

Becoming an Adult: Australian Rites of Passage as Practised at the Present Time

Melissa Saunders

ABSTRACT: Australian Rites of Passage have recently become a complex matter, one of the issues of social independence, somewhat provocative display, escape from the family, show of independence—and a touching vulnerability, this much perpetuated by much wider difficult financial circumstances in recent years.

This essay focuses on the folklore of Australian rites of passage or on the ‘life-cycle customs’ that mark the passage from youth to adulthood and how they are performed in society today.¹ Some of the practices, both public and private, have a long history and indeed this is part of the appeal in that they contribute to a sense of continuity with one’s cultural forebearers, either from the family or within one’s (historical) community. There are a wide variety of behavioural practices which mark the potential transition to Adulthood but they can all be described as ‘complex combinations of belief, expression, action and socializing’ that carry symbolic importance to the individual participants.²

Arnold van Gennep first coined the term ‘rite of passage’ in 1909, and his simple three-stage model is still very relevant today. The first stage, ‘separation’, is where one is removed from previous norms allowing for the next stage of ‘transition’ where the young person would try out new behaviours and experience a time of liminality or being ‘between positions’.³ Finally, during ‘reincorporation’, the person (re)enters the group with a new or changed status and this stage is often marked by ceremony or at least acknowledged in some form.⁴ Initiation practices in the areas of sport, school, work, the military, or indeed any organization can be understood through this model insofar as it describes how an individual achieves new status or becomes an accepted member of any group. This model also seeks to explain why young people must separate

¹ *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*, ed. by G. Davey and G. Seal (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 92.

² *Ibid.*

³ Winchester, H., P. McGuirk, and K. Everett, ‘Schoolies Week as a Rite of Passage: A Study of Celebration and Control’, in *Embodied Geographies: Spaces, Bodies and Rites of Passage*, ed. by E. K. Teather (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 60.

⁴ Salamone, F., *Encyclopedia of Religious Rites, Rituals and Festivals* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 311.

from previous environments and behaviours in order for developmental growth to occur. Leaving one's 'home' is often pivotal to this growth, yet no single event or practice defines the achievement of adult status in current Australian society.

A growing trend in recent years for Australian youth has been the participation in international travel as a rite of passage. Australians have always been prolific travellers, but this is increasingly being connected with attaining a certain age or stage in a young person's life, such as turning 21 or finishing the Higher School Certificate. Some Australian parents are funding such trips for their children in lieu of an elaborate 18th or 21st party. The traditional 21st celebration complete with speeches, gifts, communal eating, a large consumption of alcohol and a 'key' to the front door (or city even) is still deemed more important by many families, despite the official age of adulthood being 18.⁵ The choice of place of venue for both 18th and 21st birthday celebrations has been restricted in recent years, due to a growing ban imposed by publicans and clubs concerned with under-age drinking, violence and vandalism that often surround these events.⁶ Therefore, smaller, home-based parties are becoming the norm for many families, but this is also fraught with danger as word travels quickly often resulting in 'gate crashing' with large numbers of uninvited guests (including the police!). One family reported that immediately after a modest 21st celebration, their only son chose to set out on an extensive working holiday around the world lasting more than one year. This can be seen as a 'coming of age' trip where the youth, through engaging in the experiences of adult work and travel alone and unchaperoned, embarks on a journey of self-discovery resulting in maturity and full membership as an adult on their return. The length of the trip is not altogether important, rather, it is the resulting independence and self-reliance that such an independent trip requires that creates meaning. Due to economic changes in Australia, few young people can afford to move out of the parental home at the traditional adult age of 18, and, therefore, new independent experiences are sought out to fulfil this developmental task.

Moving away to a university or college is also one way to mark the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Although still monitored to some degree, the student living away from home is also challenged with new roles and responsibilities. One area of folkloric research that has been lacking in the literature is that of university college initiations as a practical rite of passage. These are often secretive and specific to the culture and ethos of the college they are performed within. Each residential college has its own folkloric initiation practices quite separate

⁵ Seal, G., *The Hidden Culture: Folklore in Australian Society*, 2nd edn (Perth: Black Swan Press, 1998), p. 80.

