Analyses of *mwoch*: Acholi nicknames

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Abstract

Rationale of Study – *Mwoch* is an Acholi term for various poetic pronouncements. Depending on the frequency of use and popular reaction, such pronouncements can define individual identity or become community nicknames that work like national anthems. In general, *mwoch* are folkloric, metaphoric or panegyric statements of opinion on life; in this article, we translate *mwoch* as nicknames whose main cultural landscape is the Acholi of Northern Uganda.

Methodology – Discourse analysis, participant observation, and interviews dating back to the 1940s were among the parameters we used. Yet, we fear that overindulgence in mainstream research methods will 'get us stuck in a tar baby' (Disney Walt, 1946).

Findings – Though 'getting stuck in a tar baby' is culturally North American, it is similar to the Acholi folktale entitled *ododo pa apwoyo, oculli ki won poto ngor* (tale of the hare, wildcat and the owner of a field of cowpeas). The Hare and Wildcat used to steal the cowpeas; the owner noted goings-on but could not catch the culprits. The theft continued until the owner conceived and crafted a beautiful girl (tar baby) from the latex of a rubber tree and placed it in his field of cowpeas. When the two came to steal the crop, they saw the tar baby, engaged with it and got stuck.

Implications – Although Acholi and American folktales strike similar notes, Acholi folktales are often different since they are largely verbal rather than visual and metaphoric rather than overt. Unless analysed and discussed, meanings in such expressions may remain hidden and rather useless to stakeholders, including scholars.

Originality – This is an original article whose main goal is to unravel the meanings, if not the knowledge, of a few selected Acholi nicknames.

Keywords

Acholi, *mwoch* (nickname), panegyric, meanings, cultural metaphor, identity and indigenous knowledge

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1 Introduction

The cultural umbilical cord of this inquiry is Akara, a rural village in Muchwini Sub-County, Kitgum District of Northern Uganda. Akara is where one of us was born and raised to live a village life but ended up not doing so. Living a full village life failed because he attended Wigweng Primary School, a set-up of the Native Anglican Church that is now the Church of Uganda. At that time of active European Colonisation, the school did not entertain any Acholi practice; this happened most likely because the Church considered *mwoch* (nicknames) to be savage, a euphemism for ill or not understood during colonial times. Outside the school and as children growing up in the village, we learned that our Pang'odo clan's nickname is *pinno yee, nok ci myero* (wasp, *yee*, few but beautiful). The first part (wasp yee) of our clan's *mwoch* is similar to the idiom "do not trouble 'til trouble troubles you". The second part (few but beautiful) makes a statement on Acholi aesthetics. In the Acholi culture, where people live under constant threat of annihilation, a sparse population is viewed as ugly because it gives the impression that the community will cease to exist. Despite its small population, Pang'odo is beautiful; is this because "less is beautiful" (Kortleven, 2013) or "small is beautiful" (Schumacher, 2010; Ishii, 2001)? To fully address why less or small is beautiful requires another article for another day.

Meanwhile, we must note that a section of the Pang'odo clan prefers to give our address as Akara, which is not our clan. In other words, we prefer to hide our smallness. Doing so enables us to enjoy "more is beautiful" since we Pangodo clansmen think the population of the Akara clan is big. We must also note that Pang'odo people approach everything carefully and with humility. We prefer to behave discreetly, not loudly, because it is a way of surviving in perpetual danger, as may be the case with a population as small as that of Pang'odo. In general, Acholis like to be humble and modest instead of *nyute* (putting one's ego on display) and *cach* (down-grading the ego or achievement of others).

Mwoch can be a panegyric that praises people or livestock; it is a significant feature of African culture that may be unknown to other peoples of the world. In parts of West Africa, "praise singer" is a well-defined social role, whether voluntary or institutionalised, free of charge or for pay (Finnegan, 2023). When Nelson Mandela was sworn in in South Africa, a praise singer emerged from nowhere and sang for him while his white predecessors in office looked on askance. In Eastern and Southern Africa (Fikeni, 2006), many manifestations of *mwoch* are panegyric, most of which are self-generated. This is because they are composed and pronounced by the person they are about. Among Nilotes,

men praise their favourite bulls and broadcast laudatory descriptions of these special animals whenever possible. We know of Shilluk and Dinka men imitating the shape of their favourite animals' horns in dance (Beckwith & Fisher, 2018). Maasai and Samburu peoples sing loudly in praise of their cattle; they may also extoll the beauty of the coat pattern they are breeding into their herds or have inherited from their fathers (Pido, 1987).

