

### 3. Rituals and rites of passage

Rituals that mark a transition to a new phase in life, known as rites of passage, are important in many cultures. Although these traditions have been passed down through generations, and are often part of the history of a community, they are not always appropriate in modern times. Because of the growing threat of newer diseases, such as HIV, some rites of passage, which have been used by many generations, are no longer safe in today's cultures.

In some cases, traditional rituals may have been forgotten or given up as time passed or as they were no longer used or needed. Younger generations may not even be aware of the traditional rituals that their grandparents and community elders followed during times of trouble or celebration.

The following stories remind us that regardless of their safety or of how often they are used, rituals can be important in bringing communities together—whether it is through the creation of a bond between members of an age group, the resolution of conflict between divided communities, the mourning or celebration of the passing of a respected community member, or for any other reason.



## Building peace in western Kenya

Domestic violence is a problem in many households in western Kenya. Often fueled by alcohol, this form of abuse hurts not only the victims of violence, but also their families and communities. One community in western Kenya found a way to bring attention to this abuse while turning a tragic circumstance into an opportunity for healing.

Margaret Wanzuu and Augustino Odhiambo had a difficult marriage. They came from different tribes in Kenya (Margaret from the Akamba tribe and Augustino from the Luo tribe) and each was very tied to their own communities and traditions. It was not unusual for Augustino to come home drunk or for the couple to fight loudly and violently. During one fight, Augustino killed Margaret. After her death, there was a lot of anger between their families and their communities; however, because of cultural differences, there was no clear way to deal with the tragedy. This act of violence caused a big strain on members of both tribes and made it difficult for those still grieving Margaret's death to heal and move on.

Margaret's death created a need to please both families through lasting and meaningful mourning, which would include a coming together of the clans. To honor their mother's memory and to work to bring the Akamba and Luo communities together, Margaret's children started the Margaret Wanzuu Foundation. The foundation works to meet the needs of men and women from different cultural backgrounds by helping them discover their power to work towards peace—both for themselves and with others.

The Luo Healing and Reconciliation Project began when the Margaret Wanzuu Foundation received a grant from CHAPS. Through this project, the foundation wanted to conduct research about traditional grieving and peace-building rituals in order to develop a plan to heal the conflict between Margaret's and Augustino's families and communities.

First, the foundation hosted a series of meetings and ceremonies to gather the support and participation of the Akamba and Luo communities. They began by bringing together elders from Margaret's community

with elders from Augustino's family in order to begin discussions between the communities. In particular, they asked the elders to speak about cultural healing processes and peace-building rituals in both communities. They also researched the role of Christianity in each community.

The foundation used what it learned from community elders and other research to bring together the Akamba and Luo communities in a way that was culturally acceptable to both. A key component of this bringing together was a cleansing ritual for Augustino, who was blamed for committing a crime against Margaret. This cleansing involved the mixing of traditional herbs and the use of this mixture in a ritual of cleansing and forgiveness. The foundation also planted a tree in the middle of the family's homestead as a way of healing the earth and used holy water to bless Augustino and both families in an offering to the Christians within the communities. It also hosted an event during which the survivors and all who were touched by Margaret's death could openly and honestly express their anger in a safe space.

Eventually, the two communities were able to reconcile, offering hope to other communities who have been divided by similar situations. One of Margaret's daughters explained: "I now feel free to continue with my own life. Like the peace trees, which occasionally have to shed their leaves, I wish to let go of what has been."



