

## UGANDA

# Cultural Implications of the HIV/AIDS Epidemic and the Need to Preserve our Oral Traditions\*

HIV/AIDS is the most serious health problem in Uganda today and the leading cause of death for adults. About 1.5 million people are estimated to be infected with the HIV virus (Uganda AIDS Commission Secretariat, Uganda National Operational Plan for HIV/AIDS/STD Prevention, Care and Support 1994–1998). Nearly 80% of those infected are between the ages of 15 and 45. Statistics reveal that sixteen African countries south of the Sahara have more than one-tenth of the adult population aged 15–49 infected with HIV.

Oral traditions refer to that knowledge which is transmitted orally over several generations in a given society. They may be in the form of riddles, songs, proverbs, legends, folktales and recitations, which constitute the intangible heritage. These traditions are a means of teaching societal values and beliefs, and are, therefore, integral to the culture of a particular society.

Clearly, culture is transmitted from generation to generation. In the case of Uganda, it is not so much the generation that possesses oral traditions that is endangered. Rather it is the generation onto whom the elderly would pass the information that is at risk. With this endangered generation (15–45 year olds), a generation gap is created that poses a future threat. In other words, this endangered generation is getting wiped out and this causes a discontinuity in the transmission of their societies' traditions to later generations.

### Cultural implications

The consequences of the HIV/AIDS epidemic have touched every facet of the Ugandan culture. Cultural problems directly related to the virus include:

- the loss of oral traditions and indigenous histories;
- decline in customs and socially accepted practices, such as wife sharing, widow inheritance, polygamy and circumcision rituals;
- the breakdown of traditional and kinship structures;
- fragmentation of societal values that included an ideological belief in the fecundity of life;
- the loss of many of Uganda's storytellers, traditional healers, scholars, artists, musicians and dancers has had an immediate impact on the cultural life of the country;
- in a family, loss of one or both parents can lead to loss of income and disruption of family and social support systems;
- it is the elderly who now bury the young.

AIDS is generating orphans so quickly that family structures can no longer cope. Typically, half of the people with HIV become infected before they turn 25. They acquire AIDS and die by the time they turn 35, thus leaving behind a generation of children to be raised by their grandparents. Parents die leaving behind the responsibility of enculturation of their children to elderly grandparents who are quite fragile and have to raise many orphans. Capacity and resources are stretched to breaking point, and those providing the care in most cases are already impoverished. Often the elderly might themselves have depended financially and physically on the support of the very sons or daughters who have died.

Once parents die, children often find themselves taking the role of mother or father or both, hence the result is child-headed households. They have to do the housework, look after siblings and even

care for the dying parent(s). The children are plunged into economic crises and insecurity by their parents' death and struggle without services or support systems in impoverished communities. Such children are even stigmatised by society through association with HIV/AIDS and they experience distress and social isolation after the death of their parents.

### Decline in cultural practices: specific examples from Uganda

The AIDS epidemic in Uganda has caused a decline in the importance of rites of passage/rituals, which are very significant aspects of the cultural practice.

Among some communities, such as the Bagisu and the Sebei, circumcision is an initiation rite during which much cultural information was passed onto the initiates. The instructions that initiates received during circumcision normally emphasised societal norms. For the Sebei, immediately after circumcision, the initiates drank milk from one gourd as a ritual expression of unity and brotherhood that promoted cultural identity. Circumcision was also a ritual, marking the transition from one stage to another. However, because of the fear of contracting HIV during the circumcision process, most parents now prefer to take their children to hospital.

In Buganda, the last funeral rites ritual (*lumbe*) was, and still is, done to chase away the spirits of the dead and to get an heir. This was a very significant social ritual with the function of passing on clan history and social norms. However, with the AIDS scourge, most people are becoming reluctant about sending their families to such functions, which involve staying overnight in small grass thatched huts (*Busisira*) and are associated with loose sexual behaviour.

The Banyankole practised blood brotherhood (*omukago*) to extend social ties beyond biological relations. Incisions were made on the stomachs of two friends (neither biological nor clan brothers) who would then rub their blood on coffee berries. Thereafter, each one ate the coffee berry rubbed with the friend's blood and by this ritual the two became 'brothers'. This ensured that brother relations extended beyond mere biological relations across the entire Nkore society, which promoted harmony. In the present times of the AIDS epidemic, it is very unlikely that this ritual is performed.

In addition, family ties in Ankole were enhanced by brothers having sexual intercourse with their brothers' wives; even fathers with daughters-in-law. All these behaviours were intended to strengthen social ties. Another cultural practice was the inheritance of widows (sisters-in-law and stepmothers). With the threat of AIDS some of these practices have vanished.

Another ritual among the Banyankole was that of the separation of twins, where part of the function involved all family members to drink certain herbs from the same cup. Many people are now against this practice of sharing from one cup, which makes the whole function lose meaning.

In most societies, traditional marriage rituals initially took place at night and involved elders and peer groups. For some societies, a bride-to-be had to go into a seclusion period during which she was counselled by her aunts (*senga*). Her peers would also

come to bid her farewell and, in the process, they would also learn a lot about marriage. These were also occasions for learning, but now some of these practices are discouraged.

As a final example, most societies used burials as occasions for reciting clan histories. The history of the deceased was the history of the clan and therefore the history of the entire ethnic group. Whereas the Baganda had the last funeral rites, the Banyankole and the Bakiiga had long mourning periods, which lasted for several days during which the clan histories were recited. However, with frequent deaths as a result of AIDS, there is less time for mourning with hardly any time provided for some of these recitations.

## Conclusion

These changes in attitude have affected collective memories, which were passed on at social functions such as those illustrated above. Usually, the rituals brought about visual learning and so their decline means loss of knowledge.

In non-literate societies, traditions and history were passed on in the form of oral traditions and rituals because there were no writ-

ten records. These traditions embodied ideals and values of a culture and, therefore, losing them means missing our culture. African societies passed on cultural practices through social ceremonies, which are gradually disappearing. The debilitating effect of HIV/AIDS poses a real threat to the maintenance of our cultural traditions. Indeed I do agree with Amadou Hampate Ba in his observation that *In Africa, when an old man dies, a library disappears* (*Our Creative Diversity: Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development*, Summary Version, July 1996, Paris, p. 34). However, I would like to add to this and say that, in Africa, when an old man or woman dies, a library disappears and this calls for an urgent need to preserve our oral traditions.

While we preserve the tangible heritage, it is essential to understand the values and aspirations that drove its makers, without which an object is torn from its context and cannot be given its proper meaning. Our cultural practices are fated to disappear, but before that happens, texts and recordings should be prepared so that the future generations find the 'old man/woman (library)' in the museum or the archive.

\* (*This paper is based on a presentation at the World Bank Consultative Workshop on Culture in Africa, Kimberley, South Africa, 27–29 November 2001*)

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