We leave discussing Nilotes panegyrics and clan nicknames and return to discussing Acholi individual nicknames since doing so is the principal object of this article. We can consider the personal nickname as a statement of how the person wants society to see and understand herself or another person. For example, a lady who wants society to view her as morally upright may coin the nickname *apii ng'et yoo, ma ngat moo kiken mato* (I am a roadside pond, from which anybody drinks). The lady seems to speak discreetly on: One, free access to anything by anybody, as may be the case of a roadside pond; remember that "free access" does not mean "owner-less". Two, so-called warped female sexualities, especially the sex morals of another woman she does not like. This statement implies that she intends to hurt the other woman, who is most likely seducing her husband and is an intruder in her family's life. Since she intends to hurt the personality of the other woman, we may say that a nickname can be a form of insult instead of praise and education.

Because there is no clear parallel in the Europhone world, each indigenous East African community picks a term from the colonial language to designate *mwoch* or equivalent in their language. In our community, Acholi of Northern Uganda, we use the English word 'nickname' even though our nicknames are not always the shortened, diminutive or descriptive single words like Nick or Liz that English speakers use among themselves. Our nicknames are always in our language, thus making their utterance completely opaque to non-speakers. They are also loaded with metaphors and symbolic connections that only other Acholis can make any sense of. So, we are studying a culture of broadcast dissemination but only within a particular language community. This dichotomy between spreading the word widely while at the same time restricting it to a relatively small number of people should be an item of intense interest to Africanist scholars.

Differences in culture and overlapping categories can explain why it is difficult to translate the word *mwoch* into nicknames, panegyrics, or ox-names. But panegyric is closer to *nying pak* (praise names), which people affectionately refer to their relatives or friends. For example, when someone refers to a male as *omoo* (of oil), it means the male is a favourite who is also greatly loved (Pido, 2017). The significance of referring to a male or female as

omoo or *lamoo*, respectively, resides in viewing oil as a special substance in food, ceremonies, religion, medicine and body protection from desiccation. In the Acholi cultural province, oil symbolizes a life of luxury, with no poverty or worries but *winyo maber* (hearing good, which means all is well). In addition, *booro* (to praise individuals) is a common way of expressing love towards spouses or lovers. *Min Tuke* (mother of *Tuke*), a popular song that Omona presented on YouTube (Omona, 2021), may help to illustrate *booro dako* (praising a wife by a husband). In the song's first line, the man says that his love for his wife cannot be found anywhere else, implying that she is special. Another line of the song says that his wife's beauty cannot be found anywhere else in the world, implying that she is the most beautiful woman in the world. He refers to his wife as *Min Tuke* (mother of *Tuke*) instead of her name. To do so is to respect, recognise, love and praise her. *Tuku* (to adorn) and *Atuku* (a beautiful girl who is adorned, or double beauty) are most likely the origins of *Tuke*; again, the name of her daughter helps the husband to pour praise on his wife.

Though we may translate *mwoch* as a nickname, it is often more than identity or praise because it teaches life lessons and states a philosophy of the individual or group of people (Pido, 2017). It is a form of verbal communication among insiders who can decode and engage with the messages. Acholi *mwoch* is a genre distinct from other forms of oral literature in Acholi culture. It is similar to verbal expressions in other ethnic communities such as Anuak of Ethiopia, Maasai of Kenya, and Dinka of Sudan. It is a way of projecting oneself as great, wise, brave, successful, infallible, invincible and of moral integrity. Since one may inherit a nickname from grandparents, it is a social link between old and young people; it is a way the past thoughts continue into the present and future, and it is social engineering. An older man/woman can take his/her own *mwoch* and give it to a boy/girl who does not have one. The gift of *mwoch* is intended to humanise the recipient because it is unthinkable for a person to live without a nickname. Whichever the origin and whatever the social purpose, nicknames often make statements on individual or group world views. In this regard, Acholi nicknames may be seen as expressions of philosophy, knowledge and aesthetics.

