

Thoughts About Acholi Music by Victoria Angelo

Victoria Angelo grew up in Uganda and Southern Sudan. A member of the Acholi ethnic group, she learned her people's songs and dances traditionally from her family and neighbors. She came to the United States in 2003, escaping the devastation of civil war in Sudan. She has nine children and works as an Assistant Group Supervisor at a daycare in Erie, where she uses traditional songs and dances every day with the children. She also teaches African dance workshops at the Erie Art Museum and performs with her daughters and her cousin Marta Sam. Although music was an important part of her daily life in Africa, Victoria never thought about it until she came to the United States and began to translate her traditions for Americans. Here are some of her thoughts on music's role in traditional Acholi culture.

I believe music is made by people, but also by animals or even by the environment. Wind, for example, can blow and communicate strange and smooth sounds. Sometimes the music of nature and animals helps give people new ideas for their own music. Music in Africa, where I was raised, was not taught in school, but it was everywhere. Each individual learned to express his or her feeling through singing, drumming, dancing, or playing an instrument. I always thought that music created good feelings. I later have come to know that music also heals the heart.

The Acholi people use music in such a wide variety of ways!

We use it for **communicating information**. You can hear drums a long way away. We have a special drum beat to alert the community that an elder has died, another beat when a young person has died, and another beat for a wedding or celebration. We have a beat that alerts the community that a stranger is in the area. We have a special song and beat when someone is missing. The missing person maybe lost in the jungle. When they hear this music they can follow the sound and find their way home. We have special music that calls people to hunt or to gather food from the forest.

We use music for **keeping records**. We make songs about the present and to recall the past. We have songs to help us remember war we have seen, bad weather like floods, or when a particular disease came. In our villages it is easy to lose a piece of paper. It is better to keep information in songs so we can never lose it.

We use music for **mathematics**. Songs help us count cattle, fruits and vegetables, days of the week, or money. Music helps us learn and remember trade languages so we can do business with people who don't speak Acholi. Music also helps us understand time. We sing about the cycles of a day (sunrise, sunset, and when the cock crows) and we sing about the longer cycles (the phases of the moon and the seasons).

Music helps us to be **healthy and safe**. We have songs about healthful eating, and how to make local traditional medicine from plants in the jungle. We have songs to remind us about planting trees and protecting the environment. We sing and pray for rain to help with cultivation, we have song about harvesting. Imitating animal movements and sounds (like lions and birds) helps us understand them better and makes us better hunters.

Music is an important way to show and teach **respect**. It is important that Acholi children be humble and to revere their elders and to show that they value them. Music also is a very important way for us to worship and praise God and to show our gratitude for everything God has given us.

Music also lets us **express our feelings**. We sing for love marriage between two people. We show respect to our leaders with music. We sing to infants all the time. Music helps them sleep (like lullabies) and it also helps them walk, clap, speak and dance.

In traditional Acholi life music happens informally all the time while we are counting our cows, or trying to get a baby to sleep, or pounding maize into flour. Sometimes we gather as a village just to sing, dance, and drum together. We do this on weekends, at night when the moon is bright and the weather is good.

The Acholi have many traditional instruments, all made from local materials. We have drums made from tree trunks and animal skins. We hit the drums with our hands or with wooden sticks. Other drums can be made from empty metal containers. We also use smaller containers for shakers with small stones inside. Our leg bells are made from iron. We have flutes (olwere) made from bamboo or sorghum stems. We have a thumb piano (lokembe) made from a small wooden box and metal tines that are plucked. We have a harp called the adungu. It is made of wooden sticks, animal skin, and string. Our traditional clothes were made from animal's skins and tree leaves. We still use these for our dance costumes.