

**Delaney, C.H. (1995, Winter). Rites of Passage in Adolescence. Adolescence, pp. 892-898.**

## **OVERVIEW**

Society has always recognized the transition from childhood to adulthood. These "rites of passage" are universal to the experience of adolescence and a cross-cultural phenomenon. The specifics of the ceremony are based on tradition, but altered to make them relevant to present day culture. They have existed throughout human history and may be a significant factor on the stability of the adult personality.

### **DESIGN**

Different rites are looked at from three continents: Africa, South America, and North America. The basic elements of a rite of passage include the following:

- A separation from society.
- Preparation or instruction from an elder.
- A transition (i.e., adolescence—from child to adult).
- A welcoming back into society, acknowledging the change of status.

Many aspects of the ceremony are common to widely diverse cultures:

- Literal and spiritual cleansing.
- Physical transformation.
- Offerings, prayers, and blessings.
- Traditional food and dress.
- Traditional musical instruments and song.

Five specific rites are studied using these above criteria.

### **FINDINGS**

Three of the five rites of passage discussed will be outlined—one from each continent.

## INITIATION AMONG THE OKIEK

The Okiek are tribal people living in Kenya, Africa (Kratz, 1990).

- Initiates are boys and girls, ages 14-16, and gender separated.
- The initiates are ceremonially circumcised or excised. After this, they live in seclusion for 4-24 weeks with same-sex adults.
- They paint themselves with white clay and charcoal to appear as wild creatures.
- Secret knowledge is shared by the same-sex adults. The most important secret: there is a mythical beast that haunts initiates during seclusion.
- Initiation is complete when each youth has seen and held the instrument used to produce a roar and has produced a his or her own roar.

## FESTA DAS MOCAS NOVAS

This festival occurs among the Tukana people of Northwest Amazon, South America.

- The rite of passage into womanhood commences on the onset of menstruation and lasts 4-12 weeks.
- The initiate is secluded in a small chamber within the family dwelling.
- The initiate is thought to be in the underworld, in ever increasing danger from Noo, the demons.
- The rite climaxes with the arrival of guests donning Noo masks, to incarnate Noo.
- The initiate remains in seclusion two more days, painting her body with black genpia dye to protect her from Noo.
- On the third day, she emerges from the chamber surrounded by family and is ushered to the festivities—which lead to dancing until dawn.
- The dancing stops and the initiate throws a fire brand at Noo. At this time, the powers of Noo are broken and the Tukana woman safely enters womanhood.

## INITIATION OF ANGLO-AMERICANS

This is the tradition of the American people, U.S.A., North America.

- It covers the high school education process.
- Mandatory child labor laws and organized education serve to isolate the adolescent.
- An obligation to spend the day with peers has led to the tendency for adolescents to socialize among themselves during leisure time.
- For four years they are supervised and instructed by trained adults.
- This tradition varies from the tribal traditions in the ratio of adult to initiate, potential lack of bonding with initiator, and the lack of spiritual and moral instruction.
- The graduation ceremony resembles many traditional elements, such as robes, structure, and welcoming speeches into adulthood; yet, it often lacks the depth of meaning of tribal rituals.
- Some aspects of development are not addressed—leaving the transition incomplete—though the adolescent moves on to adulthood.

## CONCLUSIONS

Because of the diversity and "melting pot" mentality of modern cultures, many traditions are altered to avoid offending any initiates raised in more Western European ideals. Consider this example: African ceremonies requiring female initiates to go bare-breasted as part of the initiation rites conflict with the modesty factor present today. Native Americans also hold specific traditional values that differ from the dominant culture. The root cause of the self-destruction of these minority cultures and others is often a lack of cultural identity, permanent role models, and "tribal" structure.

An obvious suggestion would be to increase the availability of ceremonial opportunities for young people. This can be done by updating traditional ceremonies, expanding specific rites of passage programs, and incorporating models of program into the high school curriculum. However, there is danger in increasing opportunities for young people to participate in appropriate rites of passage.

Formalized rites of passage are mostly characterized by observable elements. In expanded forms of passage, young people might confuse tangibles, such as African dress, with intangibles, such as Black pride.

A rite of passage is a spiritual and psychological undertaking. It does not happen instantaneously through one book, one song, or even one dance. Sufficient time must be contributed by the initiator, the initiate, and the community. And the initiator needs to know what it means to be that whole and happy person the young person is being brought into by the rite of passage. As in most cases, true change is possible only through a depth of understanding.

### CRITIQUE AND EVALUATION

This article provides a balanced overview of the meanings of rites of passage. It acknowledges equally the advantages and disadvantages of updating them to modern and dominant cultural standards while sustaining their abilities to thrive within their own minority traditions and maintaining their effectiveness of strengthening their roots. Any "quick-fix" program could severely damage the ceremony if not duly considered and specifically designed to guard against potentially negative influences.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What are some of the experiences of your life that you would consider rites of passage?
2. How have these related to or enhanced your cultural identity?
3. What are the generically accepted rites of passage considered today by our society?
4. What are the rites of passage accepted and identified within our traditional belief systems? (i.e., age of accountability, etc.)
5. How do doctrines of faith demonstrate and perform the ceremonial traditions for the rite of passage? (i.e., baptism, ordination, etc.)
6. In your youth work, how can rites of passage be incorporated?
7. What are some of the most important characteristics a youth leader needs to exercise to help a young person qualify for his or her rite of passage ceremony?

## **IMPLICATIONS**

1. Rites of passage are an important part of tradition and identity. They create a sense of personhood within the family and the community.
2. It is obvious that today's society has "watered-down" the true values that rites of passage can bring into the development and growth process of a young person.
3. We often look for age-oriented "rights" to pass as rites of passage. They generally fit into the definition, but lack the most meaningful aspects—spirituality and morality. One example: the age young people can earn their driver's license.
4. Youth leaders need to maintain the high spiritual and moral value and intent of rites of passage. Young people need adults to commit, dedicate themselves, and bond with them, while introducing them to the most important and valued principles of spirituality and morality.
5. Society needs to emphasize traditions and rites of passages of our faith and display them to the young people we are privileged to serve.

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