Interviews were the main source of raw data we processed through recording, analysis, and discussions with selected performers, experienced consumers, and academics. YouTube was the source of secondary data, while Okot p'Bitek's *Lak Tar* (White Teeth) and JP Ocitti's *Lacan Makwo pe Kinyero* (never laugh at a poor person, which may mean 'every dog has its day') are the only currently available texts containing many undigested Acholi nicknames. Since we were raised in a *mwoch*-rich culture, critical reflection is the other

method we used to generate data. Our senior relatives gave one of us several nicknames, but he also developed and used nicknames that serve as his identity and metaphorical expression. He feels good whenever his age-mates refer to him by his nickname, *idodo lawiny kom adyany* (you crown your reverse comma buttocks with a strip of rug). In other words, he is a participant and observer, so participant observation is the fourth method we used to generate data for this article.

2 *Mwoch* from published sources

As we all know, European missionaries, colonial administrators, and anthropologists initiated historical and anthropological writing on Acholiland and its people (Crazzolara, 1938; Malandra,1939; Bell, 1906). More recent scholars have appeared to be concerned with human rights (Amnesty International, 2020; Tripp, 2010. International Crisis Group, 2004) instead of the details and nuances of Acholi culture, including nicknames. Political phenomena such as the sequestering of internally displaced people (IDP) can be seen as an attempt at exterminating the Acholis (Kirkpatrick, 2011; Wegner, 2015). *Mwoch* (the verb meaning to pronounce an intellectual position on goings-on) punctuates nearly all Acholi music and dance. This is why YouTube and audio-visual tapes are significant sources of nicknames for analysis and discussion. For purposes of this article, we take only two examples that we found on YouTube; we begin with City Boy, whose performance name is Brother Q. While performing his song, he pronounced *lakwele pe kwiny* (she who loves doing sex cannot be a provocateur of fights, City Boy 2014). Obviously, provoking fights can discourage sex partners from doing what they like since making love and fighting appear mutually exclusive. The nickname is similar to the expression 'do not bite the hand that feeds you' in that it advises one to refrain from hurting what serves his/her interest.

The second example is Tam's *mwoch*, *akako kany mupong'* (I operate the place that is full of pus) (Noffy, 2014). The expression is a metaphor that goes directly to uprooting trouble and disturbing individuals or the community. Its origin is guinea worms and other parasites that lodge in the body and cause swellings and abscesses. Before the arrival of European-style medical practices, Acholis used traditional surgery in which practitioners removed worms and other foreign bodies lodged in the flesh. Those who experienced the surgery will remember that the process is raw, intrusive and very painful but relieving. Besides, the expression stands for doing exactly right regardless of other people's expectations. It is about being as professional as eliminating all margins for error. That an African act can be

exact, without room for error, may raise questions on the generalisation that African products are often shoddily finished.

Okot p'Bitek's *Lak Tar* (White Teeth) stands out as one publication containing many academically undigested nicknames. In the first place, the title of the book draws from *lak tar miyo ki nyero wi lobo*, which means, "teeth are white; that is why we laugh at unpleasantness". Laughing at unpleasantness is like laughing at *wilobo* (superhuman circumstances); both are considered bad behaviour and thoughtlessness. Whatever its origin, "White Teeth" is a nickname and is one way we Acholis marvel at why we laugh, given that life is constantly unpleasant enough to make us agonise all the time instead of laughing at all. To laugh as a response to extreme sadness seems to be the opposite of crying as a response to extreme joy as tears of joy (Paoli et al., 2022). In the context of tears of joy, *Lak Tar* may be understood as an adaptive behaviour to extreme sadness characterising Acholi's life in the last four or so decades.

