

The Girls' Puberty Rite of the Mohave

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Introduction

The Mohave are a Yuman-speaking tribe living along the Colorado River where it forms the boundary between Arizona and California. They share with other river Yuman peoples a distinctive and specialized culture based upon agriculture and dominated by dream revelations and militarism.¹ The information on girls' puberty observances presented here was obtained from Mohave living at Needles, California, and on the reservation at Parker, Arizona.²

Puberty Observances

Menstruation does not come as a surprise to a Mohave girl because "her mother warns her that it is coming" and "not to be frightened because all women have it." At the onset of the menses she begins a four day period of seclusion, "sitting alone in the corner of her own house" and doing nothing.³ She eats sparingly, mostly wheat mush or mesquite bean gruel, and eschews salt, meat, and fat for four days.⁴ She drinks only warm water "because if she swallows cold water she will have a bad stomach."

The menstruant does not touch herself with her fingers; should she use them to touch her hair, "it will get all snarled and stay that way;" if she touches her face, "it will always have black marks on it." Instead she uses a scratching stick made from a piece of shredded arrowweed or from a mesquite twig. If she wishes to wipe her face she does so with a piece of soft willow bark. There are other restrictions on her actions as well; she must not paint her face because "if she does it will leave marks;" she must not look at her image in water or in a mirror or "she will become cross-eyed." The girl wears a specially prepared willow bark skirt designed to absorb most of the catamenial discharges, the remainder being taken up or wiped off with straw or bark upon which she sits. She does not wear a special menstrual belt.

¹ Mohave culture is described by Kroeber 1902, 1925, and Curtis 1908. Drucker 1941 gives additional details.

² The fieldwork was financed by a grant from the Department of Anthropology, University of California.

³ Kroeber 1925, p. 748 states that the girl was not confined. Drucker 1941, p. 141 indicates that she was.

⁴ Kroeber 1925, p. 748 says that salt and cold water were avoided for 40 days. Drucker 1941, p. 142 records only 4 days. These disagreements with Kroeber's data probably indicate that some puberty customs have changed during the years between Kroeber's visit to the Mohave and that of Drucker and myself. Driver 1941, p. 59 notes a number of modifications in the Yuma girls' rite over a period of years and similar historical changes may also have occurred in the Mohave observances.

The menstruating girl remains alone for most of the day. Occasionally her mother and grandmother come in and talk with her, telling her "that she is a young lady and not a girl any more" and advising her "what a woman should do and should not do." Her behavior at this time is believed to affect her future character and disposition so the adolescent girl is careful to observe correct deportment. She must not "laugh out loud or act silly or she will grow up like that." Conversation is not prohibited but she should not "talk too much or she will talk and gossip all the time when she gets older."

Each night for four nights⁵ the menstruant lies in a pit scooped out of the sand to a depth of six inches or a foot in one corner of the house. The pit is warmed by building a fire in it and scraping out the embers. Warm sand is heaped up around the girl and blankets are placed over her. This "roasting" is believed to be of therapeutic value and to contribute to the general physiological well-being of the pubescent. She has to lie on her stomach because "if she lies on one side her breast on that side will be longer" or, if she rests on her back, "she will have aches in her back when she has her first baby." Each morning and evening she is bathed with warm water. The menstruant does not go to the river to bathe because "if she steps in cold water she will have pains." Her mother also combs her hair each morning and, so that she may have a clean head for the remainder of her life, delouses her and puts the lice in a small pot."⁶

The menstruating girl seldom goes outside except to relieve herself. When she does, another bark skirt is put on and she is "all wrapped up" in order to prevent exposure to cold. While outdoors she avoids meeting people. The concept of malignancy at puberty and menstruation, which is strongly developed in many North American tribes, is weak among the Mohave. A menstruant is shunned by men, particularly by hunters and warriors, but this is rather casual and there is no attempt to counteract any evil influence of the girl that is undergoing the rite. While walking in the brush the pubescent girl breaks off arrowweed twigs. This is said to "mean nothing."⁷

Dreams are of particular importance at the time of the first menses and the girl is told to remember as many of them as possible. Her sleep experiences are recounted to an older person who from them is able to foretell her future. There is no singing, dancing, or public ritual for adolescent girls: the whole rite is simple and private. The four day observances are concluded with a bath of sage leaves in warm water. The girl is "washed all over by her mother so that she will not stay in that period." She is then considered an adult and "does not expose herself anymore." Heretofore designated as "misahaija" (girl), she is now called "misahaija hacim" (girl menstruant).

⁵ Actually this is a variable period because "a girl has to lie there as long as she is bleeding."

⁶ Drucker 1941, p. 143 states that the lice were put in an olla which was later placed in the river.

⁷ Both Mohave men and women habitually snap off twigs while walking in the brush.

All the observances are repeated for the second and third menstrual periods.⁸ For the fourth and subsequent ones, however restrictions are relaxed and the girl "can eat anything but meat— and just a little salt." After her fourth period a new status term is employed "misahaija hacim hacim" and the girl is considered ready for marriage though actual matrimony usually comes several years later.

Conclusion

The Mohave girls' puberty rite is on the whole relatively unimportant and unimpressive. Many of its elements such as the use of a scratching stick and the salt and cold water tabu are widespread North American Indian traits.⁹ The rite aligns with those of southern California in "roasting" the girl but differs from the observances of most California tribes in being familial rather than public and lacking singing and dancing.¹⁰ There are, as might be expected, many similarities in function and procedure between the Mohave girls' adolescent rite and those of other river Yuman tribes, although the Mohave rite is somewhat simpler.¹¹ Analogies with puberty observances of the Southwestern tribes, beyond a few widely distributed North American traits, are few.

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⁸ According to Kroeber 1925, p. 748 restrictions were observed for the first six periods. Drucker 1941, p. 143 seemingly agrees with the statement above.

⁹ Driver 1941 summarizes and analyzes the data on girls' puberty rites in western North America. Spier 1930 and DuBois 1932 cite distributions over most of North America.

¹⁰ Driver 1941, p. 37 states that the absence of public recognition affiliates the girls' rite of the Yuman peoples with the Great Basin area. The similarity may be due to non-elaboration in both areas of a basic western North American puberty rite.

¹¹ See Spier 1933, pp. 325-327 (Maricopa), Forde 1931, pp. 152-154 (Yuma), Gifford 1933, pp. 289-290 (Cocopa).

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