## One Boy, One Knife

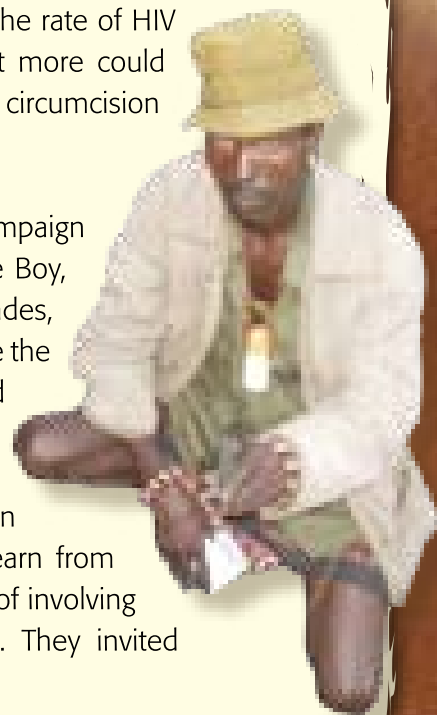
Once every seven years, a generation of boys from the Samburu tribe in Kenya undergoes circumcision. This ancient tradition serves as a rite of passage for Samburu men as they leave boyhood and become warriors. During the circumcision ceremony, boys must show their courage and manhood by not making any noise or flinching, even though the operation is done without anesthesia. Typically, many boys are circumcised with the same knife to symbolize the brotherhood and bond between the entire group that is undergoing circumcision.

Unlike the Luo and Akamba rituals of peace-building, the circumcision ritual—or rite of passage—had not fallen out of use. Instead, it was becoming more dangerous in a community that was touched by a growing risk of HIV infection. Samburu Aid in Africa (SAIDIA) is a small, community-based organization that has provided primary health care to Samburu communities for the past 20 years. The organization is deeply rooted in Samburu communities and has great respect for Samburu culture and tradition. However, some SAIDIA staff began to feel that there should be a safer way to circumcise young men.

SAIDIA wanted to promote the bonding experience from the ceremony, but did not want to risk the health of those involved. Because the rate of HIV infection is high among youth in Kenya, the staff felt that more could be done to reduce cross-contamination of blood during circumcision ceremonies to prevent the spread of HIV.

After receiving funding through CHAPS, SAIDIA began a campaign to encourage safer practices during circumcision. The “One Boy, One Knife” campaign encouraged the use of surgical blades, gloves, and antiseptic during the ceremony in order to reduce the spread of HIV and other diseases that could be transmitted through blood.

Just like the Margaret Wanzuu Foundation, SAIDIA began by bringing together all members of the community to learn from their wisdom. The organization understood the importance of involving community members in changing the circumcision ritual. They invited



district health providers, community elders, those who performed circumcision, the set of warriors who support and counsel boys during the initiation, and the boys who were to be circumcised. At these gatherings, they explained the dangers of the existing practices and built support for the changes they were encouraging. By educating community members, SAIDIA hoped to have a lasting impact on the male circumcision practice.

The impact of SAIDIA's work was even greater than expected. With the support of community leaders, an entire industry was established as blacksmiths developed special blades for the boys. Local government officials and community organizations displayed banners throughout the area to promote the "One Boy, One Knife" slogan. For the first time, a generation of Samburu boys was brought into warriorhood using safe, hygienic practices. In this way, an ancient tradition was kept alive, but its potentially harmful impact was reduced and the health of young Samburu boys was protected.