The other example from the same source is *ituku ten iot pa maro* (you upset the collum of pots standing in a mother-in-law's house) Okot p'Bitek 2021, p1). This *mwoch* makes a statement on two things one ought to avoid. First, making mistakes in the wrong places; a mother-in-law's house is the worst place to make a mistake. Second, a little fear is good for everyone. One must not be fearless enough to do the socially unthinkable as a man making love to his mother. There are many *mwoch* in *Lak Tar*, the book; for purposes of this article, we discuss only another *wangi col pi dyang oree* (your eyes are black on account of the carcass of a cow that died of foot and mouth disease) (p'Bitek, 2021, p. 1; Pido, 2017, p. 4). This nickname speaks of getting upset over things that are as worthless as the carcass of a cow that died of foot and mouth disease; such a carcass is burnt, never eaten, and there is no point getting upset over it.

JP Ocitti's *Lacan Makwo pe Kinyero* (do not laugh at poor people) also contains many unexplained *mwoch* (Ocitti, 1966); we discuss only two examples here. We begin with *ingok ki angit wii kul*, translated as 'you puke on account of eating the brains of a wild boar' (Ocitti, 1966, p8). This nickname is an observation of an important record of goings-on in society, especially human reaction to unusual food. Together with giraffe and duiker meat, Acholis classify wild boar meat as 'black meat' because it can cause *laa jok* (severe allergic reaction). Could this be the reason why eating the brain of wild boar can make one vomit? The other explanation is that many people do not like consuming brains; anybody who eats brains invites negative reactions, including vomiting. Whereas some people do not like

eating brains, others say the brains of animals taste sweeter than steak (Lucky Pro Man Luo, 2024). Besides, schoolchildren used to believe that eating fish brains made us clever enough to pass examinations highly. The belief encouraged us to catch, cook and eat the brains of fish on days of important school examinations. It was also believed that eating the head of a cock would empower one to be alert; men who sought to keep time, remain alert and spectate on night activities have eaten cockerel brains.

Let us end discussions on sources of nicknames from Ocitti's publication with *idworo cwari ki gweno ma obedo akinyakiny* (you pamper your husband by serving a meal of a chicken whose feathers are black with a few dots of white, Ocitti, 1966, p. 14). In the Acholi culture, husband pampering is sometimes culturally sophisticated as serving a meal of an *akinyakiny* chicken. Serving a husband this type of meal is considered very special and intended to soften the heart of even a difficult-to-please husband. This happens because chicken occupies a special place in Acholi life. This bird [chicken] is the way to tell time and a symbol of the home; it is used to bless relatives and foretell the future. In the Baganda of Southern Uganda, chickens have been used as a currency to pay bride wealth. Consequently, Baganda women used to shun eating chickens to show respect for the bride's wealth, which is also a symbol of the marriage contract; this is why chicken used to be a male-only food throughout Uganda. In general, chickens are beautiful birds; a chicken that is *akinyakiny* (black with white dots) is seen as very beautiful; it is polka-dotted and kinetic (a symbol of a beautiful and romantic Polish lady). In other words, a meal of a black and white chicken is a way of showing beautiful love and pampering a husband.

In 2017, we published an article on using Acholi nicknames as indigenous knowledge (Pido, 2017). The warm reception that greeted the article encouraged us to write this article. In the 2017 article, we concentrated on the nicknames of relatives, most of whom have passed on. Our chief informant was our mother, who passed on in February of 2021 at nearly ninety-five years old; she remembered many nicknames from her relatives and friends. By way of example, we cite our grandfather's nickname since doing so might help connect our past and current efforts in studying the Acholi genres of oral expression. His nickname was *okoche emong* (a bull buffalo, living alone, outside the herd and a so-called bachelor) which signifies enormous strength, survival skill, experience and wisdom. All are the desired qualities of a man without much psycho-social support from close relatives and friends. It tells the story of a man with two sisters but no brother. Being the only boy in the family is viewed as a big risk regarding gene continuity. Worries centre on men because

Acholi society is patriarchal; it is men who are worried by the prospects that the family will end should the only son die before getting one or more sons.

