

URUBU-KAAPOR GIRLS' PUBERTY RITES

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When there is a sudden change of behavior associated with physiological changes, such as at weaning or at adolescence, there is a state of discontinuity. Management of discontinuity often involves special rites and ceremonies. During the initiation ceremonies for adolescence, there is often an acceleration of teaching and learning. This, in turn, produces good, well-informed citizens who maintain the cultural heritage.

This paper attempts to show that Urubu-Kaapor¹ girls' puberty rites with changes over the years continue to meet contemporary needs. In order to show the changes, a comparison of the Urubu-Kaapor rites is made with Tupinambá² girls' rites and attention is called to some events and factors which have contributed to change. The various needs that are met by the continued observation of the rites are also discussed. Tupinambá rites are recounted first in order to provide an historical framework since it is likely that Tupinambá rites constitute a link to the proto rites. Van Gennep's (1960) taxonomy is employed in the analysis of both Urubu-Kaapor and Tupinambá rites.

The van Gennep Taxonomy

Societies employ various means to indicate the advancement of their members through various stages of life. Rituals which accompany this advancement from stage to stage are termed 'rites of passage' by van Gennep (1960:2f). Through the analysis of various examples of such rituals, van Gennep found a different type of rite for each of three different rites of passage.

He maintains that, in Rites of Separation, a novice is mutilated in some way to symbolize removal from the common mass of humanity. This is the function of circumcision, tooth pulling, cutting of the little finger above the last joint, tattooing, or cutting the hair in a particular fashion. With the exception of hair cutting, the operation leaves ineradicable traces, making incorporation into a defined group permanent.

During Rites of Transition, various types of instructions are given to prepare an initiate for a new role. Orientation to secret lore and moral instruction, including proper sexual behavior, may be given. Dietary taboos are often observed during this phase of the ceremony.

In Rites of Incorporation, an initiate presents or shares food with another individual or group. Van Gennep further suggests, for example, that at the time of her first menstruation, a female initiate enters a new status and becomes 'sacred' to the others who remain in the profane state. "This new condition calls for rites and eventually for

reincorporating the individual into the group and returning him [or her] to the customary routines of life" (1960: ix). These three types are not developed to the same extent by all peoples or in every ceremonial pattern.

In his classic study of cultural celebrations, van Gennep "accepted the dichotomy of the sacred and profane; in fact, this is a central concept for understanding his transitional stage in which [he feels] an individual or group finds itself from time to time," according to Solon Kimball (van Gennep 1960:ix). The sacred is not an absolute value, but one relative to the situation. The person who enters a status at variance with the one he previously held becomes 'sacred' to the others who remain in the profane state. It is this new condition which calls for rites eventually incorporating the individual into the group and returning him to the customary routines of life ready to fulfill his new role. Without the recognized rituals these changes could be dangerous or, at least, upsetting to the life of the group and the individual. Rites of passage, then, help cushion the disturbance during the transitional period.

Rites of passage generally mark at least four primary crises within the life cycle. These are birth, transition from childhood to adulthood or puberty, transition from the unmarried state to the married, and the transition from life to death. It is the transition from childhood to adulthood for females that will be the focus of this paper.

For most societies the sign indicating that a girl has reached puberty is the beginning of menstruation. Unlike male rites, therefore, female puberty rites tend to occur spontaneously and with little advance preparation.

The menstruous girl may be viewed culturally as either 'unclean' or 'blessed'. Among the Urubu-Kaapor, a man becomes unlucky (panem) in hunting if, even unknowingly, he sleeps with a menstruous woman (Huxley 1963: 145). Among the Pueblo people of the Southwestern United States, however, such a girl is regarded as a source of rich spiritual blessing, and in some elaborate religious ceremonies these girls may bless the priests by virtue of their condition (Nida 1954: 115). Rites of passage of a particular society generally show an inclination toward one of these two viewpoints.

