

Coming of Age

Teens around the world celebrate growing up. Besides enjoying new freedoms, young people will face new responsibilities as adults, **Coming-of-age** rituals vary, but they share a common aim — transitioning young people into a new phase of their lives.

Many **coming-of-age** celebrations are rooted in religious traditions. Jewish boys become bar mitzvah — one to whom the commandments apply — at **age** 13. Likewise, girls can become bat mitzvah — daughters of the commandments — at **age** 12. During this ceremony into adulthood, the teen recites a special blessing and reads from the Torah (the five books of Moses).

Catholics and various other Christian teens receive confirmation. They believe that the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit will help them live their faith. These gifts are wisdom, understanding, correct judgment, courage, knowledge, reverence, and wonder and awe of God.

In a Muslim ceremony, there is a ceremony for teen boys to bear witness to their faith. Hindu teen boys in certain groups have a "second birth" ceremony. A Hindu priest wraps a sacred thread over the teen's left shoulder and under the right arm. The Sikh faith tradition, also founded in India, welcomes boys into manhood with five symbols: comb, bracelet, dagger, shorts, and uncut hair. The ceremony includes drinking sweetened water called amrit.

Coming of age often can be a big social event. Think about the excitement surrounding high school graduations in the United States.

Norway's teens end junior college with Russ (ROOS) celebrations in May. For each year they play, they string knots or objects onto a hat. Many towns hold Russ parades on May 17, which is Constitution Day in Norway.

In Japan, they celebrate the end of the teen years with a national holiday. Seijin no hi (SAY-jin NO HEE). On the second Monday in January, young people turning 20 that year dress in special kimonos or business suits. A public ceremony focuses on voting and other adult responsibilities. Most young people pray at shrines afterward. Then they party with friends.

Latin American girls celebrate Quinceañera (KWIN-san-YEHR-ah) at **age** 15. Wearing a special gown and tiara, girls choose a court of honor. After the girls go to Mass with their families, a huge party follows. Girls receive their last doll — often dressed to match them. Then they put on high-heeled shoes before their first dance.

A five-day Corn Grinding Ceremony signals Hopi girls' entry into womanhood. Girls grind white and blue corn for four days. The fifth day includes a feast, a purification ceremony, and a special dance.

Navajo teen girls have a four-day kinaaldá (kee-NAHL-dah) ceremony. They prepare a giant corn cake that is baked in the earth. They also eat a special diet and run several times each day. Special songs end the ceremony.

In a Zuni ritual, four men disguised as gods beat **coming-of-age** teen boys with yucca branches. The men don't hit too hard, though. Afterward, the boys dress as gods and have their turn in beating the men.

Masai boys in East Africa enter manhood in groups. Their heads are shaved, and they take a ritual bath. After the ceremony, they live together for four to five years in their own part of the village.

Kenya's Pokot people have boys drink a mixture of milk and a little ox blood when they come of **age**. These boys also get their first painted mud cap. Pokot girls spend several weeks mostly on their own, with chalk disguising their faces. Afterward, they perform a public dance.

Relatives of Gnau boys and girls in New Guinea spit sticky, red betel juice at them during their **coming-of-age** ceremonies. Teens eat a special stew of tubers mashed with coconut oil. After their headdresses are decorated, everyone enjoys a feast.

Sadly, some growing-up rituals are painful. The Taulipang tribe in South America whips boys, inflicts cuts on them, and subjects them to biting ants. The !Kung people in Namibia make scarring cuts after a boy's first successful hunt. Cutting girls' sexual organs is an extremely dangerous **coming-of-age** practice common in some African, Asian, and Middle Eastern cultures. This process causes infections and problems during childbirth. Girls also suffer mental and physical pain throughout their adult lives.

UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) and human rights groups strongly condemn harmful practices. While several countries have outlawed them, enforcing and broadening the ban is critical. Fortunately most **coming-of-age** rituals guide teens into society — not hurt them for life.

A ritual a group's established set of practices for particular times or events.

A tiara is a girl's or woman's crown.

PHOTO (COLOR): Every year thousands of South African boys leave their parents to spend weeks at an initiation school. This boy applies ikota, white limestone, to his face as part of his rite of passage into manhood.

PHOTO (COLOR): Yahoo! We're 20 years old! **Coming of Age** Day in Japan means wearing a traditional kimono, visiting a shrine — and sometimes taking a ride on a roller coaster.

PHOTO (COLOR): A boy holds sacred texts during his rite of passage into manhood, called a bar mitzvah.

PHOTO (COLOR): What could be better than a day when all attention is on you? That's what it's like for this girl celebrating Quinceañera.

PHOTO (COLOR): A bishop performs the confirmation blessing on a teen in Arizona.

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