We started hearing nicknames when we were children since we could hear men and women pronounce their *mwoch*. At that time, we did not know why nicknames were important. Afterwards, we realised that individuals pronounce their nicknames to praise themselves, or their age-mates, in angry outbursts or before taking resolute action. *Akado jwat* (male hummingbird clucks) is one of the nicknames that took our attention, and we never let go of it because it provoked us to keep asking why male hummingbirds cluck and why clucking should bother anybody. Later, we learned that the clucking of a male hummingbird announces the coming of grave danger as may be presented by wild animals, hostile people or disease. For those who know the signal, the clucking of a male hummingbird means one must take urgent action to avoid or confront the danger. Running away and hiding are only two ways of avoiding such dangers, while standing one's ground is a step in confronting the danger. One dilemma is that sometimes we cannot always avoid or confront dangers. In such cases one may choose to confront it or resolve to *kanyo akanya* (passively experience impacts of dangers).

Latwo otwenye ki cet (the sick person farts as he stretches) is another nickname that left a humorous but big intellectual mark in our child heads. To understand this *mwoch* requires that we first explain stretching and farting. In the Acholi culture, people stretch to purge the body of a general feeling of discomfort or unease whose exact cause is difficult to identify. From this explanation, one may say that a sick person stretches to purge the body of the disease-causing infection or to signal that something wrong is happening to the body simply. Meanwhile, people hold different disapproving views on farting. Some people think the one who has farted is careless, while others think he has lost control over his body functions or is disrespectful. Views on farting can be unforgiving when one is a healthy adult and age-mate. We children laughed at our age-mates who farted loudly; we never asked why we laughed. Today, many years later, we think we found the noise entertaining. Perhaps this is why the nickname *latwo otwenye ki cet* was laughter-provoking and hence attractive to us children who felt that life could be better with more laughter.

Equally laughter-provoking and intellect-tickling is the nickname of one of our relatives; it is entitled *yiro oduny* (smoke billowed), a short form of *yiro oduny ite Bura* (smoke billowed from the buttocks of Bura clan). To unpack and reveal meanings in the nickname, we must first note that the nickname concerns Bura and Panyum, two rival clans located in Mucwini

of Kitgum District. Members of the Bura clan tend to behave in a bullying way because their clan is bigger than Panyum, a neighbouring clan. The nickname is a tool that members of the Panyum clan use to poke fun at the Bura clan and to get back a bully.

A close look at the nickname reveals that "smoke billowed from the buttocks" refers to a big, hot, explosive and dust-blowing fart. "At the buttocks of Bura clan" suggests farting by many people in unison. The feat is impractical given that the Bura clan includes thousands of people. So, it is probable that only one person farted; pluralising the act serves two main purposes. One, it helps to hide the identity and protect the social image of the one who farted. Two, it is a generalisation, which enables the nickname to serve its purpose of poking fun at a rival clan. Intense clan rivalry is a popular Acholi cultural sport. In this case, the nickname is a weapon in rivalry. Considering that poking fun at people and intense rivalry can lead to fist-fights, nicknames tend to be discreet; this is why the "smoke billowed" (the shortened form) instead of the full version of the nickname is less aggressive and unlikely to generate heated debates and fist-fights.

3 Discussions of a few *mwoch* from our data

At the beginning of 2024, we visited our home in Akara. The visit presented a chance to collect more nicknames to add to our collection since 2017. To guide our collection, we sought to know the nicknames of our relatives and their wives, husbands, children, distant relatives and friends to obtain a spiral or an ever-widening circle of nicknames. From the beginning, our informant told us that she did not know the *mwoch* of Okoch-Emong's wife, our grandmother. That she could not remember grandma's *mwoch* was disturbing because we expected her *mwoch* to make our collection more complete since we had our grandfather's *mwoch*. It was only fair to obtain our grandmother's *mwoch*. However, our informant could only remember her song, which we present here.

