

Initiation Rites Of Aboriginal People

Introduction

“The Australians, have elaborated a magnificent religious system, though their technology remained elementary.¹” This idea is interesting to think about because we’re used to think today that whenever technology is developed, human being should be too but the spiritual development of human being has nothing to do with his technological development. One of the reasons why we despise the ancient societies is that they didn’t have a technology we have now. But they had complex metaphysical ideas about human being and cosmos, which we do not pay attention so much. Even they have been expressed in simple ways. We shouldn’t fall into the mistake of reductionism. Their sacred history cannot be demythologised in order to reduce it to a “projection” of psychological, sociological or economic conditions, says Eliade.

With the latest researches and the auto-criticism of western scholars, the sacred world of ancient societies is put in the place they deserve.

¹ Eliade Mircea, *Australian Religions*, London, 1973, p.xvi.

As Eliade mentions, some scholars pointed out that archaic mind was not stagnant, not mentally retarded.

“We can not judge all human spiritual works with a modern western scale of values.²” We need to understand others by deserting our prejudices and opinions.

Another thing we cannot see in the ancient societies that they weren't interested in a linear, historical time but a sacred history of their origins. This difference also made western scholars to despise these cultures.

Rites are some kind of establishing contact with Supernatural Beings and of immersing oneself in the sacred time of the “Dreaming”. Rites are repetition of events that took place in the beginning of time, an imitation of models revealed to the tribe by supernatural Beings. On the other hand, every individual is fundamentally a “spiritual” being. His most sacred self is a part of that sacred world he is periodically trying to recontact.³ The Australian people have a wide and deep initiation rites related with the stages of life and medicine man.

The mythical language looked like a primitive way of understanding the nature and answering to the metaphysical questions in the west but this way has been used for centuries to tell about the higher truths of man even in the latest religions. As we know to interpret myths properly, we're going to give the deserved value to the myths of all ancient societies.

There are even differences among the Australian groups in their religious activities, rites and myths, the similarities are much more. Every religious act is the repetition of an event in their sacred history. They keep up their relations with their ancestors and supernatural beings through these religious activities.

Male Initiation

Initiation rites related to stages of life are common characteristics of ancient societies. The different stages of life mean a difference in the consciousness and role of the member of society. The member must be instructed for his new role and new experiences of life. Initiation rites reveal to individual his real identity so it gives back to young Australian his original, spiritual identity.

² Eliade Mircea, *Australian Religions*, London, 1973, p.xxi.

³ Eliade Mircea, *Australian Religions*, London, 1973, p.84.

The Australian initiation ceremonies accomplish a gradual introduction of the novice into the sacred world. It is a transition to another identity, to another role so the novice has to leave his old world, old habits and old life style.

The ritual is performed in a "sacred ground". This is related with the mythical events, a reacting of them through dances, chants, pantomimes etc. The sacred ground represents an image of the world in its beginning times. According to R.H. Mathews, two circular enclosures are prepared. The larger, about 21metres in diameter, had a pole 2.7 metre high in the centre with a bunch of emu's feathers tied on the top. In the smaller circle, two young trees were fixed in the ground with their roots in the air. Two circles were connected by a path. On either side of the path a number of figures are drawn on the ground or modelled in clay. The largest, which is 4.5 meters in height, is that of the Supreme Being, Baiami. A couple represents the mythical Ancestors, and a group of twelve human figures stands for the young men who were with Baiami in his first camp. Other figures represent animals and nests. The novices are not allowed to look at these images, which will be destroyed at the end of the ceremony.⁴

We notice the usage of sacred circle that represent cosmos in this rite. The outer circle looks like the symbol of ideal universe that is in the mind of Creator. The inner circle then is the symbol of manifested universe. The incomprehensible root of everything is represented by a pole in the centre of outer circle. The trees with the roots up in the inner circle are the Trees of Life, which has its roots in the heaven. The connection of ideal world and manifested World is the process of creation that is symbolized by the path that connects outer circle with the inner circle. The Supreme Being, Baiami is as the Creator Power. The Ancestors has a significant meaning in Aboriginal people because they are the bridge between them and Supreme Beings. And first of these Ancestors, first human beings are represented by a couple.

That is a reactualisation of Baiame's presence and creative works, and hence a regeneration of the world.