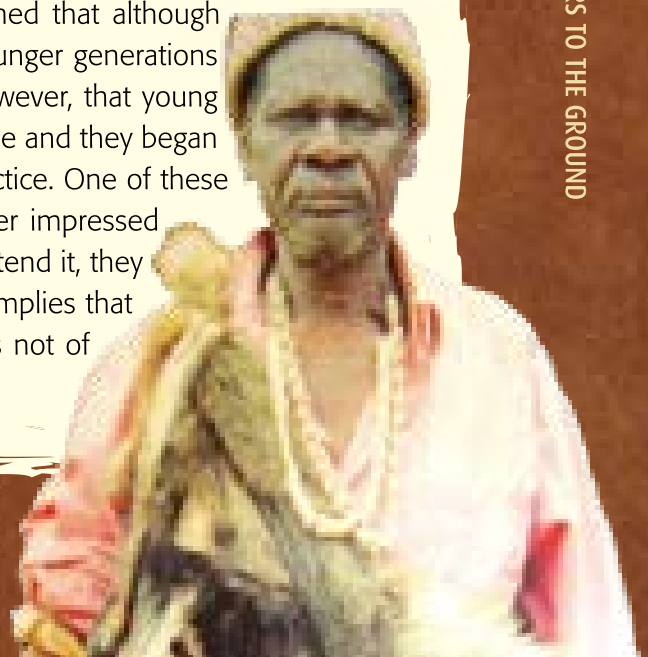
## Learning through funeral rites

Kumuse is an ancient ritual observed among the Bakusu and the Tachoni, who are neighboring Luhya communities in the Western Province of Kenya. After the death of a respected community elder, kumuse is a ceremony that is held to comfort mourning family and friends and share messages of unity and morality with the larger community. Community problems are also discussed during the ritual. Just like the Samburu circumcision ceremonies, kumuse is a time when many of the members of a community gather together in celebration.

The kumuse is performed by trained men known as basena kumuse. Participants take the messages from the basena kumuse very seriously—it is believed that these leaders have the power to see future events, warn people about these events, and advise them about the best steps to take to avoid a disaster. According to Wanyonyi Manguliechi, known as one of the most famous and respected basena kumuse, “Kumuse teaches people to live a good life; moral teaching and counsel are the core elements of kumuse.”

Kibaba Makhokha and Kakai Karani, researchers and members of the Bukusu and Tachoni communities, were worried about the way that HIV and AIDS were destroying their communities. They understood the respect for kumuse and its ability to bring attention to serious community issues. Because many of their community members cannot read and do not have radios and televisions, Kakai and Kibaba believed that kumuse could be a good way to teach people about HIV and AIDS.

Kakai and Kibaba received funding through CHAPS and began to conduct research about the ritual. Just like the Margaret Wanzuu Foundation and SAIDIA, they wanted to learn from their community members. They learned that although kumuse was respected among older generations, younger generations did not know much about the ritual. They found, however, that young people were interested in learning more about kumuse and they began to help the youth of their communities study the practice. One of these youth said, “My parents and grandparents have never impressed on me the importance of this rite. When they go to attend it, they do not tell me. I just hear from other people, which implies that this is not a youth thing and what transpires there is not of



relevance to us." According to Mangara, another youth, programs should be put in place to emphasize the importance of kumuse rituals. "The teachings of kumuse," he said, "have shaped me into what I am now."

Kakai and Kibaba worked with basena kumuse to find ways to encourage discussions of HIV and AIDS during kumuse ceremonies. They also held discussions between elders and youth about kumuse, so that this ancient ritual would not be lost with the passing of the older generations. These discussions encouraged young people in the study of this tradition and the adaptation of their rituals to help solve contemporary problems.

Kakai said, "The persistence of kumuse lies in its capacity to constantly reinvent itself in view of the changing social circumstances. Kumuse is rooted in the very culture of the people, is part of what defines them; it is thus part and parcel of the identity of the Babukusu and Abatachoni." Just like the Samburu circumcision rituals and the Luo peace-building rituals, kumuse was reinvented and adapted to fit the needs of a more modern community.



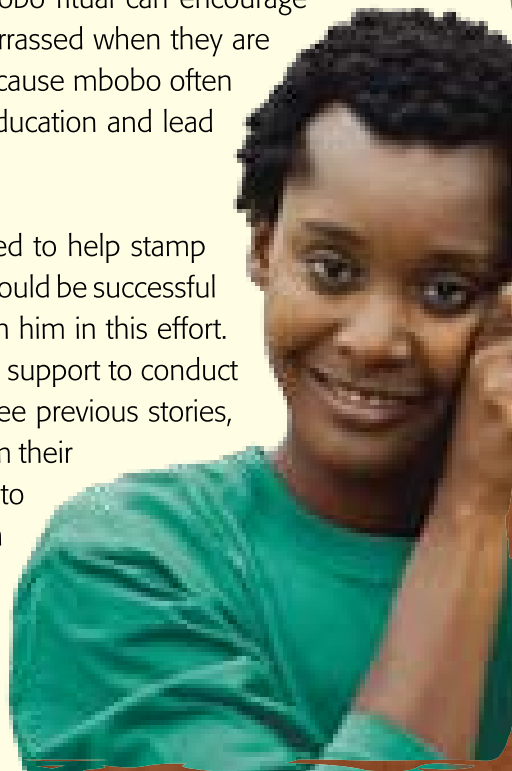
## Modified rites of passage for young women

