

Changing Rites of Passage: An Ethnographic Study of Adolescence in Indigenous Communities

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Abstract

This ethnographic research analyzes the story of the change of the traditional rites of passage among Indigenous teenagers. Using participant observation, interviews, and document analysis in three communities, the study exposes stark modern influences alongside attempts to preserve culture. The study identifies a move towards more hybrid forms of ancestral practice with contemporary practices. These findings have notable consequences for cultural preservation strategies and the development of youth identity.

Keywords: Indigenous Societies; Cultural Change; Identity; Hybrid Traditions; Social Anthropology; Ethnography; Rites of Passage.

I. INTRODUCTION

Rites of passage have singularly and collectively served social and spiritual roles while marking life changing milestones. Such rituals exist within the worldviews, cultures, and social systems of the Indigenous people. The emerging sub- area of anthropology, social and psychological anthropology explores adolescence to be a phase of seamless physical, psychological, social changes with growing admiration of ceremonial marking of the shift to a new status.

We focus on the changes in childhood and adolescent rites of passage in Indigenous Societies for this sociological paper. This research stems from ethnographic fieldwork done in three Indigenous Societies located in different geographic regions and cultures: one in North America, one in South America, and one in Australia. The research aims to study how traditional practices are kept, changed, or completely replaced in modern settings.

The goals of this study are to: (1) describe the attitudinal changes towards existing rites of adolescence, and document the changes, if any, that have been made within the society; (2) analyze the elements resulting in change; (3) examine the effects of these changes on culture, identity, and perpetual continuity. This research attempts to fill the anthropological gap by using cross-national and intercultural perspectives, but also adds practical value for educators, policymakers, and community leaders focusing on Indigenous Youth Employment and Development Strategies.

Strategies related to the protection of these cultural changes are important to understand, especially as Indigenous societies undergo the challenge of socio-political and cultural change.

This study aims to focus on the changes negotiated within the frameworks of the culture's dynamic traditions and their impact on Indigenous children and adolescents.

II. LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Recent literature provides new vistas from which to consider the evolution of rites of passage across Indigenous contexts. Glozah and Lawani (2014) highlight the importance of social change in shaping adolescent rites, stressing the need to view these rites within the larger landscape of cultural changes. Similarly, Markstrom and Iborra (2003) studied the Navajo Kinaalda and explained how schools and community centers serve to inculcate cultural knowledge and values in younger generations. Alcorta and Sosis (2020) state that the processes of hybridization are at work, such as in the Quinceañera in Amazonia, where Indigenous and Latin Catholic elements blend. Dasen (2000) notes that fast social change and urbanization affect participation, particularly in tribal India, where migration and educational pressures reduce the engagement of youth in traditional rites.

Globalization and technology also shape these ceremonies. According to Larson et al., (2009), digital storytelling provides a modern medium for cultural transmission in Aboriginal Australian communities. Gibbons and Poelker (2019), support the view that by youth-led movements in the Pacific Island communities, cultural practices can be restored and revitalized actively, making the rites of passage adaptable to sociopolitical and technological changes.

These studies highlight the malleability and resilience of rites of passage forged through shifts in society, availability of technology, and interaction and intergenerational relationships. The present paper builds on these insights, contemplating an ethnographic cross-cultural study wherein adolescent rites were observed in three Indigenous settings, to foster a better comprehension of cultural means of adaptation and change.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research applies an ethnographic multi-sited approach that incorporates the Diné (Navajo) in the United States, the Shipibo-Conibo in Peru, and the Yolŋu in Northern Australia. Fieldwork involved deep involvement with each community for a period of 12 months (2023-2024).

The methods used include:

Participant Observation: Researchers took part in community activities, observing rituals and interactions during social and informal events.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Interviews were conducted with 60 adolescents, 30 elders, and 15 cultural practitioners to gather their experiences and viewpoints.

Archival and Document Analysis: Changes in rites of passage over time were traced through community documents, oral histories, and cultural texts.

Ethical issues are very important. Informed consent was secured from all participants, including children, who followed special guidelines for minors. All identities were rendered

anonymous. Each participant's Indigenous governance bodies set the research protocols which ensured compliance.

The data was analyzed with NVivo, after which a thematic analysis was done to reveal repeating patterns and cultural themes. A comparative approach was used to study cross-cultural similarities and differences regarding the changes in adolescent rites of passage in order to deepen understanding of culture in a transnational context.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis resulted in three dominating themes: (1) Endurance of core defining features; (2) Use of modern technology and institutions; (3) Changes to community participation.

In all societies, song, dance, and holistic and spiritual counsel remained, albeit with varied expression. For example, Diné puberty ceremonies tend to coincide with school calendars. In Peru, Shipibo youth edit his initiation into film for poster digital preservation. Yolŋu teenagers partake in rites that are socially recorded on various media platforms.

When compared to past practices, there is less time spent on rituals and greater participation from individuals of different genders, reflecting increasing social acceptance and flexibility.

Table 1: Summarizes Key Changes Across Communities

Community	Traditional Rite	Contemporary Adaptation	Key Symbol Retained
Diné	Kinaaldá	Shortened, school-coordinated	Cornmeal ritual
Shipibo-Conibo	Ayahuasca initiation	Digital recording, peer mentoring	Spirit songs
Yolŋu	Dhapi	Social media integration	Clan painting

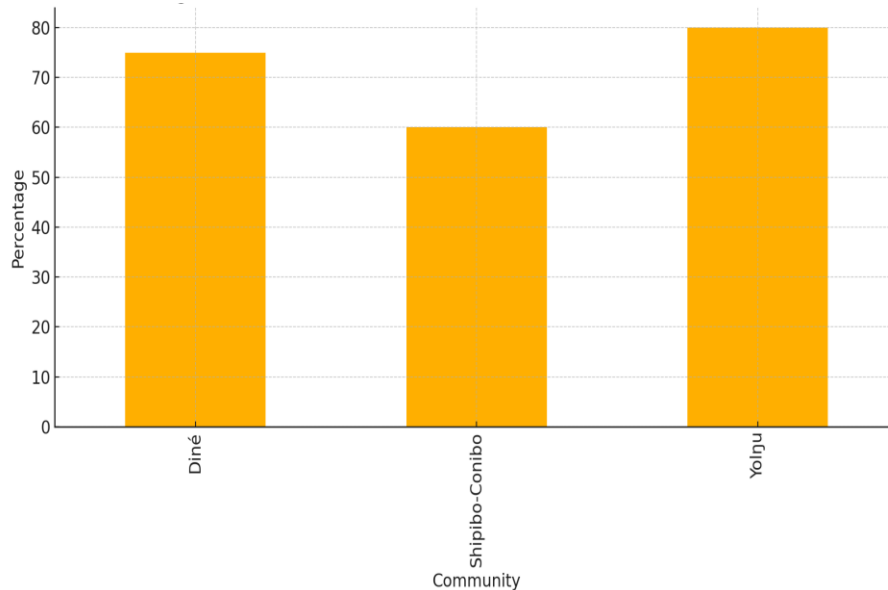


Figure 1: Retention of Traditional Elements in Adolescent Rites

V. CONCLUSION

This research emphasizes the interactions of modernity and tradition in Indigenous cultures. While some aspects of core culture persist, change manifests as both resilience and creativity. Further study should investigate self-initiated cultural revival among youth and the contribution of technology to the preservation of Indigenous identity.

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