Piny ma ruu ni	This day that is breaking
Ka akwoo	If I live
Akwoo	I live
Piny ma ruu ni	This day that is breaking
Ka atoo	If I die
Atoo	I die

Through performing this song, the lady intimated that her social situation was hopeless because of the following. One, she entered a polygamous marriage as a second wife. The first wife regarded her as some sort of assistant instead of a real wife and an uninvited

nuisance in family affairs. In short, she had a rocky relationship with the first wife. Her husband, too, had a rocky relationship with relatives he brought to his home; the relatives disliked him enough to expel him from the home he had helped to build. He then migrated to live with distant relatives. One day, he fell sick, his sickness worsened, and he decided to return to his home since an Acholi prefers to be buried at home along with his ancestors. With the second wife and their four young children, he set off walking to "his home", some thirty miles southeast of where he lived. He could only make it to his uncle's home halfway to his destination when he died. His uncles buried him at Chamcham, nearly 1.5 miles South of the present-day Mucwini Trading Centre. As a young widow, she was now in a place that she was not culturally entitled to own, among distant instead of close relatives, and with children who did not have a father to help them figure out life. To be a single mother at that time, in the early 1900s, was a very tough engagement because it was dominantly a man's world. She moved into the home of a man she called her brother. The arrangement did not work out, and consequently, she moved to the home of her first son-in-law. Since her two sons became men, she braved single motherhood over remarriage or so-called wife inheritance.

The exact time when she composed the song remains unclear. However, our informant first heard the song around 1956, when the author of the song performed for an elderly male neighbour who took care of spiritual rituals in her home. Whereas the song painted a picture of her bad experience and stubborn resolve, it made statements on Acholi worldview. Literally translated, "*piny"* means down here on earth, the opposite of up in the sky. At the same time, it is a metaphor for the universe, the force of nature that decides how humans behave without question. That is why a section of the song indicates that she does as the force of nature determines, suggesting that there is no point in going against the decisions of the universe. One may ask what is left of her if all she did was do as the universe decides. It would appear that she actively submitted to God's sovereign will as it plays out in our lives. This would align with the Christian religion (Walker, 2022).

Walker and similar scholars would have their intellectual ways if only Christianity or other foreign religions had fully dominated Acholi spiritual culture. But Acholis have yet to leave their own religion, one based on the spirits of ancestors. This observation enables us to look for alternative thoughts to explain her song. Despite enormous difficulties in using and interpreting words, we think she sought to be easy-going instead of complaining constantly. We come to this after a quick look at "if you want to be easy-going, say goodbye to worries" (Athar, 2023) and 'positive character traits of an easy-going person' (Brown,

2024). To be easy-going, Athar advises against worrying about perfectionism, tomorrow and other similar matters. Acholi craft aims to obtain a good enough object to function socially, culturally, and physically. The philosophy of the craft does not include perfection, which means that her philosophy in life is to be good enough instead of perfect. On the other hand, two of Brown's advice on easy-going are important because they are relevant to Acholi cultural mentality. He advises anybody who desires to be easy-going and not needy and dependent. "*Pe amito gin ma ngati moo*" (I do not need anybody else's things) and "*doga pe ki laa"* (I do not salivate over other people's things) are frequent expressions in Acholi social conversations, and they express the spirit of the line – "if I live, I live; if I die, I die." Meanwhile, the expression "*lacan kwo ki lwete"* (a poor man lives off the sweat of his forehead) is about independence as an essential in easy-going. Though "I am because we are" is a well-published and popular Bantu philosophy (Paulson, 2019), this song implies that she resolved not to depend on other people for survival.

Let us now present and discuss one *mwoch* that is closely related to it because it speaks about "day as the universe dictates."

Piny ruu keni-keni	Days break differently
Onyo, kuman	Now is like this
Diki, kit maca	Tomorrow is like that

The nickname was frequently shortened to "*piny ruu*". It means one day is different from another, perhaps in the same way one individual is different from the other. This *mwoch* seems to agree with the perception that there are good and bad days (Baiju, 2019). Often, we tend to ride on and not worry too much when the day is good, but one big question is what we should do when the day is bad. In the Acholi culture, people will most likely persevere on a bad day, sort of weather it. Using a time-honoured system of predicting danger, no person undertakes a journey when he expects that danger awaits him somewhere on the way. Acholis are also often wary when things are going too well; they hesitate to enjoy a good day. When a baby is happy and laughing, its mother will stop the baby from laughing too loudly. They say such a level of laughter invites disease and crying. In short, a happy day is greeted with apprehension.