Tupinambá Girls' Puberty Rites

Perhaps the earliest documentation of the Tupinambá girls' puberty rites is that chronicled by André Thevet. According to Thevet (1575: 946f), the first menstruation was called quioundu-ar. The Tupinambá celebrated it with drunkenness. The young girls had great fear of this first menstruation because the initiation rites could be very painful. The hair on her head was cut off with a fish tooth (which, Thevet said, cuts very well), as close to the head as possible. The few hairs that were left were singed off. The girl was then placed in a standing position on a flat stone where the Tupinambá used to make necklaces.

There, those conducting the rites scratched the skin of the girl's back in the form of a cross, with a tooth of an animal, from the shoulders to the buttocks. Some girls were

scratched more deeply than others, depending on how much pain and bleeding they could withstand. After that, ashes made from a wild squash were rubbed into the wound. The ashes caused pain and left a permanent scar. It was said that if the girl was not cut in this manner, her abdomen would not do well and her children would be malformed.

Then her arms were tied to her body with cotton string and capybara teeth were strung around her neck. This was done so that her own teeth would grow stronger and thus she could chew cassava tuber used in making the drink called kaouin. After that, she had to lie down in an old hammock and was not allowed out of it until three days had passed.

During these three days she was completely covered so that no one could see her, and she fasted--no eating or drinking. If she needed to relieve herself, the mother, aunt, or grandmother carried her, taking along a red hot piece of charcoal in a clay vessel and a bit of cotton thread to ward off any evil spirit (?) known as Mae which might otherwise come close or even enter her genitals.

After three days had passed, the girl got out of her hammock, stepping down onto the same flat stone used in her initiation, so that she would not touch the ground with her feet. She was then given cassava meal (farinha) to eat and roots cooked without salt or meat. She was not permitted to drink anything but water. It appears that this was her diet for the first month.

During her menstrual flow, a girl cleaned herself with a stick about three feet long. She remained inactive in her hammock until the beginning of her second menstruation, which usually took about a month.

At the time of the second menstruation, the girl had incisions made on her chest and abdomen, as well as new incisions on her back. Dietary restrictions were not as severe as during the first month, but she was still not permitted to talk to anyone. Neither was she permitted to go to the garden nor to do any of the things she had been able to do prior to menstruation. She remained in her hammock and spun cotton.

In the third month, after having been painted all black with the juice of the genipap fruit, a girl was permitted to go to the gardens again. The Tupinambá believed that if she did not observe these rules, the spirit Mermona³ would cause everyone to die (Thevet 1575: 946f).

It appears that the Tupinambá focused a great deal of attention upon the teaching of adult skills during puberty rites. Montoya (1879, according to Fernandes 1963: 272f) says that an initiate was sent to an adult woman who made her work to the point of exhaustion. Errors were penalized with severe punishment and the girl had to acquire skills needed for homemaking.

When a girl's hair had grown again to shoulder length, she was considered marriageable.

Métraux (1950: 204) suggests that the reason for the painful ordeal suffered by young girls was to shelter them from danger that threatens them at this critical period of development. Fernandes (1963: 273) noted that the initiation of women among the Tupinambá implied the observance of rites of death and of rebirth. It is likely that both of these aspects entered into Tupinambá thinking.

There was a striking similarity between Tupinambá practices when someone dies and the treatment of a pubescent girl at her first menstruation. A pubescent girl, for example, covered herself in the hammock and did not eat for the first three days of the first month. She was considered and treated as though she were dead, in that she was carried by her female relatives whenever she needed to relieve herself. This activity also went on during what van Gennep calls the Rites of Transition.

Analysis According to van Gennep. I suggest that the hair cutting and the scratching belong to a Rite of Separation as defined by van Gennep. Tying a girl's arms to her body with a string, tying capybara teeth around her neck, seclusion and fasting for three days, being carried out to relieve herself--all these were part of the Rite of Separation which began with hair cutting and ended with her breaking her fast.

I interpret the restricted diet, the cotton spinning which could require instruction, and orientation to beliefs regarding the initiation rites themselves as constituting a Rite of Transition according to van Gennep's scheme.

Additional incisions on other parts of the body, continued abstinence from talking and from any activity previously engaged in--such as going to the garden--were some of the other activities included during this second stage which began with her breaking her fast and ended with scarification of other parts of her body.

