

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION
BUREAU OF AMERICAN ETHNOLOGY
BULLETIN 143

**HANDBOOK
OF
SOUTH AMERICAN INDIANS**

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Volume 5

THE COMPARATIVE ETHNOLOGY
OF SOUTH AMERICAN INDIANS

Prepared in Cooperation With the United States Department of State as a Project
of the Interdepartmental Committee on Scientific and Cultural Cooperation



UNITED STATES
GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON : 1949

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington 25, D. C.
Price \$3.00

BOYS' INITIATION RITES

By ALFRED MÉTRAUX

Initiation rites for boys or young men are fairly common in South America, but, unlike the puberty rites for girls, they tend to take several different forms and often serve quite different purposes. The age of the initiate is less frequently determined by purely physiological development among boys than among girls. Magic and religious elements occur in all ceremonies, but their function as well as their relative importance varies considerably. In many cases trials and ordeals form part of the rites, but here again there is considerable variation in emphasis and meaning. In almost all cases, the rites have some connection, direct or indirect, with the attainment of adult status, but frequently the same rituals may also serve other purposes.

In the Guianas, the young people acquire adult status when they have been whipped or bitten by poisonous ants, but the ordeal assumes the character of an initiation rite only because it is inflicted for the first time. In itself, the ordeal does not have that significance, for it is a magic rite that is performed on many occasions in life when a man wishes to assure his good luck in an enterprise or needs to purify himself from evil influence.

Practically, all the ceremonial life of the Marginal peoples, the Fuegians, the *Chamacoco*, and the *Ge*, is focussed on the training of the young men and on their admission into men's societies or age groups. Their religious activities pale in comparison to their elaborate initiation ceremonies.

In Perú, boys' puberty rites, unlike those for girls, were not a family affair but were organized and celebrated by the whole community once a year in December. Every boy who was regarded as sexually mature received a breechclout and changed his name. The ceremony was, of course, particularly solemn and elaborate among members of the nobility. The rites have been so frequently described by various chroniclers and have been so often quoted that it would be superfluous to repeat the details here. The ceremonies, which continued over several weeks, included pilgrimages to several shrines, particularly to that of Huanacauri, dances, flagellations, purificatory ablutions and races. The whole cycle of rites and feasts culminated in the

solemn giving of weapons and breechclouts to the candidates and in the piercing of their ears. The initiates also took their new names at this time. Thereafter, they were considered to be adults.

Ordeals.—In the various tribes of the Guianas, boys who had reached puberty were subjected to a series of severe ordeals which often were intended to give the candidates skill and strength in hunting and fishing.

Among the *Taulipáng*, the boy was first whipped by an old man, generally a grandfather. Then his chin, arms, chest, and ribs were scored with vertical incisions which were rubbed with magic herbs to increase his hunting luck. The arm incisions made him a good archer; those on his chin helped him to shoot his blowgun well. Next a string smeared with magic herbs was passed through his nose and mouth. After these ordeals the young man had to go through the maraké ceremony, in which stinging tocandeira ants (*Cryptocerus atratus*) in a meshed basketry frame were pressed against his body. The candidate had to stand the intense pain with a stout heart or the operation was repeated. In addition to these ordeals, the pubescent boy lived for a year on a diet of broth, cashiri (manioc beer), small fish, and birds.

Among the *Aparáí*, a shaman directed the initiation ceremony. The candidates, of whom there generally were three or four at one time, spent a whole day dancing and singing. A frame of wasps, generally in the shape of some animal, was pressed against their chest, back, arms, and legs. Those who succeeded in concealing their sufferings returned to the dancing ground, where, wearing a large headdress and carrying a flute in their left hand and a dancing arrow in the right one, they danced in a line over a board until they dropped from exhaustion. Then they bathed and returned to the shaman who cut their hair, decorated them with bead strings and a shoulder band of monkey hair, and gave them their first loin cloth.

Among the *Rucuyen*, the candidates, when they had been stung by ants and wasps, were lashed in their hammocks (Crévaux, 1883, p. 249).

At puberty, *Warrau* boys slashed their chest and arms with a peccary tusk or a tucan beak and were subjected to the ant ordeal.