⁶ Personal communication, John Pugh, publican of Colliery Inn Pub, 1 May 2010.

from the formal activities organised by the institution such as ‘O’ Week, an orientation schedule of social and familiarization events occurring the week prior to the commencement of first semester. At Warrane College, an all male residential Catholic college at UNSW, there is the yearly practice of the ‘Freshman Log Adventure’ where senior students wake up all the freshman on a particular floor without notice and drop them off with a lounge in Cronulla (a coastal suburb 20 minutes away) and must take pictures of various situations and people as they make their way back. The list of ‘tasks’ included taking pictures of:

- the lounge and students in front of ‘Maccas’ (McDonalds Restaurant)
- as many people as you can humanly fit on the lounge
- the largest people you can find (actual word was ‘fat’)
- the oldest people you can find sitting on the lounge
- a homeless person on the lounge
- the lounge in front of a city fountain.

These tasks were to be done whilst carrying the lounge with them using the train as transport where possible. The informant (current 4th year resident) could not say when this practice started, but all the senior students had participated as freshman. This folkloric rite of passage provides the ‘pledges’ an opportunity to work together with shared challenges, humour and humiliation as well, a necessary ‘paying of dues’ for inclusion within the group.⁷

Other groups enacted their own initiation such as taking freshman students to an off-campus backyard where they invented the game, ‘goon-a-fortune’.⁸ They hung a wine cask on a ‘hills hoist’ and spun it around and whoever was standing under it had to drink. The informant did report that the police had to be called due to noise as this activity went on for several hours in the middle of the night. Weekly binge drinking at the pub nearby was also practiced, although not for any purpose other than to engage in adult social situations. These types of activities, especially in an all male environment, serve to prove allegiance to mates but also test individual endurance and tolerance. Another term, the ‘hazing’ ritual, is also applicable in situations where one must suffer subordination, humiliation or pain by those in power to prove oneself to the group.⁹

Hazing practices often occur in male dominated areas such as sporting groups or the military and are carried out on new recruits as a form of

⁷ Salamone, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

⁸ Personal communication, Mark K., 16 May 2010.

⁹ Waldron, J., and C. Kowalski, ‘Crossing the Line: Rites of Passage, Team Aspects, and Ambiguity of Hazing’, *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 80.2 (2009), 291-302.

indoctrination to the specific culture or group. Boot camp for new military recruits is a place where one's individuality is stripped and then replaced by a new set of behaviours where conformity is paramount.¹⁰ Even after passing through this stage, new military personnel will then be subject to further initiation into the specific work culture and social group they are sent into. For example, one Navy informant reported it was commonplace to wake up tied to a chair with black marker (or 'texta' in the Australian vernacular) written on their face and body, if they 'failed' to stay awake during drinking rounds. Writing on people who are passed out has also been reported from collegiate and sporting groups as well. Retributions for non-conformity are swift and are carried out to ensure group cohesiveness and also provide shared humour and folkloric material specific to members of the group. Outsiders may choose to label these behaviours 'abusive', and yet they seem to be part of the transmission of team or group values allowing members to develop a new identity. In one study, all the participants described the various acts of hazing as 'tradition' and necessary to gain social approval.¹¹ Just how widespread acts of hazing are among groups in Australian society is uncertain due to the fact that members are encouraged to remain quiet about the specific nature of these events (especially if they are criminal or excessively violent) ensuring they remain part of the 'hidden culture'¹²

