

Maturity and the Rite of Passage

My generation (people born between 1981 and 2000) are often referred to as the digital/internet natives or the “Millennials.” We are characterized for our individuality, creativity, and our unwavering desire to pursue our passions but also our obsession with the internet, entitlement, self promotion, narcissism, lack of empathy or compassion for others, and generally a lack of ability to connect offline.¹ We have lost sight of traditional values and the importance of real community, while trying to constantly “connect” with each other online. We have developed a social gap with genuine human connection, compensating with a false feeling of connection online between devices. We want to feel like we are a part of something, but we are drifting away from reality. The virtual world, that we use to avoid loneliness, ends up leaving us even more disconnected than ever before. To top it off, we are the pioneers of these platforms, learning as we go with no rules or guidelines. We are running the show with no experience, values, or teaching on the subject. We find ourselves teaching the elders about this new society and our new means of connecting. We are moving away from the traditions of our cultures into something we perceive as better and more modern, but we are forgetting our values. Celebration is the vehicle of any culture (for example pop music and party culture) but what are we even celebrating anymore? In the last two hundred years we have forgotten the value of rituals, ceremonies and celebrations that help us get through transitions in life. We reject communities that we could contribute to and be a part of for the pursuit of individuality, and we are left without guidelines or values to support us.

I am on the verge of eighteen years old. Next year I will attend college. I decided to forgo my senior year in order to get a head start on my goals in higher education as an artist. Therefore I am losing every celebration and every tradition associated with this transition in my culture. I will probably never go to prom, I will never get a senior trip, I will never have my testimonial read to my school and I will absolutely never graduate in the conventional sense. High school graduation is an official celebration of the completion of necessary education by society’s standards. After this period is over, we are typically given the freedom to make our own decisions as adults. We may be influenced by the wishes of our parents or the pressures of our environment, but eventually we will turn eighteen and become legal adults. Symbolically, graduation is heavy if you take all of those factors into consideration. We use celebration to leave behind our most formative years as children. Is this celebration really necessary though?

When I decided to take this path, I regarded these events as trivial to the pursuit of my goals. As I get closer to the reality of leaving home, I feel as though I might be missing out on something greater than I thought. Becoming an adult is one of the most important transitions in life no matter what culture you are a part of. We experience puberty, our bodies mature and there is a natural chemical shift in our brain that allows us to grow out of childhood. It happens to everyone no matter if you choose to celebrate it or not. In more traditional indigenous communities, they welcome these beautiful transitions with rites of passage.

The term “rite of passage” was first introduced by the European Ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep² who defined the practice as “moving from one social status to another” and categorized it in three parts.

1. Separation: preliminal, cleansing and purification

¹ Williams, Kelly. “Millennials -- Why are they the worst?.” TEDxSalem. 28 Apr. 2015. Lecture.

² Wing, Sobey. “Rites of Passage.” TEDxGeorgiaStrait. 28 Apr. 2015. Lecture.

2. Threshold: liminal, think of the hero's journey, test of endurance and vitality
3. Reincorporation

Separation is usually composed of cleansing and purification of the body and from the past to rid the child of childlike behaviors so that they can mature. They are also usually separated from the community so that they can reflect upon their childhood, their life, their goals and their identity. In the *Threshold*, the rituals often encourage some sort of test of endurance with support and guidance from the community. They are taught the history of their people and the traditions they practice. They are offered stories and parables to aid them in their journey through life. The child is to prove what they can contribute to the community and what they have to offer to a potential partner. Their strength is tested, and if they can survive, they can be a part of their community. They are made to feel beautiful because of the wealth of their character and they celebrate their outer beauty with elaborate adornment and decoration. When they come back from this process, they are celebrated by their families and welcomed. They are validated as beautiful, sexual adults. They are ready to find a partner and to be a teacher to younger members of society. They are also respected as individuals within the group.³

For the Okrika people of the Niger Delta in Nigeria, girls become women through a ceremony called the Iria Rite. Girls who practice this rite are called "Iriabos." Today, it costs 20 naira (10 cents USD) to undertake the privilege of this rite. For this reason, not every girl chooses to go through with it. The ceremony starts with a public examination of the girl's chest and abdomen to ensure that she is not pregnant and presumably a virgin. The girls parade through the community bare breasted, so that every member can witness them before their Separation. Some girls can afford to have their chest painted while some cannot. Today some girls choose to forgo this part of the ceremony because they do not want to expose themselves in this way. It usually depends on what their father wants for them. Following this, they bathe and are taken to a fattening room and a blacksmith attaches heavy iron bangles to their legs. They are fed rich local foods and pampered by their family. They stay in this room for three weeks, trying to gorge themselves with food. Elders of the community (usually post-menopausal women) visit them every day to teach them the traditional songs and stories of their people and of their land. On the last day of this part of the ritual, they are wrapped in skirts that accentuate their midriff, to show off their incipient fertility and wealth. They then enter a public viewing booth adorned with family emblems and photographs and are celebrated by their community with the prospect of marriage and bearing children looming over them. During this celebration, they are chased by the young men of the community led by a male performer in the role of Osokolo, a warlike spirit from the land of Ijaw. Osokolo hits the girls with a stick to separate them from their childhood love affair with water spirits. They believe that girls are enchanted by these water spirits throughout their childhood, and to marry, they must be expelled. Many times the new women are immediately married after the ceremony as they are now confirmed as women ready to bear children.⁴ In their culture, water spirits symbolize childlike lack of responsibility and something that bars girls from their own sexuality. The pinnacle of their life is their marriage and their family. The girls are proud to be recognized and supported by the community as women. Their sexuality defines their life and their culture is supportive of that.