The ant ordeal is also reported for the *Tamanako* (Gilij, 1780–84, 2: 347), the *Oyampi* and *Emerillon* (Coudreau, 1893, pp. 228, 548), the *Macushí*, *Acawai*, and *Arecuna*.

South of the Amazon the ant ordeal was practiced only by two tribes, the *Maué* and the *Parintintin*, but there is some doubt whether among the *Maué* the ceremony actually was connected with puberty rites. *Maué* children, especially those who seemed to be retarded, and young men both were subjected to the painful application. Barbosa Rodri-

gues (1882) witnessed a ceremony at which a young man plunged his arm into a kind of sleeve bristling with ants and then danced wearing the apparatus. He had to repeat the performance seven times. Martius (1867) reports that boys of 8 or 10 years were stung by ants and that when they screamed and cried they were dragged into a wild dance. The ordeal was repeated frequently until the boys were 14 years old, at which age they married.

When a group of *Parintintin* boys were old enough to discard the small fiber apron worn by little children, they were sent to the forest to prove their skill as hunters. Their return was hailed with war cries and flights of arrows. They were also exposed to the mandibles but not the stings of *tocandeira* ants. Thereafter they could wear the adult penis sheath.

The martyrdom of the ants and wasps has often been interpreted as a test of fortitude and as a preparation for the hardships of a hunter's life. Actually, it is a magic rite which "refreshes man, prevents him from being slow and lazy, makes him active, wide-awake and a good archer" (Coudreau, 1893, p. 228). Not only pubescent boys but also children and mature and even elderly men are subjected to the maraké. *Carib* chiefs, for example, had to lie in a hammock covered with hundreds of *tocandeira* ants. Everyone in a *Wapishana* village had to undergo the ordeal when an important visitor came. Shamans used it as a treatment for their patients.

Some other puberty rites also were to some extent ordeals. Formerly, *Palicur* boys were incised on their chest, arms, and legs, and were flogged with a *Bromelia* whip. Afterward they were given bands to wear on their upper arms and knees (Nimuendajú, 1926, p. 84).

During a special ceremony, the *Saliva*, *Guamo*, and *Otomaco* inflicted a considerable number of wounds on 10- to 12-year-old boys (Gumilla, 1791, 1: 118-119; Rivero, 1883, p. 211).

The *Nambicuara* were considered to be full-fledged adults only after they had had their nose and lips perforated.

There is a tradition among the *Tucuna* that in former times young men were initiated when their voice changed. They were secluded and then, after taking a snuff of tobacco powder, were presented formally to the sacred trumpets.

In some cases, the initiation rites may rather be considered a magic inoculation of virtue. The ancient *Cariri* rubbed a mixture of charred fish and game bones and ashes into incisions traced on the bodies of initiates and also compelled them to drink a concoction of the same ingredients. This magic treatment took place at a time when the young men were also receiving practical training in hunting. For 10 days they went out early in the morning to hunt; on their return they gave the game to their elders and contented themselves with maize

and cassava. In the evenings they danced and sang until they were utterly exhausted and emaciated (Martin de Nantes, 1706, pp. 12-13).

Admission to men's societies.—There is another category of initiation rites that coincides with puberty, but which differs fundamentally from the kind of ceremonies described above. In this category are the rites connected with admission to the cult of the sacred trumpets, which are so important among the *Cubeo* and many *Arawakan* tribes. Among the *Ona* and the *Chamacoco*, the revelation of the true nature of spirits has been combined with initiation rites, but should not be construed as a puberty rite, even though those to whom the mysteries are explained generally are adolescents. Among the *Cubeo*, the age of the initiates varies from 6 to 16.

Initiation rites constitute one of the most important social and religious events in the lives of the *Ona*, *Yahgan*, and *Alacaluf*, in addition to symbolizing the passage from childhood to adult status, they provide the young people with training in arts and crafts, in the traditions of the tribe, and in the ethical ideals that keep harmony within the community. Despite many common features, the rites differ in each of the tribes.

The *Ona* have combined the primitive initiation rites with the kina ceremony, the purpose of which is to terrify the women and keep them in subjection. For this reason they exclude women from the initiation rites, while the *Yahgan* and *Alacaluf* accept them more or less on the same footing as men.