Another initiation example of hazing came from a student at St Paul's College at the University of Sydney, where the freshman were stripped and beat with thongs (Australian footwear) whilst other senior boys shone flashlights in their eyes. Power, place and status are enforced by the students themselves and 'fReshers' [sic] are not allowed to write their first or last name (nor any other freshman) with a capital letter, the second letter is to be used instead. This is also evidenced on invitations to parties and dances made to the women residing at the sister college, The Women's College (another exclusive 100+ year old residence on the U Sydney campus), where this same writing practice is directed towards 'fReshman' students. Most of the student's antics are tolerated although not condoned by administration and much folkloric gossip and ridicule is circulated about the 'unfair' Principals who are often portrayed as strict and lacking in humour or even 'clueless'.¹³ Shared experiences like these are important and often therapeutic as bonds are formed outside the sanctions of authority and create an exclusive 'club' of members with specific folkloric practices, knowledges and behaviours. It must also be added that there are many other academic and social practices conducted

¹⁰ Salamone, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

¹¹ Waldron & Kowalski, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 296.

¹³ Personal communication, M Keulen, Women's College resident, 15 May 2010.

within residential college life that are positive, healthy and supportive of individual development towards adulthood. The experiences during the transitional or liminal phase allows for the instillation of values and lore, but must also evoke feelings of confusion or self-doubt requiring reflection of the self to enable genuine personal growth.¹⁴

Unlike countries such as the United States, on-campus residential life for college freshman is not the norm and many families are unable to fund this type of arrangement with many Australian students attending post-secondary institutions whilst residing in the family home. Other students may live in shared accommodation without supervision, a steep learning curve in the achievement of independence. For many young people, other rites of passage may be given a higher priority or expenditure, such as joining the military, sporting achievement, travel and adventure, taking on an apprenticeship or new job or even (rare in current society) courtship, marriage (or defacto) and starting a family. Young people may 'partner', buy a house and engage in other adult situations without shame, as it is now common in the educated 'middle class' and working class alike to reject marriage as a necessary prerequisite to adult life and remain 'defacto'.¹⁵ Increasingly in Australian society, marriage as a rite of passage is often performed after one's education, cohabitation or partnering, property ownership and/or even parenthood has already been undertaken or achieved. Religious ceremonies in general are currently popular as a reproduction of family tradition but not practiced by the majority for reasons of religious adherence as regular church attendance in Australian society is less than twenty per cent.¹⁶

As non-indigenous Australian culture does not have prescribed rites of passage for young people, each family or community group will differ in the acknowledgement of important stages, events or birthdays. There is an African proverb that warns of those who are not initiated will initiate themselves (an uncertain and contradictory process), and I suspect many young Australians engage in all sorts of perceived 'adult' behaviours in an attempt to mark their own identity into adulthood.¹⁷ These can be witnessed by negative or even delinquent behaviours such as the

¹⁴ Salamone, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Clancy, L., *Culture and Customs of Australia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 2004), p. 59.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁷ Crawford, D., 'Becoming a Man: The Views and Experiences of Some Second Generation Australian Males', *Electronic Journal of Sociology*, (2003) <http://scholarlyexchange.sociology.org/content/vol7.3/02_crawford.html> [accessed 1 November 2010].

practices of binge drinking, nightclubbing, 'hooning', criminal activities, use of drugs, sexual risk taking and other dangerous practices.¹⁸

In one subculture of Australian youth, the 'juvenile delinquent', even a stay in a detention centre or prison can be considered a necessary 'rite of passage' and is a sign of criminal achievement that carries status for these groups. As a teacher in a detention centre for several years, I witnessed similar behaviour across all cultural groups and even had one boy beg me to take a picture of him with the older, tougher looking detainees so he could 'prove his lock-up to his mates'. The separation from the community and the new roles and behaviours taken on also fits the van Gennep model for a rite of passage although the developmental outcome is deleterious for the individual as viewed by most members of society. Sadly, and especially for Aboriginal youth, involvement with the criminal justice system is often generational with most having other relatives who have experienced similar inequities within society. Thankfully, not all behaviour during the passage to adulthood is this damaging.

