The Transition from Childhood to Adulthood: Female Puberty Rights in the Aboriginal Culture

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Note on the Author:

Finishing up her last semester in Sociology at the University of Guelph, Mikale has had a keen interest in social justice issues involving people in First Nation communities. Growing up in Northwestern Ontario, it has motivated her to research and discuss the First Nation issues throughout her studies. Mikale plans to work in the field of social services and working with youth. She currently lives in Guelph with her husband and their dog Ember.

The Transition from Childhood to Adulthood

“Celebrate that young girl who just became a woman! That’s a gift we are given!”¹ In a quote from A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood (2016), Edna Manitowabi shares a reminder of why puberty has been celebrated in Aboriginal culture throughout history. Stories passed down through generations within North American Aboriginal cultures brings the past to the present. Traditions have been also culturally significant because many Aboriginal peoples believed in the importance of rituals that surrounded each stage of life. For this reason, many Aboriginal cultures today still practice the traditions and beliefs that hold significant value to the past and present generations. This essay will explore and discuss the cultural significance, spiritual influences and educational impacts that aboriginal girls are exposed to during their transition from childhood to womanhood. Evidence that will support this paper will be discussed through the many cultural beliefs and rituals of different Aboriginal cultures. The cultural beliefs and rituals of many different Aboriginal cultures throughout North America are important to discuss as they provide a way of shaping a woman’s identity and creates wholeness within the community. This paper will discuss reasons why shaping a woman’s identity in the Aboriginal culture can be practiced in various ways which include spirituality, rituals and beliefs.

The people of the Aboriginal culture had many beliefs and customs that were important in every aspect of their lives, including

during different life stages. In particular, girls were encouraged to
develop and practice many life skills that would be useful in the future.
The most celebrated life stage in any Aboriginal child’s life was the
coming of age celebration. Puberty, a more modernized term, was
identified as being a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. In
order to understand how sacred puberty is to the Aboriginal culture, it is
important to understand what puberty is and how it plays an important
role in a girl’s life. Puberty typically occurs between the ages of 8 and 13
and consists of both emotional and physiological changes.² Hormonal
secretions from the pituitary gland activate the sex organs, allowing for
procreation³. Kim Anderson, the author of Life Stages and Native Women
(2011), discussed many significant areas in which the Aboriginal culture
was proud of their womanhood and celebrated through different life
stages. Before puberty the child was still pure and innocent.⁴ The child
still had the freedom to rely on the parent and roam free without
responsibility. It was not until puberty that girls became prepared for
what was to come.

Carol A. Markstrom identifies in her book, Empowerment of
North American Indian Girls, several iconic beliefs that are typically
found in the Aboriginal culture. Markstrom acknowledges the ideas of
these beliefs through her own research within several different cultures
of the Aboriginal people. She shows how menstruation is considered
powerful in Aboriginal culture, especially during the first menstrual
cycle.⁵ During the first menstruation, girls were believed to be so
powerful that they would disrupt the energy from any male, which could
potentially be strong enough to kill.⁶ This power shows just how
important the women were in this culture, and how sacred puberty was.
Women were respected by those living in the community or tribe and
were considered leaders.⁷ Coming of age ceremonies signified the
importance of this leadership because it emphasized women’s ability to
bear children. Women give birth to the future generations of the