Because of their dual nature, the *Ona* rites were performed along double but parallel plans. The initiation ceremony was organized by old people but was presided over by the father of the oldest candidate. It lasted from 3 to 6 months and took place in a conical hut built near the forest at some distance from the village. The candidates were about 16 years old. (See Handbook, vol. 2, pp. 120-121.)

Among the *Yahgan* and *Alacaluf*, the initiation rites lasted from a few days to several months and were celebrated at least once a year, but sometimes after a shorter interval. The *Alacaluf* held the ceremonies when a whale had been stranded on the shore or after a successful sea lion hunt. Only girls and boys who had reached puberty could be initiated, but all the adults participated in the rites. Among the *Yahgan* each boy was entrusted to the care of two male and one female sponsors and each girl to one male and two female sponsors.

The *Yahgan* rites took place in special huts decorated with painted boards and poles; they were shared by the boys and girls. Among the *Alacaluf*, the women retired at night to their own huts and only toward the end of the initiation period were they authorized to remain with the men on the condition that they would not watch the men's activities.

During the initiation period, the novices slept and ate little, worked hard, and took a daily cold bath. They could drink only from a tube. Inside the hut they sat with crossed legs; the *Alacaluf* beat those who changed their position. Much of the time was spent in learning the main arts and crafts and in listening to moral discourses. Their sponsors exhorted them to be generous, respectful to old people, and to refrain from gossip; their words were presented as expressions of the will of the Supreme Being.

Yahgan novices were constantly threatened by a demon who finally appeared to them in the guise of a man but amid frightful yells and strange noises. A traditional element in the *Alacaluf* initiation links it to that of the *Ona*. At a given moment a man disguised as a spirit came near the hut and howled. The novices shouted and beat the walls of the hut to chase him away, but the women showed signs of great terror because he struck whomever he could reach.

Alacaluf rites also included comic elements lacking in those of the *Yahgan*. The men played tricks on the women or on one another. The magico-religious aspects consisted mainly in dances and chants that were intended to keep evil spirits at bay. Certain songs belonged to women, others to men.

Toward the end of the period, the sponsors gave their candidate a basket, a drinking tube, and a scratching stick. The final episode was a mock battle between the men and the women.

There are striking parallels between the men's feast of the Tierra del Fuego Indians and the initiation rites of the *Chamacoco*. Here, too, the formal initiation of the boys is blended with the disclosure of the mysteries of the men's feast, but the revelation and the enacting of rites destined to terrorize the women are only the most spectacular aspects and the crowning of a whole cycle of initiation rites. At a time set by the old men of the tribe, two men visited the parents of the prospective candidates to demand them for the initiation. When a mother objected, she was threatened with the intervention of the Anapöso spirits, who would come to take her child by force. So great was the women's terror of these supernatural beings that they readily yielded up the boys. The children were taken to a small clearing where they remained for a month or more in the company of old men. The candidates were not subjected to any ordeal, they were even given abundant food, and therefore the initiation was looked back upon as a pleasant experience. The old men imparted to them knowledge of the tribal lore and taught them proper social behavior; they were urged to act in an adult manner, to abandon their childish ways, to observe moderation in eating, to remain chaste until marriage, and never to fight with other members of the band. Finally, they learned that the Anapöso spirits, whom they feared so much, were only masked men. This revelation was accom-

ped by the warning that if ever they told the secret to women they would be clubbed to death. The Anapöso feast itself took place at the end of the initiation period. The initiates danced, ran, and were visited by masked impersonators of the spirits. Finally, the "spirits" marched toward the village and danced in the presence of the women, who were not allowed to look at them. After the masked dancers had gone, the initiated boys, beautifully painted and decorated with feathers, made their entrance into the village where the women received them with shouts of joy; in the midst of the tumult the initiates maintained a reserved demeanor to signify that they had reached maturity.

Fragmentary evidence seems to indicate that similar initiation ceremonies were held by the primitive tribes south of the Pilcomayo River.