So, what are some meanings in the expression *piny ruu* (some days are good and some are bad)? It means one forgives the past, sort of 'let bygones be bygones' because dealing with such matters attracts more pain than joy. One learns to live without expending too much resource on the unproductive past. Learning from but forgiving the past advises

concentrating on going forward instead of remaining stationary or going backwards (Nielsen, 2019). Besides 'letting bygones be bygones,' there is 'living for today' and allowing tomorrow to take care of itself. In the Acholi context, there is a folktale of *tulekee*, a people who had a bumper harvest, prepared and ate so much food and burnt all their granaries. The moral of the folktale is 'plan tomorrow or you will suffer pains.' Yet they say *wakuru ma diki* (tomorrow will take care of itself) which essentially absolves one of all responsibilities for the future. Whatever the thoughts on tomorrow may be, the nickname engages with yesterday, today and tomorrow metaphorically.

We continue our discussion with three nicknames, beginning with *okoro pa mon* (snail of women), presented below.

Okoro pa mon	Snail of women
Okori pa Labol	Snail of Labol
Ka komi yil	If your body is itching
Ter bot coo	Take to men

The four lines above are the nicknames of a middle-aged man who migrated to urban Kitgum. While in town, his friends call him *Okoro pa mon*, a nickname his uncle gave him. To discuss and unravel its meanings, we need first to point out that *okoro* is a snail that lives on land under thick climbers, which is moist and cool. The snail is pointed at the bottom but wide around the mouth. We are unsure of its feeding habits, but a fully grown snail is five to ten centimetres wide at the mouth. Women harvest and process adult snails to obtain the tools for weeding millet and other crops. At the superficial level, it would seem that the "snail of women" is the snail shell itself. But "snail of women" is a metaphor for a vagina; now, we can read "snail of Labol" as Labol's vagina. *Ka komi yil* (if you are itching), in line four, means if you have a great urge for sex, while "take to men", the last line, means "look for a man to satisfy you sexually."

We have explained the nickname line by line, and we hope that readers understand its message. However, we still need to explain the social-cultural architecture of the nickname. First, statements in nicknames are discreet, which allows one to publicly speak on sexuality without appearing obscene. Acholi male adults discuss sex only in private, as among age-mates or between spouses. Adults do not discuss sex with their juniors; to do so is taboo. The snail is smooth and reddish around the mouth; men objectively or subjectively liken the structure to the vagina, while the snail is like the clitoris that moves in resonance with excitement. The snail often leaves a whitish trail as it moves from one location to another;

the white trail is likened to ejaculation that some women enjoy. Since men cannot overtly speak on female sexuality, the snail is a metaphor men use to speak on female sexuality.

Following "The Snail of Women" above, we discuss another nickname, "Thick", whose full text is below. It is the nickname of a man who died about six years ago at nearly eighty-five. His nickname was a tool that he used to fight his wife every day because she stopped him from marrying a second wife. Polygyny is common in this region, so common that it is often taken for normal and understood as a man's right. Lack of wealth is often a good reason a man does not marry more than one wife. He saw her stopping him from marrying another wife as denying him his rights and making trouble.

We now explain the nickname,

Oduk	Thick
Dogi oduk	Your lips are thick
Lakolo dogi olunge	Troublemaker, your lips are well-shaped
Irac calo meni	You are ugly like your mother
Meni bene rac calo in	Your mother is ugly like you
Oduk	Thick

In general, Acholi and other African lips appear to be thicker than those of Europeans or Asians. Some lips are thicker than others within the already thick Acholi lips; such lips attract special mentions that may suggest that thick lips are ugly. It seems this nickname speaks of physical or behavioural ugliness. In line two, to tell someone "Your lips are thick" is to hurl insults at that person. To make trouble or behave badly is also ugly. From the third line of the nickname, we may see that the insult is targeted at a troublemaker, which may be okay because societies do not approve of trouble-making. We Acholis think troublemakers are anti-peace and antisocial. "Your lips are well-shaped", in the same third line, means "your lips are thick and ugly" instead of "well-shaped and beautiful". In the Acholi manners of speech, to say what one does not mean is to speak *tok lok* (the hind side of words, opposite meaning).

