

# Coming of Age:

## The Importance of Male Rites of Passage

by Brett & Kate McKay on November 9, 2008

### What Is a Rite of Passage

Sociologists have identified three phases that constitute a proper rite of passage: separation, transition, and re-incorporation.

**Separation:** During this phase an initiate is separated in some way from his former life. In the case of the Mandan tribe, the young man was isolated from the village in a hut for three days. In other tribes, boys' heads were shaved and they were ritually bathed and/or tattooed. In a more modern example, when a man has just enlisted in the military, he is sent away to boot camp. His former possessions are put aside, his head is shaved, and he is given a uniform to wear. During the separation phase, part of the old self is extinguished as the initiate prepares to create a new identity.

**Transition:** During this phase, the initiate is between worlds—no longer part of his old life but not yet fully inducted into his new one. He is taught the knowledge needed to become a full-fledged member of that group. And he is called upon to pass tests that show he is ready for the leap. In tribal societies, the elders would impart to the initiate what it meant to be a man and how the boy was to conduct himself once he had become one. The initiate would then participate in ritual ceremonies which often involved pain and endurance. In the case of the new soldier, he is yelled at, prodded, exercised, and disciplined to prepare him to receive a rank and title.

**Re-incorporation.** In this phase, the initiate, having passed the tests necessary and proving himself worthy, is re-introduced into his community, which recognizes and honors his new status within the group. For tribal societies, this meant a village-wide feast and celebration. The boy would now be recognized by all tribe members as a man and allowed to participate in the activities and responsibilities that status conferred. For the soldier, his boot camp experience would come to an end and both his superiors and his family would join in a ceremony to recognize his new status as a full-fledged member of the military.

During the all phases of the process, the men who have gone through the ritual themselves guide the young initiate on his journey. By controlling the rite of passage, the men decide when a boy becomes a man.