Stuck
as a
Child
Indigenous men's rites of passage and the
Modern Western Men's Movement
Eddy Elsey

For the last couple of years I have been running what I consider are 'shamanically inspired' men's groups, although admittedly, this is quite a vague title.

My own healing, and my receiving of the teachings that I follow, began in the years prior to the setting up of the groups, after a four year long initiation process with a teacher from Britain.

It was during this time that it became apparent to me that a lot of the questions I had about my own life came down to a lack of understanding I had about my own masculinity.

This confusion led me to want to bring together a community of similar minded men, in order for us to jointly ponder these same questions. One thing led to another, and so, many men's circles and groups - as well as fire ceremonies and sweat lodges - began to pop up around the country, with myself either leading or taking an active role in them.

Recently however, I have become rather disheartened and dismayed at the work for a number of reasons. One of these reasons is there is now quite a lot of men's work happening - both in Britain and beyond - and on one level that is an amazing thing; indeed, perhaps there is no negative to this resurgence at all, because we have to start somewhere. Perhaps I am concerned over nothing.

But it seems to me that a lot of this men's work appears rather aimless; being apparently little more than the use of a lot of buzzwords, such as 'be kind,' 'be vulnerable,' and even 'be more feminine.'

This is not to say that these groups don't have good intentions, and also does not mean that, at least on some level, they are ineffective. But could they be more effective? Are we really getting anywhere?

If we go along with the premise that 'toxic masculinity' is really just immature, uninitiated masculinity, then surely it would aid us to look at cultures who put incredible emphasis on the process of initiation. This premise of 'toxic masculinity' is one I personally agree with, as all of the hallmarks of toxic masculinity - self service, greed, arrogance, domination of others due to emotional fragility - seem to go hand in hand with adolescent behaviour.

By looking at cultures, who put an emphasis on the process of initiation, cultures who still have functioning rites of passage, and compulsory initiations for their young men, perhaps we can start to unpick why these rites of passage are so important.

There is an old African proverb; 'If the young are not initiated into the tribe, they will burn down the village just to feel its warmth.' This seems incredibly poignant now within our own culture if we look around it, as each day, immature masculine dominated industries are literally burning the world for financial gain.

When I spent some time with the Iwol people of Senegal, West,

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Iwol boys of Senega running around their village during their initiation

Africa recently, I asked an elder what initiations they put their young men through.

He explained that their twelve to thirteen year-old boys would run through the village all day, every day for a month, running in a traditional straight line, and then they would spend five months in the bush alone - only returning after those five months were over.

Armed with this knowledge, I began to look at other indigenous male initiation rites. I discovered that in the Satere-Mawe tribe of the Brazilian Amazon, in order to become men, youths must put their hands inside wicker mittens woven together with local plant fibres. These mittens are full of bullet ants.

Now, just incase you are not familiar with the bullet ant, there is a pain scale, called 'the Schmidt sting pain index', which goes from 1-4. This scale classes a sting from a bullet ant as a '4-plus pain level' - the highest in the world. I have seen it written that when stung in the foot - the usual place for an accidental encounter - one is said to feel a 'pure, intense, brilliant pain, as if one was walking over flaming charcoal with a three-inch nail embedded in one's heel.' We can only imagine the sheer agony of this initiation.

Historically, the young men of the Powhatan people of Virginia, in the North Eastern United States - a part of the Algonquin nation - would be taken to a sacred area and dosed with a hallucinogenic plant medicine they called wysoccan for up to twenty days straight. The plant medicine was derived from jimson weed, a species of datura, which is a dangerous and very potent psychoactive plant, a member of the nightshade family.

This near month-long experience was said to remove all memory of childhood, and it is reported that many youths didn't survive the ordeal, and those that did were marked with incredible strength for doing so.

In comparison then, looking closer to home, the initiations that are currently offered to Western men in the global 'men's work movement,' are essentially optional masculine retreats, held in safe and controlled conditions.

Before someone goes on such a retreat, they often have to 'sign a waiver,' saying they take full responsibility in case of harm, they get a kit list of things they need to bring, and then they arrange their travel plans, with the warning; 'please don't arrive before 5pm because we will still be setting up.' Once there, they can all share around a circle, look into each others eyes and howl like wolves around a fire.

Now, don't get me wrong, I have done all of these things myself too - both as a participant and as a facilitator - and I understand that these are helpful, and I think they are much better then nothing.