The mbobo initiation is widely practiced in many communities around Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria. Mbobo is a coming-of-age ritual for adolescent girls that involves several stages, including a test of virginity, female circumcision, and a three-month period of fattening. At the end of this period, the girl walks naked through the town market to display her beauty and plumpness. At the end of this ceremony, the girl is taken to her husband's house; this final stage marks the beginning of her womanhood. Like the Samburu circumcision ritual, mbobo signifies the coming of age of a young person and is believed to be an important way for a community to recognize and celebrate her entry into adulthood.

Many community members feel that mbobo has many advantages. They believe that it encourages girls to remain virgins and keep their high moral values. The parents of girls who undergo the mbobo ritual receive respect in the community. The practice brings economic benefit to the girls' parents in the form of gifts from relatives. It also attracts a high bride price from the husband and his family.

However, the potential disadvantages of mbobo are many. The circumcision carries a high health risk: excessive bleeding, problems during pregnancy and birth, and even HIV infection. The fattening period during the mbobo ritual can encourage obesity throughout life. Also, many girls feel embarrassed when they are asked to walk through their town naked. Finally, because mbobo often occurs with younger girls, it may shorten a girl's education and lead to early marriage.

Professor Ufot Ibangi, a Nigerian sociologist, wanted to help stamp out this practice, but he knew that the only way he would be successful was by asking those in mbobo communities to join him in this effort. Through the CHAPS program, he received financial support to conduct research on the mbobo practice. Just as in the three previous stories, Ibangi consulted community members to learn from their experiences and opinions. He immediately began to put together group discussions, which brought in groups of elders, circumcisers, or "priestesses" as they are called, and women over the age of 40 whose standing in the community qualified them to make decisions on women's matters.





In his search for other rites of passage to replace mbobo, Professor Ibangi discovered uman. Uman is a different type of rite of passage for girls celebrated in some Nigerian communities; although it is still a coming-of-age ritual for young women, it involves different activities. Uman is observed for about three months following the birth of a first child after marriage. It does not involve female genital cutting and, because it occurs at a later age, does not interfere with a girl's period of schooling. It includes no fattening period. Uman carries similar prestige and material benefits for the parties concerned.

Using what he learned from the group discussions, Professor Ibangi and his partners decided that the best way to spread the message about stopping the mbobo practice was through the radio. They designed messages and played them on the Akwa Ibom Broadcasting Corporation, the state radio station in the area. Professor Ibangi shared information about uman with community members and respected elders, who agreed that uman could replace mbobo. Community groups in the area began to discuss the differences between the two practices and to think about the possibility of replacing mbobo with uman.

Professor Ibangi believes that his work to bring up the sensitive issues surrounding mbobo have created the opportunity for information to be shared and for discussions to occur. As more and more families let go of or change the practice, some may choose to use uman to replace mbobo; others may not. Because discussions about the issue have begun, in time, community members may demand a greater change in this practice.

### Reflection questions?

Now that you have read the stories behind some CHAPS projects dealing with rituals and rites of passage, think about how they are similar to practices within your own community. It may be helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- Are there any rites of passage that are practiced in your community? What are the benefits of these rituals? Do they have any negative aspects?
- Female genital cutting has been identified as a cultural practice that is harmful to female health. How can this practice be eliminated without creating a void, while still achieving cultural values and targets?
- Conflict resolution is a key component of community living. How can our traditional practices help in resolving conflicts today?