³ Rubenstein, Arne. "Rites of Passage." TEDxByronBay. 28 Apr. 2015. Lecture.

⁴ Okome, Mojúbàolú Olúfúnké. "Girls to Women: Responses to Social & Ecological Challenges in Okrika." Ojogbon Globalization. Mojúbàolú Olúfúnké Okome, n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2015. <<http://www.mojubaolu.com/2010/07/girls-to-women-responses-to-social.html>>.

These rituals can seem very distant from what we are used to in the culture of western matriculation and maturation, they can parallel many western traditions. The Okrika Iribos are cleansed and paraded through their neighborhood to show that they are still children. Traditionally in Western culture, girls wear white at graduation to symbolize purity or virginity. They fatten to bring out their feminine attributes and to become well suited for potential motherhood. In the Okrika culture, fat women are beautiful because it is a sign of wealth. In our culture, we are constantly encouraged by mainstream media to change our appearance to fit into patriarchal society's standards. Fat women aren't accepted as beautiful and we feel the pressure to "watch our weight" as a result. We dress up for Prom and Graduation to try to look our best in the community during these pivotal rites of passage. Iriabos are taught the traditions and rituals of their ancestry to enrich their cultural understanding and to learn their place within their society. The ceremony brings them closer to the women of the community which strengthens all of their wellbeing. After the threshold period, they are put on display to show what they have achieved.⁵ They are validated and admired as sexual beings and recognized as individuals by their community. They are left empowered and their knowledge guides them through life with a strong sense of value. They are given a space to learn about topics otherwise taboo to aid them in life's journey. They are reminded that one day they will be the well-respected elders.⁶ While graduation validates us for our success in completing high school, we lack recognition and support from the community in our lives outside of school. We are encouraged to separate our education from our social life and our family life, but only to our detriment. This is a reflection of flaws in education and in our society as a whole.

Children with strong role models and guidelines in life are much more likely to succeed.⁷ When members of a community are strong, their culture is rich and full of vitality. This is important for a number of reasons. In the Delta of Nigeria, where the Okrika live, the environment is at risk as a result of oil production. Their land is ravaged for the benefit of corporations which have no compassion for them or respect for their right to property. These ceremonies encourage a deep investment in the survival and advancement of the people. When the community is strengthened, they feel ownership over their place in the world.⁸ They are empowered to fight for what is theirs to allow their culture to survive. This is also why sexuality is important to these rituals. They want to continue their beautiful cultural lineage by having a family.

From a Western viewpoint there are some problems with the patriarchal nature of rituals like the Iria Rite, as women are encouraged to work towards attention and validation from men without agency over their own desires. However, many women within the community feel joyful and empowered to have the privilege of undergoing this ceremony. The ritual offers them a space to stand out as an individual before they embark on the journey of womanhood and motherhood. They are given the guidelines and the support to thrive in their life as a part of something greater

⁵ Rubenstein, Arne. "Rites of Passage." TEDxByronBay. 28 Apr. 2015. Lecture.

⁶ Woolstein, Robyn. "Crossing the Line." TEDxMerseyside. 28 Apr. 2015. Lecture.

⁷ Cope, Edward. "Rite of Passage." TEDxColoradoSprings. 28 Apr. 2015. Lecture.

⁸ Okome, Mojúbàolú Olúfúnké. "Girls to Women: Responses to Social & Ecological Challenges in Okrika." Ojogbon Globalization. Mojúbàolú Olúfúnké Okome, n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2015.

<<http://www.mojubaolu.com/2010/07/girls-to-women-responses-to-social.html>>.

than themselves.⁹ In their culture, marriage is the pinnacle of their life and the Iria rite acts as a celebration of advancement towards this goal.

If we instilled this type of empowerment, community involvement, knowledge and support in Western Industrial culture with our youth, we would be able to grow towards more meaningful connections with each other. We would strengthen our values and develop a strong sense of belonging in the world.¹⁰ There are some parts of our culture that mirror these practices, but we need to also find a way to validate the youth as a part of something beautiful and greater than themselves so that they can live in a world rich with magic, beauty and meaningful value.

I wasn't raised in a tight community, so I have had to create it for myself. I can't continue to search for validation in structures unsupportive to me so I am creating my own support by working intensively on what I love most. When I put out work that I care about and receive any sort of acknowledgement, I feel gratified. This gratification serves to stand in for the sense of community that I feel doesn't exist for me. Instead of a graduation ceremony, I have decided to engage in my own rite of passage ceremony. I have used writing and diary entries to collect some of the most valuable lessons I have learned in life. I have assigned symbolism to some aspects of growing up to conduct a ritualistic practice as performance art. Making this art, leaving high school early and getting into college have all been very important to my sense of self worth as a test of my capability. This is my Threshold into Womanhood. When I have completed the project, I am going to share the video with my community, online and with my friends and family to showcase my passions and abilities. Then, I am going to embark on my next journey as an adult pursuing higher education towards my future as an artist.

⁹ Anderson, Melissa. "Monday's Girls by Ngozi Onwurah." Rev. of Documentary Film. *African Arts* Vol. 29, No. 4 (Autumn) 1996: 76-78. Print. published by UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center

¹⁰ Rubenstein, Arne. "Rites of Passage." TEDxByronBay. 28 Apr. 2015. Lecture.

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