Van Gennep's suggestion concerning the presentation of food or the sharing of a meal as a Rite of Incorporation are not present in the document which concerns Tupinambá rites.

I suggest that when the initiate paints herself with the genipap fruit paint and begins to return to the gardens, it is at this point that she is incorporated into the adult community, since it is a return to a normal activity of an Urubu-Kaapor adult.

Urubu-Kaapor Girls' Puberty Rites

Among the Urubu-Kaapor people, menstruation is called, jai (Kakumasu 1968). At her first menstruation, the pubescent girl enters a palm-leaf enclosed room, called kapyk, for a period of isolation. This enclosure is made in the sleeping area of the home. It is the same type of enclosure used for the isolation of parents of a new-born baby.

The girl sleeps alone in a hammock in this enclosure for a month. "Her feet [are] kept clear of the ground, lest the magic that [is] in her should escape in a kind of short circuit" (Huxley 1963: 155). She bathes with warm water that her mother heats for her. During her seclusion, "the girl spins a long carauá string to distribute to her relatives, part of

which serves as the attachment of her feather necklace which she wears when she abandons her place of seclusion" (Ribeiro and Ribeiro 1957: 148).

On the seventh day of isolation, her father cuts her hair as short as possible using a pair of scissors. Studies by others on hair cutting reveal that it is often seen as a means of ridding a person of a dangerous state, to end a taboo, or to purify oneself of the influence of death or the ghost to which a person had been exposed (Fraser 1922: 258-87).

Food is given to her from the beginning of menstruation, but the diet is strictly limited. She eats only cooked white cassava meal (u'i) and stewed white tortoise (jaxi te) until the hair on her head grows out again a bit. Then her legs are scratched with the tooth of an agouti, and a white string is tied around her neck with bows tied in front and back with the same string.

Cloth binders are wrapped around the stomach and forehead, and the girl's father puts large ants (tapia'æ), into the binders. After she has suffered some painful bites, the binders are removed. In a culture where it is desirable and admirable for a person to be strong (pyratã), the girl is not supposed to cry audibly. The Urubu-Kaapor explain that pain is inflicted to make her strong.

Huxley (1963: 148f) suggests that this is done to atone for the guilt feelings. When she menstruates for the first time, she is repeating woman's age-old offense of contradicting man's pretensions, showing that it is she who makes children, not man. This is her guilt, and by this the contradiction of the masculine world of mythology and the feminine world of physical reality is resolved. The mythological contention is that the creation of human life is an exclusive function of the male. This is contested by the life-producing menstruation; hence, a sense of guilt results.

Food taboos are maintained from the beginning of menstruation for several months, at which time the girl is ready for marriage. After the hair on her head grows a little, larger, orange spotted tortoise (Port. Carumbé) is added to her diet. Certain fishes (jandi'a and karaiwa) are also added. In the sixth month, when her hair has grown long, she begins to eat deer, tapir, the small wild pig and agouti. In the eighth month, she adds the large wild pig (Port. queixada). The reason given for abstinence from all but tortoise meat in the early stages of first menstruation is that a girl would otherwise go crazy and die.

A month after her first menstruation, when the initiate comes out of isolation, her father peels some cassava for her and she begins to perform the toasting process. She makes balls of soft cassava and places them in the sun to bleach. She cuts and gathers firewood for the fire and toasts the cassava grains by herself. When the toasting is done, she shares some of the grains with each major household of the village. Then she grates other cassava tubers, boils the mass, and makes sweet unfermented drink for her family.

After she has completed all this--her seclusion, the toasting of cassava, and the preparation of the cassava drink--she begins to wear the adult woman's feather necklace. She also begins to wear the women's waistband, sewn for her by her mother of Job's

tears (Lat. *Coix lacryma-jobi*). At the end of the waistband are hung feathered flowers. This is worn over an everyday denim skirt. The girl applies pink lipstick plant paint (Port. *urucu*) to her face in horizontal lines between the eyebrows and on the chin, and in a vertical line on the cheeks. This facial application of fruit paint is for both ceremonial and casual cosmetics. The young woman emerges into adulthood with the assurance of her competence to fulfill her future obligations and is impressed with the importance of her role.

