

Collective in the
pursuit of all tasks



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Collective Male Initiation Rituals of the SambiaThe transition of a boy to a man is very important to the Sambia, of New Guinea. This transition consists of an initiation ritual, which has 6 stages and takes between 13 and 20 years to complete. The first 3 stages are collectively focused, which I will discuss, and stages 4 through 6 are individually focused. This ritual helps to introduce the boys to male society, prepare them for adult responsibilities and is used to transmit culture (Nanda 2002: 132).

The beliefs of the Sambia show a warriors conception of manhood where men should be strong, brave, and unyielding in the pursuit of all tasks (Herdt 1981: 50). The first stage of initiation is called Moku and occurs between the ages of 7 and 10. The second stage is called Imbutuand occurs between the ages of 10 and 13. The third stage is called Ipmangwi and occurs between the ages of 14 and 16. In the first stage of initiation the boys are taken from their mothers homes and taken to live at the mens clubhouse. Here boys are given a ritual sponsor who is usually in the third or forth stage of initiation (Herdt 1981: 55). Early in the first stage is the stretching right.

The stretching rites are the initial stimulus to spur masculinity (Herdt 1981: 223). In the stretching rites the boys are carried off into the woods by their ritual sponsor and sticks or switches are rubbed against the bodies of groups of boys by the elder males. The boys skin is rubbed and perforated. This is said to remove sweat and the fine down of the boys cheeks, arms and legs (Herdt 1981: 222) which are contaminants caused by close contact with their mothers. After this dangerous ritual their sponsor must carry the boys back to the mens clubhouse. One of the most important rituals in the first stage

initiation is nose bleeding. This act is the most painful preformed on the initiates (Herdt 1981: 224).

In this rite sharp blades of grass are stuck up the nose until it bleeds. This is done to remove any contaminated blood that is caused from extended contact with the boys mother (Herdt 1981: 223). This purifies the boys and enables them to move on to rites that will strengthen them.

After stretching and nose bleeding the initiate is given the ingestive rights. The boys are told of hundreds of positive and negative foods to eat. The pigments and color of the foods play an important role in their qualities (Herdt 1981: 228). The most important ingestive rite is the act of fellatio (Herdt 1981: 232). This rite is the most secret of all and is introduced in the penis and flute ceremony. The boys are told of the danger of seaman depletion and the powers that semen contains. Fellatio is not preformed at the ceremony, but takes place after, in private between the boy and his sponsor and is preformed daily there after. Ingestion of semen is said to give the boy the strength that is needed to become a warrior (Herdt 1981: 234).

This act strengthens the male bond and can be linked to a male form of breast-feeding and is known to the boys as our breast milk (Herdt 1981: 234). In the second phase of initiation, which occurs between the ages of 10 and 13, the boys still live in the mens clubhouse. During this phase there is no nose bleeding for purification. In its place is a tree ceremony in which the boys are smeared with the red grease of the pandanus fruit for purification. This is said to be good enough due to the equivalency of blood and pananus juice (Herdt 1981: 229). During this phase the initiate still performs fellatio

on the men of the tribe on a regular basis, to make them strong. The third phase is the last of the collective initiation. This takes place between the ages of 14 and 16 while the boys live in the mens clubhouse (Herdt 1981: 55).

In the third phase the boys perform the puberty rite and move from the fellator to the fellated (Herdt 1981: 242). They are now considered to be bachelors and can take on a sponsee of their own. It is in this stage that the bachelor learns to make milk sap from the pooliku tree.

This milk sap is an elixir believed to replenish semen lost through their fellatio inseminations of younger boys (Herdt 1981: 111). During this phase the bachelor is allowed to wear the clothing of a warrior and participates in war-raiding parties (Herdt 181: 242). The Sambia of New Guinea view the transition of a boy to a man as an important act. Their collective initiation rituals last for up to 9 years and go through 3 phases, some of which are very secretive. These rituals help to emphasize male dominance and show an envy toward the procreative ability of females that is evident in the ritual blood-letting of nose bleeding and close relation of semen ingestion to a male form of breast feeding (Nanda 2002: 132). Some of their practices, such as the ritual fellatio preformed by young boys, can be seen by other cultures as child abuse. In fact some missionaries from the German Lutheran Church have gone so far as to try to persuade the Australian government to prohibit these initiations (Godelier 1996: 52). It is due to this and other cultural pressures that the act of ritual fellatio, though widely practiced by many tribes in New Guinea until the 1960s, is dyeing out (Godelier 1996: 52).

Initiation rituals serve an important part in many societies by gradually increasing participation in society, with little psychological trauma (Nanda 2002: 131). This is true for the Sambia and I believe that changing any of these rituals would be a great lose to them. Words/ Pages : 980 / 24