² Louise Greenspan and Juilanna Deardorff, The New Puberty, (New York. Rodale,
2014): xii.
⁴ Kim Anderson, Life Stages and Native Women. (Winnipeg. University of Manitoba
Press. 2011), 85.
⁵ Carol A Markstrom. Empowerment of North American Indian Girls. (United States.
University of Nebraska Press. 2008), 72.
⁶ Anderson, Life Stages, 86.
⁷ TEDx Talks. How do we stop aboriginal women from disappearing? Beverly Jacobs.
(YouTube. 17:44. December 8, 2014.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NtkmnJ2Q3w&app=desktop
Aboriginal culture, so they take pride in knowing that they are able to pass down their beliefs to their children. The people of the aboriginal culture depend on beliefs such as spirituality. The beliefs within each Aboriginal culture vary, depending on where they are located. The following few paragraphs will discuss the differences in the cultures like the Navajo, Ojibwe and the Algonquin people’s spiritual beliefs. For example, cosmological constructions, which can include origin stories, are instructive to the girl going through puberty. Many of the spiritual and cultural traditions of the Aboriginal people are centralised around supernatural beings. As Markstrom mentions, women are sometimes given alternate names for their feminine cosmologies; girls were sometimes given a name representing a female spiritual figure. These supernatural beings were thought to have some type of purpose which could include an identity of nurture or other forms of characteristics that involve the nature of a woman's responsibilities in the culture. An example that Markstrom uses from the Navajos culture is the spirit called the Changing Woman who is filled with nurturance and creativity. Girls were to dress like the Changing Woman as part of the traditional culture and four different components were incorporated into this dressing. The first was the darkness that was wrapped around the girl; this darkness was usually black and a sign of hope. In Molden in the Image of Changing Women, a woman by the name of Sunny Dooley explained that black was their colour of the north because it signifies the hope a woman represents through bearing children. Being able to have children was a way in providing hope to the community. Furthermore, it was with this hope that the Navajo women could be strong in the leadership of the community. Next was deer skin, which was offered as leggings, then rainbow which was the sash that was wrapped around the waist. Lastly, a dark cloud was represented by a girl's hair. Schwartz describes the girls who are dressed like the Changing Woman as sacred and beautiful. Jewelry was added to the outfit. This allowed for family members to offer them as blessings so the girl would be “blessed and

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8 Markstrom, *Empowerment of North*, 73.
9 Ibid, 73
10 Ibid, 73
13 Ibid, 183 (See Appendix)
This dressing was significantly important to the community and beliefs of the Navajo people because it emulated how the Changing Woman dressed during her own coming of age ceremony. The example of the Changing Woman illustrates how the Aboriginal people were focused on spiritual stories and beliefs.

The spiritual rituals associated with the girls’ coming of age have been important to Aboriginal cultures because they create a sense of solidarity for the community. In the Ojibwa culture, fasting had an important role to play in the ceremonial aspects of puberty. Christopher Vecsey (1983) explains that everyone in the Ojibwa culture had to find their own identity. Fasting in the Ojibwa culture was about visions and seeking pity. Fasting typically lasted between the span of one to ten days and took place during the onset of menstruation which focused on isolation from boys and men. It was a time to meditate on their future as a woman, reflecting on the responsibilities that they will take on. Parents would provide the child with little food and sent them away to a small hut in the forest. Pity was an important aspect of the visions because it would invoke the spirits and could help obtain important relations with certain spirits; the visions cast would be useful in their future. Not only does the spiritual realm affect the girl going through puberty, but those who support her in the community hold value and significance.

The Aboriginal people took the time to learn about their culture through the coming of age ceremonies. The people of the Algonquian culture would use puberty as a time to learn, experience spiritual enlightenment, and to build commitment to their culture. The Algonquians painting a girl’s face would hold important significance in this life stage; the girls would have their faces painted with charcoal to signify that they were in seclusion. Markstrom highlighted the importance of the rituals, acknowledging the fact that the coming of age ceremonies were only intended for girls who have experienced their first menstruation. The values placed on the coming of age rituals are only recognizable if a girl is actually going through puberty. Those who did not participate in the rituals of puberty or were against the idea were said

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14 Ibid, 182
17 Vecsey, *Traditional Ojibwa Religion*, 126.
18 Ibid, 87
19 Ibid, 86
to bring shame, sickness and even death to their family. Participating in the rituals brings longevity in a girl's life and reassures the community that the girl is abiding by their cultural beliefs. The many rituals that some cultures go through can include many endurance activities and tests that can predict the course of her life. The evidence supported so far has demonstrated how influential puberty is on a girl's life.