Analysis according to van Gennep. The hair cutting of the Urubu-Kaapor initiate may be considered in van Gennep's view, as being a Rite of Separation. Isolation, warm water baths, scratching of legs and the tying of string around her neck are activities which occur during this rite, which begins with the hair cutting and ends with string tying.

The dietary taboo, cotton spinning with accompanying instruction in beliefs about the rites and sexual privileges are the activities I consider to belong to the Rite of Transition, according to van Gennep's frame of reference. Endurance of ant bites on the stomach and forehead is practiced during this period, which begins with dietary taboos and ends with spinning and instruction.

For the Rites of Incorporation, the presentation of cassava grains to the villagers and the sharing of sweet cassava drink with her family are central. This rite begins with gathering of firewood and the toasting of cassava and ends with her adornment in ceremonial wear of the adult woman.

Comparison of Tupinambá and Urubu-Kaapor Rites

In the Tupinambá Rite of Separation, scarification by scratching and rubbing with ashes was practiced to assure normal offspring for the initiate. Incisions on the chest, abdomen, and back as well as hair cutting were also practiced.

In the Urubu-Kaapor rite, scratching of the initiate's leg to the point of bleeding is practiced, but no scar-producing agent is used. There is no repetition of scratching nor does there seem to be a belief like that of the Tupinambá regarding mutilation.

The modern use of scissors for hair-cutting makes singeing unnecessary. Other Tupinambá activities not practiced by the Urubu-Kaapor are tying of the initiate's arms to her body and the initial three day fast. The metaphor of death as a part of the Rite of Separation appears to be weakened. Urubu-Kaapor substitutions are the tying of string around the neck instead of *capybara* teeth, seclusion in a room for a month instead of being covered in a hammock for the three days, warm baths instead of the use of a cleaning stick, and an amplified diet.

In the Tupinambá Rite of Transition, very restricted dietary taboos were enforced throughout two full months of seclusion. Cotton spinning was possibly accompanied by instruction in ritual beliefs.

The Urubu-Kaapor have omitted the fast during the first three days of first menstruation. A restricted diet from the first day is augmented in succeeding weeks and months. The purpose of abstinence from certain game is taught. Cotton spinning is common to both groups. Orientation to acceptable sexual behavior takes place during this period. The Urubu-Kaapor add an endurance test, using biting ants, that is lacking among the Tupinambá.

In the Tupinambá the Rite of Incorporation into adult society began with the initiate returning to the gardens and to other menial tasks in the third month of menstruation. The Urubu-Kaapor initiate shares toasted cassava grains with each major household in her village and shares sweet cassava drink with her family at the end of just one month. The Urubu-Kaapor initiate then dons the ceremonial dress which marks her entrance into adulthood, this being shown for the Tupinambá initiate by permanent scars.

Changes in Environment and in Rites

Leighton made the following observation:

Forces moving toward change, actual and potential, exist in all societies throughout the world. Sometimes these are triggered by aid programs, more often now they are well under way when the aid programs are introduced. In either case, these forces are the means for driving development; yet instead of being harnessed to this end by the innovators, they are frequently resisted and fought with. Because they seem overwhelming and disorderly, they are held back; and from holding back, it's a short step to blocking at every turn. The flood then swells and instead of turning the wheel bursts the dam and sweeps wheel, mill and all away. (Goodenough 1963: 7f)

This helps to explain the acceptance of modern tools but the maintenance of distance from and a certain degree of resistance to the outsider and his ways that has continued among the Urubu-Kaapor people over the years of intermittent contact with outside forces.

In an historical overview, I would like to suggest possible reasons for the changes that occurred in the Urubu-Kaapor girls' puberty rites. Service (1962: 113), describes environment as having two aspects: (1) the natural (organic and inorganic) environment and (2) the presence of competing societies, the superorganic environment. The presence and influence of the Portuguese in Brazil constituted the competing or dominating society in the life of the Urubu-Kaapor people, and has been a powerful contributing factor toward change in the Urubu-Kaapor rites.

