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Meeting the Maasai

Children's Library hosting cultural event Wednesday

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There's a mystique to the Maasai, an old-world sort of romanticism associated with a people whom Westerners know so little about. Through lore and advertising, they have become the face of Eastern Africa, so easily identifiable in their red robes, elaborately beaded jewelry, bald or closely cropped heads and impressive vertical jumping.

On Wednesday (Oct. 1), the Palo Alto Children's Library is hosting an opportunity to meet two Maasai leaders at 3:30 p.m. They will be sharing stories of their lives as children in the semi-nomadic tribe.

Hellen Nkuraiya and Sabore Ole Oyie grew up in a Maasai village called Maji Moto in western Kenya.

Nkuraiya faced discrimination in her village as a young girl who desperately wanted an education, something that is often denied Maasai women. She fled a childhood marriage, pursued an education and fought for women's rights.

She has used her position as head teacher and principal at Ole Pariata School to further her mission to assert the value of girls and give them access to an education.

Ole Oyie is the eldest of 16 children, and, as such, he was taken out of the family's cattle pastures to be sent to school. After 10 years, he ran away to become a warrior and spent two years developing survival skills in the bush.

He returned to his village to complete his education and became an elder adviser, working to ensure the education of the rest the village children.

Their visit is part of a tour put on by Asante Africa Foundation, a nonprofit group that educates children in East Africa.

"They both have lived incredible lives," Susan Olofson, vice president of Asante Africa, said. "They'll be telling personal stories of the way they grew up, what the day-to-day life was like in their village."

Currently, the foundation is collaborating with other organizations to build a school in the village of Maji Moto as part of an effort to educate the children while allowing them to remain in the cultural home.

"Our focus is on keeping the culture alive," Olofson said. "The children get to stay in their own community

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and participate in traditional life while still being educated. It's about keeping the old -- the traditions -- while embracing the new -- education."

The lives of the Massai revolve around their cattle. The groups roam the desert, following the grazing and pasture land for their herds and setting up enclaves of huts constructed from what local resources might be at hand.

Like many indigenous cultures, the Maasai have been able to preserve their culture through oral tradition, stories passed down from generation to generation over hundreds of years.

These are some of the stories that Nkuraiya and Ole Oyie will be sharing in the form of traditional song and dance at the Children's library, along with demonstrations of the Maasai's signature vertical jumping and animal calls.

They will also be at the Cubberley Community Center Auditorium on Oct. 4 for a fund raising event for the Africa Asante Foundation.