Some aboriginal cultures believe that endurance is important in the transition from being a girl into womanhood. Tests and endurance in these cultures represent the strength a girl will carry into womanhood. The Apache tribe in the southern United States holds a coming of age ceremony every Fourth of July; this four day long ceremony involves girls going through menarche participating in grueling tasks that prepare them for the trials for womanhood. On the fourth and final day, the endurance task consists of a dance that lasts throughout the night with no sleep and only a small amount of food. The short film, “Apache Girl’s Rite of Passage,” provides visual evidence of what the rites of passage ceremonies consist of. Through the demonstration of dance, the girl is perceived as strong which reinforces how powerful puberty can be. The performance of rituals ensures the cause of the transition into adulthood and influences every aspect of her life. Usually when girls go through coming of age ceremonies, they are mentored by older woman of the community. Depending on what the culture's beliefs were, teachings were also very important during the time of fasting and seclusion as it would allow the girl to focus on what she was being taught without being distracted. Learning about the culture and the stories being shared was highly important to prepare the girl for what was to come as they went from childhood to womanhood. During the seclusion period, grandmothers, and elders would teach the girl the importance of their culture through stories, and about the responsibilities they would eventually take on. Mentorship of an elder would consist of not only instruction through teaching, but sometimes physical manipulation. Physical manipulation would consist of massaging the girl to strengthen the physical and psychological traits of the mentor which would be then passed down to the pubescent girl. Along with the endurance and testing of a girl’s strength, behaviour is also an aspect of some cultural rituals that is believed to determine a girl’s future.

21 Ibid, 74.
22 Ibid, 75
23 Apache Girl’s Rite of Passage. (National Geographic: Date Unknown)
http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/us-apachegirl-pp
24 Anderson, Life Stages, 87.
25 Markstrom, Empowerment of North. 76.
In some Aboriginal cultures, it was believed that behaviour during the coming of age ceremonies determined the fate of a girl’s future. Due to her empowered state, a girl's behaviour at puberty will have an impact on her future through behaviour, welfare of others, and transition into the spiritual realm. Many cultures believed that a girl’s behaviour could also affect the way they bring up their future children. The reason why certain rituals exist is because there are certain taboos that have to be followed in order to complete the coming of age ceremonies. Markstrom makes note that the many taboos were deemed necessary because it was believed that it would bring good health, wealth and personality. Another example of power behind the pubescent girl and her first menstrual cycle is the belief that girls were not allowed to touch themselves during puberty. This belief was so powerful that girls were even given a scratching stick because if they touched a part of their skin, it would leave scars. After the seclusion and fasting, coming of age ceremonies included the community as a whole to celebrate the rites of passage.

As Markstrom (2008) also points out, the empowered state of a girl going through puberty was believed to be capable of influencing the welfare of others. In the short National Geographic video mentioned earlier, the rite of passage ceremony for the young girls, impacted the whole community of the Apache tribe. It was an event that involved many people from the tribe to come and watch the girls take part in their coming of age ceremony. The celebration is not just for the girl alone, but for her relatives, friends and other members of her culture. The coming of age ceremony is also a statement to a girl's culture and those around her that she is vowing to be a blessing to others. Another significant part of the Apache cultural ceremony is the incorporation of blessings that are given to the girl. The girl is blessed with sacred yellow pollen which is given to her by both the men and women of the community. A girl can also bless those who come see her. Those who visit the girl come to bless her or be blessed and healed by her.