One Australian event, the 'Schoolies Week', serves to allow participation in the seedy side of adult life, where separation from school and authoritarian figures temporally removes constraints and inhibitions.¹⁹ This annual pilgrimage to the Gold Coast in the Australian state of Queensland to celebrate the end of their secondary or 'Year 12' education is very significant to mark the change from student/child to free choosing adult. Recent police and authoritarian involvement to control the public places this rite occurs in has caused many young people to seek out other destinations (usually similar coastal areas) to experiment in.²⁰ The celebratory nature of this gathering of some 70,000 per year (Surfers Paradise alone) can also be seen as one of Australia's annual festivals where school-leavers perform defiant behaviours as a specific contextual response to society: a deeply symbolic event.²¹ The beach climate and environment is also conducive to the exploration of identity, the body and human emotion providing the space for and access to meaningful heritage in a public gathering. Cantrell and Ellison²² argue that the beach offers a site of resistance, especially for young women to reject notions of conformative beauty and as an object to be gazed at.

¹⁸ Northcote, J., 'Nightclubbing and the Search for Identity: Making the Transition from Childhood to Adulthood in an Urban Milieu', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 9.1 (2006), 1-16.

¹⁹ Winchester, McGuirk & Everett, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²¹ Lincoln, R., and M. Mustchin, *Clubs and Violence: A Follow-up Evaluation of the Surfers Paradise Safety Action Plan* (Bond University: Centre for Applied Psychology & Criminology, 2000).

²² Cantrell, K., and E. Ellison, 'Between Borders, Across Gendered Lands: The (Voiceless) Female Space in Contemporary Representations of the Beach and Australian Identity'. In Proceedings of the ECCQ Multicultural Summit '09, 26-27 October 2009, State Library of Queensland, Brisbane.

However, participation in such a collective and public rite/festival is one of exhibitionistic display and 'the gaze' is a necessary part of any one's individual performance, albeit there are choices in how one engages in this process. The beach also carries a mythical and central position in the folklore of Australian leisure and is often the 'place' of initiation into sexual experience and drinking for young people irrespective of 'schoolies week'.²³

Alcohol and Australia's drinking culture in general still hold a central place as a perceived 'rite of passage' for young people.²⁴ The paradox is that because of its centrality in our culture, messages aimed at changing attitudes to alcohol consumption for young people are contradictory to behaviours exhibited by the wider community. However, one's individual experience of 'coming of age' may provide a different view. In a study on 'becoming a man', Crawford²⁵ found that the only definitive response common among the participants was that of fatherhood as an event marking their adulthood and only retrospectively by those of middle age. Only one respondent mentioned turning 18 and drinking alcohol as his moment in becoming a man. The popular notion that one pivotal moment such as a sporting achievement, work success, moving out of home, sexual conquest, or any other individual marker of achieving adulthood was remarkably absent. In fact, most of the men in their twenties responded that they still did not feel they had become real men and had yet to 'grow up' and stop 'mucking around'. The conclusion being that young people lack mentors or structured guidance on the road to adulthood and are 'on their own' with this journey, each displaying their own personal pattern of initiation.²⁶

Responsibility for self and others would seem to be the defining factor whether one perceives themselves as an 'adult' in Australian society. As this internal awareness of status is unknown to others, society must continue to use external indicators, such as age and other external achievements in determining official adulthood. The incongruity lies in the fact that adolescence has been extended in recent years and genuine maturity may not be attained despite involvement with a series of 'rite of passage' experiences. The use of alcohol, whilst present in many customs, does not contribute to maturity and needs to be socially contextualised in order to provide any developmental purpose for the liminality stage towards adulthood.²⁷ The complex social interactions and the myriad of lifestyle customs and 'rites of passage' practised in Australia at the present time provide the raw material for this process, yet

²³ Clancy, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

²⁴ Lincoln & Mustchin, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Crawford, *op. cit.*,

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Winchester, McGuirk & Everett, p. 60.

it remains an uncertain and bewildering process for most young Australians. The richness and diversity in this area of folklore research has yet to be fully discovered and certainly further knowledge will contribute to a deeper understanding of our people and our living heritage.

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