The admission of a young *Bororo* to the men's house was the occasion for a special ceremony. For several days before his reception, the father taught his son the traditions of the tribe and exhorted him to follow them. On the day before, the boy's closest relatives took him to the men's house, where they introduced him to a godfather, a member of the opposite moiety. During this night, the boy was not permitted to sleep, lest he have bad dreams. In the morning, dressed in his finest array, he was placed facing the sun; after several rites the godfather tied up his penis sheath. Then he returned home, where the women lamented as if he were dead. On the same day the chief uncovered to the new member of the men's house the religious secrets of the tribe and began to teach him ritual songs (Colbacchini and Albisetti, 1942, p. 172).

Age grade membership.—Initiation rites were also very involved and intricate among the *Northern Ge*, where they were connected more or less clearly with admission into age grades.

Among the *Canella*, the initiation ceremonies did not correspond to puberty, but instead served to determine membership in one of the five age groups that formed an important subdivision of the community. The members of each age group celebrated together a series of alternating feasts which made up a cycle of about 10 years. The ceremonies were begun sometime between the ages of 5 and 10. In the first phase, the candidates were secluded for about 3 months in the maternal hut. The second phase, which also included a period of seclusion, took place 3 years later. After repeating the two sets of rites at the same intervals of time, the boys attained the status of adults and were permitted to marry.

There were very few religious elements in the rituals. In the first phase, the boys were possessed by the spirits of the dead whom they attracted by chants; they acted as if they were the dead and only rid themselves of the spirits by ablution and flagellation. During both the first and second phase, they were exposed to magic rites that

ensured their growth and their longevity; at the same time they received instruction about their duties as married men.

When a new age group had been formed it occupied a special place on the plaza, causing the next group to move up and thus effecting a general shift in the position of all groups. The eldest one settled in the center of the plaza and its members became advisers.

Among the *Sherente*, only the members of the akemha society went through the initiation rites. For 3 years the candidates lived away from the village, eating game which they had hunted or food brought by their relatives. Under penalty of expulsion from the group, they were forbidden to quarrel, sing, laugh, or speak aloud. After their seclusion they occupied a hut built by their relatives, bestowed traditional names on little girls, and accepted the symbols of their status from their maternal uncles. Thereafter the boys were said to be *shipsa* and remained in the men's house until they married.

Though it may seem strange that only members of one of the four *Sherente* societies went through initiation rites, the anomaly may be explained if we regard the akemha, also called the youngest, as one of the age groups to which young people had access after a period of initiation.

Among the *Apinayé*, a new cycle of initiation rites began every 10 years for all the members of the new generation. When the time came, the village old men selected two instructors, one for each moiety, and these in turn designated a sister's son as chief of the candidates in his moiety. During the two periods of initiation, the candidates lived in a camp near the village, where they were assisted by four girls who had inherited this function. The main rites consisted in the perforation of the earlobes and lips. Every evening the boys went in solemn procession to the village to ask for their food, which they ate in common.

During the first phase of the initiation, the boys made the ornaments which they were to wear. During the day they went hunting, and in the evening they sang the four initiation songs and danced special dances. The nights were spent at home. When their hair, which previously had been cut, was long enough to touch their nose, they made spindles for the women of the community to spin the thread for their ornaments. The work was accompanied by various ceremonies. When they had reached this point, the parents assigned godparents to their sons. The final rites of the first phase of initiation took place when the ornaments were ready. The ceremonies celebrated on the occasion included a log race, a parade of the boys, and songs. Large meat pies were eaten by all those present except the initiates. The night was spent standing on a pile of wood; after a few days

spent singing and dancing, the ordeal was repeated. They also performed magic rites to get a long life.

An interval of several months separated the second phase of the initiation from the first. The meaning of the very complex rites characterizing the second phase is obscure. Once more the boys moved to a camp where they lived for 6 months learning the rules of the good life. Their teachers stressed particularly the conduct to be observed toward their prospective wives; they were warned to remain disciplined and chaste during the period of seclusion.

Also during the second phase there took place a ball game played according to complicated rules not by the candidates but by their elders. The godparents gave the initiates ceremonial clubs and cut their hair, which had grown during the time of seclusion. The end of the second cycle, like the first, was marked by log races and by the performance of magic rites to ensure strength and long life to the young men.

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