In the light of writings of some scholars as Eliade (Birth and Rebirth), Elkin (The Australian Aborigines), R.M. and C.H. Berndt (The World of the First Australians), F. Speiser (Über Initiation in Australien und Newguinea), R. Piddington (Karadjeri Initiation), N.B. Tindale (Initiation among the Pitjandjara Natives of the Mann and Tomkinson Ranges in South Australia), E.A. Worms (Initiationsfeiern einiger in Nord-Westaustralien), Warner (A Black

⁴ Eliade Mircea, *Australian Religions*, London, 1973, p.85.

Civilisation); we can see following common items in the initiation rites of many groups in Australia;

- The segregation of the novices in a special isolated camp or in the bush.
- The instruction received from their tutors.
- Certain bodily operations.
- The disclosure of ritual objects and the acceptance of novices at some secret ceremonies.
- The final washing that is, cleaning off of all traces of the sacred world and the ceremonial return to ordinary life.

A youth does not learn all the answers at his first initiation. He continues to learn about sacred ritual and myth through his life, and he may be middle-aged or relatively old before the final revelations are made to him.⁵ That is like the long journey of life through which we experience different aspects of our existence and life.

Death and Rebirth: The symbolism of death and resurrection is dominant characteristic of initiation rites. The novice dies of the profane world of childhood and irresponsible innocence and the world of ignorance and prepares himself for rebirth as a spiritual being.⁶

The trials and conduct during the seclusion period, and their bodily operations are the signs of this ritual death, death of their habits of previous lives and roles. The silence of novice is another sign of this death in the segregation stage, he is not permitted to talk, only sounds and signs. To be able to give birth to a new stage of consciousness and a new role, it is necessary to depart the previous one. Nature follows the same routine as the cycles of life and death.

Circumcision is probably the most important rite of ritual killing. That is also a trial of his braveness. He leaves one of the pieces of his body back as a symbol of his previous life. The bleeding is also a frequently seen element of initiations that means to have the courage to face with the cause of life that is the cause of death as well.

⁵ Ronald M. and Berndt C.H., *The World of First Australians*, Canberra, 1999, p.168.

⁶ Eliade Mircea, *Australian Religions*, London, 1973, p.88.

In some cases, the killing of novice is represented as a swallowing by a gigantic monstrous Being, usually a Snake⁷. That is why some unknown and scarring noises are heard by novices even they don't see anything during the seclusion period.

Djungawon (circumcision) : This is an age-grading initiation ceremony that begins with the call of the sacred trumpet (yurlunggur) over the uncircumcised novices. This is the circumcision ceremony of young men. It is based on the myth of Wauwalak sisters. Novices react the myth of Wauwalak Sisters who were swallowed by the Great Snake Yurlunggur. Some other songs are chanted and pantomimes are enacted from the different parts of the myth. The meanings of animal dances are explained to novices by old men. Each initiate has to blow the sacred trumpet. There are some codes novices have to promise to obey⁸;

- Respect your fathers and mothers,
- Never tell lies,
- Not to run after women who do not belong to you,
- Not to disclose any of the secrets of men to the women, men who belong to a lower division of the tribe or uninitiated boys.

These can be seen as the basic rules to keep a society in peace. If the new adults don't have this basic level of morality, it would be against the harmony of the society to give an adult role to the young men.

Female Initiation

The initiation of girls is simpler than boys have. There is again a seclusion period, a departing from the old life of childhood. In the period of seclusion, they are instructed about songs, specific myths, the behaviours and duties of married women. After the ritual bath they have at the end of seclusion, they come back to society and are accepted as adults.

Women have their own secret ceremonies. It is also a part of initiation of females to be instructed for these ceremonies.

⁷ Eliade Mircea, *Australian Religions*, London, 1973, p.91.

⁸ Eliade Mircea, *Australian Religions*, London, 1973, p.105.

The mythical female roles in the myths are the ideals of women. They are considered as the inventors of the rituals and the original owners of the sacred objects⁹.

The other pole of the society, the women must be ready to carry the responsibilities of their new role for the survival of the society. The society raises on these two basic roles of adult man and women.

The initiation rites of both genders are a key for the future of the society and for the preservation of traditions, which come from ancestors.

