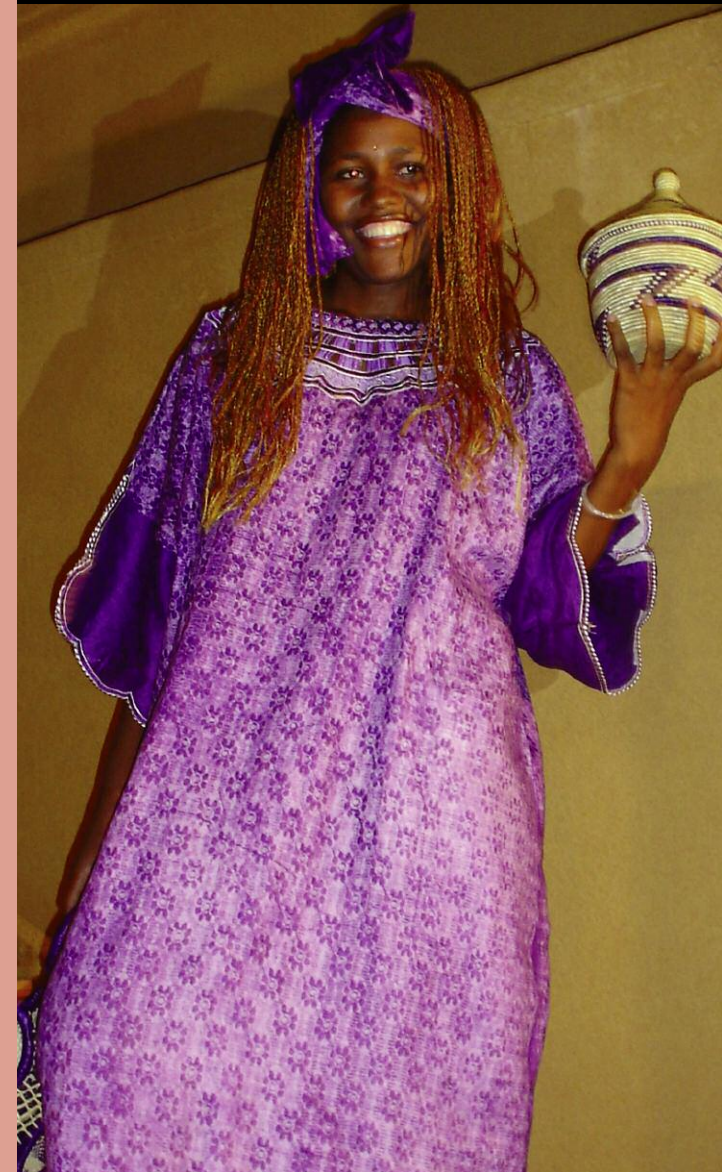
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ACHOLI WOMAN

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE  
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## WHY STUDY ACHOLI?

Speaking Acholi is one of the gateways into the world of Luo, one of the major cultures of Africa spanning across southern Sudan and northwestern Kenya. The Acholi are part of the Nilotic Luo tribe of East Africa. Their complex customs and social organization, their traditions of conflict resolution, their variety of specialized dances, and their rich material culture are some of the attractions to studying the culture and arts of the Acholi people.

Acholi is one of the seven major languages of Uganda in terms of number of speakers. Students of anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science, the arts and linguistics may find it useful to study Acholi language. The language will be of special interest to students of language and literature to appreciate some of the Africa's indigenous masterpieces such as Okot p'Bitek's *Wer pa Lawino*, later translated as *The Song of Lawino*.

## WHO SPEAKS ACHOLI?

The Acholi are found in the north-central area of Uganda, where they have lived for several centuries. They have traditionally been subsistence farmers, moving throughout the region looking for the best areas to grow crops. The Acholi are a Luo people, who are said to have come to northern Uganda from the area now known as Bahr el Ghazal in southern Sudan. Starting in the late seventeenth century, a new sociopolitical order developed among the Luo of northern Uganda, mainly characterized by the formation of chiefdoms headed by Rwodi (Rwot, 'ruler'). The Acholi have small chiefdoms of one or more villages, each with several patrilineal clans. Chiefs are chosen from one lineage. By the mid-nineteenth century, about 60 small chiefdoms existed in eastern Acholiland. During the second half of the nineteenth century Arabic-speaking traders from the north started to call them Shooli, a term which transformed into 'Acholi'.

The Acholi trace their relationship to the greater Luo tribe by connecting their descent to one of their first chiefs, who, according to legend, is believed to have descended from the first man Luo.

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, lalobaloba, otiti, myel awal, apiti, labongo, myel wanga and atira, which are performed on different social occasions.



Bwala dancers



Acholi dance



Acholi Village Before IDP Camp