"You are ugly like your mother", in the fourth line, and "Your mother is ugly like you", in the fifth line, compare the wife with her mother. Comparing a wife with her mother suggests that the man intended to badly insult his wife. The comparison also suggests that he was so upset that he had lost his head. Though there was no divorce in this case, such a comparison is grounds for divorce. Before discussing the next nickname, it is important to note that Acholi husbands revere their mothers-in-law. Why? There may be many

reasons, but the most common one is that she bore his wife, the mother of his children, who continued the family line.

Meni cunu coo (your mother seduces men) is the last nickname we discuss in this paper; it is about social morals gone as wrong as decadence. Acholis think that it is morally right for men to seduce women but morally wrong when a woman seduces men and worse when a mother seduces men. Of course, a woman may attract or even flirt with a man she likes. Cosmetics and other forms of beautification are common methods women use to attract men worldwide, but they tend to stop at looking attractive. She may smile at a man, be in his face or flirt with him in other ways, but her efforts stop at flirting as she waits for the man to seduce her. Acholi women also attract and flirt with men, which seems proper, as is the case worldwide. A mother approves of her daughter's *nyinyo wiye* (doing her hair) because it is a culturally approved way of attracting suitors. During *myel moko* (get-stuck dance), a popular Acholi teenage dance, a girl will dance before a boy of her choice; her action does not trouble anybody since that is a culturally correct way to turn a man's head towards her.

From the above paragraph, we can say that it seems the nickname, 'your mother seduces men', makes a statement on a practice that crosses the Acholi morality red line as a *malaya* (someone with oversize sex appetite) would do. It warns women against going as far as seducing men. The nickname begins with 'your mother'; by so doing, it speaks on lays emphasis on all mothers. An Acholi mother is the moral custodian of her family, and this is why sex morals do not allow her to seduce a man. So, the nickname does at least two things. It is a public education and reminds people of the fundamental position of a mother in the family. A wife who is not a mother can afford to seduce a man with whom she may get a child who will live for her when she dies; the child is a symbol of life after death and is a good excuse for her to cross the morality red line and seduce a man.

4 Summary and implications

This article is about *mwoch* (nicknames), a cultural expression of the Acholi and Langi in Northern Uganda, Parajok and Oboo of Southern Sudan, and Annuak and Gambella of Western Ethiopia. It is probable that Alur of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo also practice *mwoch*. We know that the Luo of Kenya and Tanzania use *wod thuon* (son of a bullman) and *nyar thuon* (daughter of a bullman) to praise their males and females, respectively. As mentioned earlier, the Maasai, Samburu, Turkana and Dinka also praise their animals and people. Nicknames and praise names are parts of an old Nilotic tradition

that continues today. It has weathered the great migration, the onslaughts of Christianity, Islam, Colonialism, school education and globalisation.

We translated *mwoch* as nicknames and 'panegyric' as praise names, though both are close in meanings, as appears in the article 'Nicknames as Indigenous Knowledge' (Odoch Pido, 2017). Besides Acholi, many East African ethnic communities use *nying twon* (ox name) as practised by the Dinka in South Sudan and *nying pak* (praise names) as practised in Western Uganda; the two are close to *mwoch*. Whether or not there are links between *mwoch* and the shortening of names from Anthony to Tony or Elizabeth to Liz, as practised by Europeans, requires additional studies to establish. *Mwoch* remains common in the Acholi sub-region. However, there is little literature on the subject, which is partly responsible for this article.

Using a few selected examples from existing text and our data, we attempted to highlight the nickname in Acholi culture. No doubt scholars will hold views that are similar or different from ours. We hold the view that Acholi nickname is folkloric, metaphoric and panegyric. Acholi youth take to *mwoch* as a step in growing up and developing a personal philosophy of life in the past, present and future. The philosophies may serve as entertainment, identity and other forms of vernacular expression that scholars have yet to address adequately. We are not even sure whether or not Acholi nickname is a type of testosteronic display or the praise of the paternal gene. The need for inquiries to determine whether or not *mwoch* is a testosteronic display or the praise of male genes gains traction when one listens to Ajulu, who in his *mwoch* claims that he is the son of a senior man whose touch is romantically toxic, enough to send the affected lady into a coma for one week (Ajulu, 2021).

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