26 Ibid, 77.
27 Ibid, 77.
28 Anderson, Life Stages, 86.
29 Markstrom, Empowerment of North, 78.
31 Markstrom, Empowerment of North, 79.
32 Betty L Creamer. Aching to Age: The Adolescent Need for Rites of Passage to Adulthood. (USA: Dissertation.com, 1999), 47.
33 Creamer, Aching to Age, 47.
Apache ritual reiterates the powerful role a girl going through puberty has in defining her community. Before colonialism and the modern age, puberty was an important aspect in the Aboriginal culture as it provided a way to distinguish between stages of life and provided a sense of empowerment in the communities. The word empowerment is a way to give women a sense of confidence and to hold value to their own culture. Living in remote communities, in an area where everyone comes together to celebrate puberty, shows respect by not only everyone, but by males as well. It was clear that Aboriginal communities had a passion for celebrating rites of passage. By the early nineteenth century, a new wave of regulations were introduced into Canada through educational institutions called residential schools.

The coming of age event is not only a transition from childhood to adulthood but also a transition into the spiritual realm. The spiritual aspect in the Aboriginal culture connects the past to the present, where ancestors believed the same type of traditions. Coming of age respected those who lived in the ages before where puberty was still seen as powerful and filled with so much importance. It was powerful because it gave life and associated the powers with the universe that linked the rest of the community together. It was important to the people of the Aboriginal cultures because it filled the people with certain aspects of hope and faith. It celebrated a significant event in a girl's life that should be presented as a positive experience. The parents, grandparents and other family members wish upon their daughter to go through the coming of age ceremonies as a sign of respect and following tradition. It was mentioned by a mom of the girl who was taking part in the coming of age ceremony featured in the National Geographic video that she knew that it was what she wanted for her daughter. The sacredness of puberty and its meaning have connections to all aspects of the community, spiritual realm and the past.

When the traditional rites of passage ceremonies were finished, girls started practicing what they had learned. Puberty was not something that happened in one day, as Greenspan and Deardorff (2014) explained. With puberty comes a new understanding of sexuality. Most

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often, Aboriginal girls were no longer allowed to interact and play with boys the way they did before they hit puberty.\textsuperscript{37} The social type of freedom girls had when they were younger were more severe when it came to boys. Sometimes parents and grandparents kept a close watch over their daughter in case there were any interactions with a boy.\textsuperscript{38} Furthermore, unplanned pregnancy was not something that was accepted in Aboriginal cultures, especially in the 1950’s.\textsuperscript{39} The evidence of how powerful puberty is in the Aboriginal culture supports how generations have endured the same traditions. Around the 1880’s, a lot of the cultural ceremonies were put on hold for many decades as power and puberty rights of young Aboriginal girls were altered by the impact of the residential school.

In the late nineteenth century, residential schools began to appear throughout Canada. These schools were supposed to be a way for the Aboriginal people to become civilized with the Canadian culture.\textsuperscript{40} Children were no longer able to use their native language or acknowledge their aboriginal rights. Puberty was another right that was mistreated and negatively impacted the way girls viewed this sacred life event. As girls were brought to the residential schools, there were many issues that would discourage and disrupt the cultural beliefs and ultimately destroy the womanhood that the ancestors of the past once had. These issues included the mistreatment and abuse that girls endured. Furthermore, the issues also included not being able to practice their beliefs and traditions while at school. The residential schools wanted to take the traditional aboriginal child and teach them the ways of the white person. Taking these traditions away meant that puberty was no longer an important aspect to the aboriginal culture. Attachment is very important and being taken away from their families were emotional and stressful for the children. The parents were no longer able to educate their daughters on the beliefs of the culture and were forced to send them off to a school they knew little about. Being taken away from families and communities was hard enough, anything else would be altering to the status, especially of the Aboriginal girl. As soon as the girls arrived to the school, they were forced to cut their hair. The hair cutting was a sign that the girls were losing their identity of their femininity in the native

\textsuperscript{37} Anderson, \textit{Life Stages}, 118.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 118.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 118.
The long, vibrant black hair that once had significance in many of their cultural ceremonies, which included puberty rights and a loss of personal identity. They were no longer able to express their rights as a woman in the Aboriginal culture, but also not able to express their feelings. Dressing the same, and looking the same was not something that most Aboriginal girls were used to. Girls were used to being their own person, and being identified by their Aboriginal given name. Being in the residential schools meant they would miss out on the most important part of their lives, ceremonies that celebrated the rites of passage. Once a significant part of history for the Aboriginal women, this ceremony was no longer important. The impact that the residential schools had on the identity of girls altered the way they viewed their bodies.