When the Portuguese stopped the Tupinambá from waging wars on their neighbors, the ritual execution of enemies stopped. Change was inevitable. Historically, interethnic wars were very much a way of life for the Tupinambá. Young warriors were not considered to be men nor could they marry until they had killed an enemy. This killing took place at

ceremonies. The warrior was then scratched and a permanent scar was left on his body as a sign of his membership in adult male society. Although scarification was also a part of Tupinambá girls' rites, it is not part of the comparable Urubu-Kaapor practice of today. Without the male counterpart, the practice may have lost its significance for the Urubu-Kaapor.

The warrior also had to endure ant bites on his forehead and waist for an entire day. Although the Tupinambá rites for girls' did not apparently include a similar ordeal, the Urubu-Kaapor rites still do. This may represent an innovation by the Urubu-Kaapor, along with the eating of white tortoise from the first day of menstruation.

Other likely reasons for changes in Urubu-Kaapor rites are the formation of the Serviço de Proteção aos Índios (SPI) in 1910 and the 'pacification' of the Urubu-Kaapor in 1928. Increased contact between the Portuguese speaking community and the Urubu-Kaapor resulted in the establishing of SPI trading posts. The education of the children of SPI personnel was started at the posts along with material goods. The introduction of perforated copper plates made the grating of cassava easier. Having strong teeth to chew cassava was no longer as important for initiates in the girls' puberty rites. The introduction of firearms by SPI personnel made the capybara scarce after a time. The reduction in population of this rodent very likely influenced the disuse of its teeth in the initiate's necklace.

Decrease in human population constitutes another reason for change in rites. Increased contact with dominant society has resulted in the introduction of the common cold and other communicable diseases among the Urubu-Kaapor. Their practice of bathing in the cold stream to ward off fever has resulted in pneumonia and death for many. Lack of immunization or adequate medical attention has also contributed to their misery.

A resulting decrease in population may have contributed to a decrease in duration of the rites. With fewer villagers to provide tortoise meat for an initiate, this special diet has become problematic. Girls themselves are needed even more for subsistence activities as the population has dwindled. The period of learning homemaking skills has been omitted from the present-day rites. Girls are no longer sent to other women for the purpose of learning these skills. Mothers teach them to their daughters before puberty. The rites merely provide reinforcement of earlier learning.

The introduction of a bartering economy at SPI posts has also contributed to change. Contact with the dominant society since pacification has instilled in the Urubu-Kaapor a desire to be clothed. The men now wear shorts, trousers, and shirts; and women wear dresses. This desire has necessitated having these items sewn by seamstresses at the post. Payment for sewing is made in the form of three or four tortoises per item. The tortoise was also used, for a time, in bartering for certain articles of clothing, tobacco, and soap. I believe this increase in demand for tortoise, along with the decrease in population, has influenced the shortening in duration of the rites. It very likely also influenced how soon other meats could be added to the initiate's diet.

The Present-day Function of Puberty Rites

Although the Urubu-Kaapor have made changes in their girls' puberty rites to adjust to a changing environment, they have retained the practice because it continues to meet present day needs. The specific needs of separation, instruction, and incorporation are met through the retention of some aspects of earlier (Tupinambá) forms, with certain additions.

The need to communicate certain facts in symbolic mode is met: the initiate celebrates the attainment of sexual maturity, hence the possibility of maternity; the initiate also celebrates social maturity with its associated responsibilities and privileges. Richards (Firth 1975: 182) says that "with a female there is additional complication: the onset of her menstrual flow is linked with emotionally tinged ideas about the power of blood--negatively associated with danger and mystical damage; and positively with creative fertility. So linked with rites of protection and purification are also those of promotion of child-bearing and domestic efficiency."

The instruction that is accomplished during rites and the post puberty orientation is one of the most effective ways to transmit culture. The value system of the society and its justification and much of the cultural heritage of the community are taught or reinforced at this time. In quoting Hart (1955), Spindler (1974: 342) says that "standardization of experience--uniformity of training is markedly present in the post-initiation experience." He maintains that whereas childhood experience is part of the secular world, postpuberty experience is part of the sacred world. It is no wonder that uniformity of training is desired.