Initiation of Medicine Man

Some men with some gifts, abilities have a different destiny than the other men of tribe. These are medicine men, doctors or shamans or Men of High Degree as Elkin called. They have a central role in the life of tribe. They cure the sick, defend the community against black magic, discover those responsible for premature deaths and perform important functions in the initiation ceremonies¹⁰.

Medicine man has the role to contact with the Supernatural Beings, is a kind of mediator between his people and the beings of divine world and other dimensions. A person can inherit the role of medicine or elected to be or apply to be.

Quartz crystals play a great role in the initiation of medicine man. After the novice assimilates quartz crystal, which symbolizes the solidification of light, a novice can see the "spirits" which are invisible to others.

The celestial ascension to Supernatural Being Baiame¹¹ is another common character of initiation of medicine man. Baiame initiates them with his powers. He teaches them to fly and to use quartz crystals. Baiame is the ancestor of medicine man who gives this power to the new novices if they deserve.

It's very little known about the actual initiation because even the other members of tribe know little about this unless he is a medicine man, researchers say.

⁹ Eliade Mircea, *Australian Religions*, London, 1973, p.121.

¹⁰ Eliade Mircea, *Australian Religions*, London, 1973, p.129.

¹¹ The Great Spirit, his wife Birrahgnooloo is described as Mother of All.

The essential elements of the initiation scenario are; the bright cave, the miraculous feathers, the flight, the quartz crystals and the magic rope.¹² The cave is bright because it is covered with quartz crystals, which reminds the starry sky.

The wings and feathers symbolize the ascension to sky and flying. It is interesting to see how birds and butterflies are identified with soul in the western and eastern symbolisms, as feather is a sign of spiritual power in the religion of Aboriginals like the Indians of Northern America.

The voyage of novice to heaven and underground world is another common point of initiation process among the tribes of Australia. The medicine man travels and contacts with the beings of three worlds of existence that are underground, the world of man and the heaven.

Sometimes, an initiation through fire is completed by a second ordeal “passing through the water”¹³. He is thrown into a sacred water hole. These trials are related with the elements of nature which human being has too. The similarities with the initiations of other traditions are worth to investigate.

The new medicine man cannot practice his art for a year. He has to learn the secrets of the profession from other medicine men. Even through the initiation he is ready to be a medicine man, there needs a period of technical instruction too.

After becoming a medicine man, he can cure the sick because he can see the magical objects that caused sickness, and he can eliminate or annihilate them¹⁴. He can see the other causes of sickness rather than the physical causes because he can see the world of spirits. He can be rainmaker because he is able to go to heaven or summon the clouds¹⁵. He establishes the relation of his tribe with nature too because he can see the rules governing the nature.

Only the medicine man succeeds in surpassing his human condition, and consequently he is able to behave like the spiritual beings, or in other words, to partake of the modality of a Spiritual Being¹⁶. That is why they have a role in leading of his society in the world and in the other one as well. It's not then only the physical health of the society they care.

¹² Eliade Mircea, *Australian Religions*, London, 1973, p.137.

¹³ Eliade Mircea, *Australian Religions*, London, 1973, p.143.

¹⁴ Eliade Mircea, *Australian Religions*, London, 1973, p.157.

¹⁵ Eliade Mircea, *Australian Religions*, London, 1973, p.157.

¹⁶ Eliade Mircea, *Australian Religions*, London, 1973, p.129.

Conclusion

The initiation ceremonies are as important for the spiritual life of the community as they are for the mystical metamorphosis of the novices who are the future of society. They are the means of transforming novices to adults.

Initiation is a progressive in most of Australian religions as life is. Every member of society will learn all the knowledge during the stages of his life when that knowledge is needed..

Initiated ones learn more about their place in the society, in relation with nature and with Supernatural Beings. They discover that the world has a hidden meaning that cannot be grasped by ordinary intellectual operations but must be revealed and explained by the older men. This is the power of tradition, the power of heritage that is the wisdom society has. This wisdom is the most reliable and valuable treasure of the society. It was taught by Supernatural Beings in the Dreamtime and is transferred from generations to generations for the sake of society. This wisdom is the one that takes us from our primitive animal world to the heights of human being.

Today as the members of modern societies, we must ask ourselves how far we are from the wisdom that teaches how to live in harmony with nature and ourselves. The problems of modern societies and its members and the problems with nature will give the answer.

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