Girls that experienced puberty in the residential school sometimes had no idea that they were going through puberty. Some girls were even terrified because they thought that they were sick or something was wrong with them. Menstruation was viewed as a shameful, dirty act of sin. A Cree woman in Kim Anderson’s book, recalls a time when she started menstruating for the first time. She thought that she was dying and had to learn from other girls at the school what was happening. The treatment that occurred in the residential schools was senseless and the girls were robbed of their puberty rites. The fact that they were not given the proper sanitary items or restricted from using them is an unacceptable act for girls in general. A survivor from a residential school recalls her time in the 1950’s when she was refused sanitary towels. “The nun in charge of the girls side decided that girls would no longer be provided with sanitary towels at night.” Being denied sanitary items for a biological function that affects all women is not an easy thing to grasp. Not understanding what they were going through was degrading to their puberty rights. Puberty at one time that was supposed to be sacred and praised was now degraded and shamed upon. Moreover, girls now feared men as untrustworthy, and found themselves unvalued by the male figure. With all the punishment going on in the residential schools, girls were no longer viewed as powerful, but deemed ‘troublesome’.

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44 Ibid, 52.
46 Ibid, 54.
status of being Aboriginal was wrong, and there was no longer a sense of entitlement of being proud of their culture. The status of being Aboriginal was sacred, and just like educational institutions, students identify themselves under a social status.

Educational institutions play a huge role in any person’s life. High school particularly is a place for identity, maturation, and social status to be explored. Changes are made not only to the social groups and status, but also throughout every part of the body. Murray Milner makes a point in his book *Freaks, Geeks and Cool Kids*, that throughout all the social changes in high school there is physical and psychological changes that come about.\(^{47}\) Although high school is about being educated, it is also about the status of the youth. Where do the youth fit in? Where do they belong? Puberty is a major part of these questions being asked. Milner makes some good points about how status is related to all areas of maturation. He acknowledges the fact that the nature of status is a resource.\(^{48}\) Status is not something that can be taken away, but strengthened. The rituals surrounding puberty in Aboriginal cultures are all about status. Identifying status through coming of age ceremonies serves as a way to remind girls of who they are and that taking part in the ceremonies is sacred to their culture. Although this was altered by the residential schools, the status of the Aboriginal culture is still prominent on the reservations throughout North America today. The beliefs and rituals discussed throughout this essay are still a huge part of many Aboriginal communities and puberty rituals are still taking place.

After researching the cultural significance of puberty for Aboriginal girls, this paper proves that this life stage is much more than just a change in a woman’s body, it is the transition from a young girl to a woman. It is a power behind Aboriginal gendered beliefs and traditions. The teachings and blessings girls receive throughout the rites of passage ceremonies prepare them for what they are going to become. Gendered identities before puberty are not specified or clearly laid out. The identity of a young child is not questioned until puberty hits.\(^{49}\) Referencing back to the horrifying events of the residential schools, it is an unfortunate example of how demeaning puberty was made out to be. The status of being aboriginal holds significant value to those who still believe in the historical traditions. It is important to recognize that puberty in any culture is special and unique. By identifying and exploring Aboriginal culture’s understanding of female puberty, one can

\(^{48}\) Milner, *Freaks, Geeks*, 89.
see the importance of encouraging and empowering girls everywhere to accept puberty as not something to be ashamed of, but to be praised and celebrated.
Appendix
Bibliography


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