Spindler suggests that primitive societies, despite their marginal subsistence and the fact that they are frequently close to the starvation point, devote more care and attention to the production of good citizens than to the production of good technicians, and therefore they can be said to value good citizenship more highly than they value the production of food producers. He says that this relative lack of interest in standardizing subsistence-training while insisting at the same time on standardizing training in the ideological aspects of culture, may go a long way toward enabling us to explain the old sociological problem called cultural lag. Change in technology is easier to achieve and takes place with less resistance than change in the non technological or ideological fields (Spindler 1974: 358).

Another need being met by the continuance of puberty rites is that of group identity. In their rites, the Urubu-Kaapor maintain their identity as 'dwellers of the wood', as they like to call themselves. In spite of enduring contact with the dominant society, they have embraced little of the ideology of the outside world, though they have accepted material goods and technology. They have retained their own language and have remained, for the most part, monolingual. About 90% of the population speak only Urubu-Kaapor. Loewen (1968: 8-15) attributes cultural vitality, a functional 'reason-to-be', as one reason for the retention of a minority language. Other reasons are a relatively balanced cultural integration, and the capacity to function meaningfully under contact conditions.

The Urubu-Kaapor maintain a geographic distance from trading posts. This geographic distance serves as a resistance factor to reduce the influence of the national language and culture upon the community. Service (1962:8) puts it this way: "There have been survivals into the present of ancient cultural forms which because of relative isolation have maintained a relatively stable adaptation."

Concluding Remarks

Changes have been made to Urubu-Kaapor girls' puberty rites over the years, but they continue to meet contemporary needs. They safeguard the initiate during a dangerous period in her life by separating her, by focusing supernatural power on the task of insuring her a productive life through food taboos, orientation of ritual beliefs, and by incorporating her into adult society. Celebration of her attainment to maturity is communicated symbolically through ritual. The need for ethnic identity is met. Post-puberty instruction effectively transmits cultural values and knowledge and standardizes experience leading to a uniformity of training in a society which considers it important to produce good citizens and good communicators of their cultural heritage.

Changing circumstances can lead to change in rites either by omission or addition, depending upon whether there is a continuing function for the rites or an emphasis is needed for particular beliefs or values. Examples are the discontinuance of the use of the capybara teeth around the neck of the initiate after the introduction of perforated copper plates made their use obsolete, and the addition of the ant bites to emphasize endurance.

A minor socioeconomic implication also surfaces within the Urubu-Kaapor folk society today with the continuance of these rites. The heavy use of tortoise in these rites spells danger of an eventual shortage in the future. Its continued use in the period after childbirth and in bartering for kerosene in more recent years also contribute to this danger. The demarcation of the area in which these people live also contributes to this danger. Not only is there danger of a shortage of tortoise as a food supply, but of a shortage for ritual dietary needs. The time seems opportune for the introduction of conservation principles or of a production project.

The analysis of ritual is enhanced by comparison with practices of the past or of the present. Comparison helps us to put our findings in perspective and to reach a greater understanding of what we have seen. This study analyzed the contemporary Urubu-Kaapor girls' puberty rites, comparing them with earlier Tupinambá practices. Van Gennep's analysis of the function of puberty rites was used as a basis for discussion.

Notes

¹Urubu-Kaapor belongs to the Tupí-Guaraní language family. There have been approximately 500 speakers of this language for the past twenty-five years. They live in the State of Maranhão, Brazil, on the tributaries that flow into the Gurupí, Maracaçume, and Turiaçu Rivers. Data for this study was gathered during field trips to the village of Xâtarixã during the years 1964-67, under the auspices of the Summer Institute of

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²During the 16th and 17th centuries, the Tupinambá were settled along the eastern coast of Brazil as far north as Pará and as far south as Rio de Janeiro.

³Clastres (1978) refers to Thevet's mention of a creator spirit named Monan. She also discusses the death of a person named Maira-Monan. Maira is the Urubu-Kaapor culture hero. My hypothesis is that the name Mermona may be a corruption of the name Maira-Monan.

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