Indigenous Australian’s male rite of passage

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Traditional rite of passage In North-Eastern Australia, bora is translated as the religious event and sites associated with the rite of passage for young men. At the bora, there were three major stages of initiation: from boys, to young men, to men. 

In the early stage, boys who reached puberty were called birri-birai and began initiation ceremony by being tossed and caught by male relatives. The birri-birai attended bora through being taught the sacred stories and dances of the

Dreamtime, about connectedness to the land and spirit, and attaining all the traditional rules and laws by which all the men and women in the community lived. Passing on stories allowed the knowledge of life to be kept whole and the Aboriginal culture to stay strong for future generations.

In the later stages of initiation, the birri-birai progressed to become bubora. These adolescents would then pass through many ordeals which would finally lead them to become the full man. These ordeals included circumcision ceremonies and having one of their front teeth knocked out. The bubora would go on journeys to meet with other tribes to understand that becoming a full adult meant there were responsibilities with other tribes as well as one’s own tribal community.

The last ceremony for complete adult male initiation to become borba was the fire ceremony in which the bubora’s resistance to pain was tested from falling hot embers of torches or lying on burning logs. From the process of initiation and rite of

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1 Anna Kenny, 'The 'Society' at Bora Ceremonies: A Manifestation of a Body of Traditional Law and Custom in Aboriginal Australia Relevant to Native Title Case Law', Oceania, 82 (2012), 129.
4 'Australian Aboriginal - Initiation and Mourning Rites of Passage' http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/~rfrey/220aboriginal_passage.htm [Accessed on 24/10/13].
passage, the young men of the Aboriginal communities were able to live by a warrior code\(^5\) through having developed survival skills and learned their roles and identity as the future *borbas* of their clan.

**Today’s rite of passage**

Bora ceremonies are no longer performed in many parts of Australia, whereas in some places there are some quite similar to *Bora* gatherings that renew the connection amongst tribes of the wider region\(^6\). For most Indigenous communities today, the elder men can no longer reproduce cultural traditions and beliefs and enforce laws and customs upon the youths\(^5\). So what are the options today for these boys to identify themselves as men?

In a remote Indigenous Australian community in New South Wales, young men struggle to come to terms of what it means to be a man in a modern world where the social roles and interests clash between Indigenous and non-Indigenous views\(^5\). Leading one’s life by the warrior code is lost due to the introduction of the role of men as soldiers during colonisation.

Soldiers are considered to have great discipline in their work for the dominant society but not in their individual life\(^5\). The role of nurturing children has become the responsibility of women\(^5\) even though the knowledge to conduct the initiation process only exists in elders of the same gender as the initiate\(^1\). Drug and alcohol use and gang involvement have become a form of initiation for young men without elder men’s guidance in making life decisions\(^7\).

A controversy occurring today is that criminality is sometimes seen as a stage in development and maintenance of masculinity\(^8\). As a result, jail has been argued to serving as the replacement for traditional badge of honour for many young Indigenous people\(^9\).

Without elders teaching young men about the structures and rules within the


\(^7\) Ogilvie, E. and A. Van Zyl, *Young Indigenous males, custody and the rites of passage*. 2001: Australian Institute of Criminology.


traditional Indigenous community, a stronger sense of community structure is experienced in prison as the adolescents have engaged in offending behaviours with like-minded peers and are provided with food and equipment required for safe and comfortable living conditions.

Embarking on criminal activities may challenge, teach and direct a teenager to achieving self-identity that is accepted and respected by significant others. In particular, criminality is engaged for ‘fun’ and ‘adventure’ with ‘mates’. Hence, incarceration is not itself a replacement rite of passage but is instead considered a place for a new learning experience.

Taking these factors into consideration, the world of prison holds no fear for many Indigenous youth with some even embracing incarceration. Hence, the concept of detention needs to be questioned to redirect Aboriginal youth today to less destructive ways of entering adulthood.

Questions

1. What customs are performed for birri-birai?
   a) Tossed in the air and caught by elders.
   b) Knock off one tooth.
   c) Meet members from other tribal communities.
   d) All of the above.

2. During which stage/s of Bora do Indigenous male learn Indigenous laws and rules?
   a) Bubora
   b) Birri-birai
   c) Borba
   d) All of the above.

3. By what code was the traditional rite of passage based on?
   a) Soldier
   b) Fighter
   c) Warrior
   d) Community

4. In the Indigenous community today, who nurtures the children?
   a) The whole community.
   b) Direct family members.
   c) Elder men.
   d) Elder women.