But it feels like we are seriously underestimating the reasons why indigenous cultures have found it absolutely paramount to put their young men through so much.

For peoples whose literal survival relies on each of its

Iwol village in Senega

In the Satere-Mawe tribe of the Amazon, in order to become men, youths must put their hands inside wicker mittens full of bullet ants. A sting from a bullet ant is as if one was walking over flaming charcoal with a three-inch nail embedded in one's heel'

Bullet ants are large ants with very powerful stings

Woven wicker mittens full of Bullet ants, used for male initiaon by the Satere-Mawe tribe of the Brazilian Amazon

members becoming a valuable member of their community - the risk of their dangerous initiations is certainly worth the reward. And as our culture is teetering on the edge of widespread irreversible crisis - perhaps we need to start taking more risks too.

To really move forward in terms of masculinity - and therefore as a society - I believe we would be better served to heed the call of indigenous societies, and remove much of the safety and control from our initiations and rites of passage.

Traditionally, as we have seen from an indigenous point of view, these tribal initiations can be horrific, and included intense periods of pain, fear, and sometimes the real potential of even not returning from them. They become a dance between life and death, and that is why they are so powerful.

The elders are not concerned with their public image, not concerned overly with safety guidelines and don't require public liability insurance. This isn't because they don't know any better, it is because they know that without creating intensely real, tangible and life threatening situations - the youths would not be tested sufficiently enough to prove to themselves that they had passed from adolescent to adulthood.

They know that if the severance from a youth's previous life is not harsh enough, they will remain forever - even in part - at the adolescent stage of their lives. These peoples understand the almost limitless power of the human psyche, and they know what is needed in order to temper it into something useful; often that is intense pressure.

I am not saying we should re-create these initiations in our culture - as even if we did, much of the power would be lost anyway - and I will explore why I think that is the case later in the article - but the 'method behind the madness' - that it was always in the boy's and the community's best interests - can be looked at and utilised.

This issue of diluted ritual, is I think, mirrored by modern day shamanism, and spirituality in general, not just in the rites of passage work provided for men.

It seems to me sometimes that we have in many ways 'sterilised' spirituality, made it safe, in order to suit our culture, almost perhaps in a bid to not scare people off.

Maybe this is because those of us with the intent of making a more animistic outlook on life accepted in the mainstream, understand the difficulty of getting people onboard.

As somebody who grew up in a working middle class agnostic environment, I remember that I was incredibly surprised when the only thing that helped me with my own severe mental health situation was shamanism. I suppose I was lucky in that I didn't feel like I had a choice, and I certainly had nothing to lose from trying it. Shamanism was just the last thing on a long list of methods which I had tried, in order to find some peace within myself.

For many others in our culture however, it is not considered a viable technique for healing by them, and because of this, I suspect that many practitioners - and those who lead ceremonies - think that they need to play by the rules of our culture, in case their clients don't come back. I wonder if it is really possible to be authentic in our practice whilst we adhere to the guidelines of a non-animistic mainstream society?

Another reason for this dilution is that I think the aim of the majority of western ritual and spiritual experience initiatives is focussed on the outcome of 'getting your mind right'.

My own experience however is that personal healing is a by-product of shamanic ceremony, and that the first role of shamanistic or animistic practice is to feed and balance the local spirits of the land.

By treating shamanism as a form of exotic psychology, we end up mostly ignoring the land, and lose the practice of offering ourselves up in service to something much vaster then ourselves. It seems like a narrowing, instead of an opening - a concentration, to find exactly what is going on in our own heads, instead of surrendering to how we are, just as we are, and allowing our uniqueness the legs to walk around a bit.

Because of this, many of us are encouraged to undertake ritual in order to find out what we need, instead of what the land and the spirits need.

These are two completely separate things, and we would do well to understand the difference.

We also need to be aware that what the spirits need may very rarely fall under the category of 'acceptable' in modern day Western society.

For example, I was speaking to a Wixarika [Huichol] Ma'rakame [medicine person] recently in Wales about the subject of animal

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sacrifice. I asked how they felt about it, if they 'enjoyed' the process, and the Ma'rakame explained that it didn't matter if he did or he didn't - it was the local spirits that had commissioned the blood, and his views were secondary.

By refusing the uncomfortable - one might perhaps say 'unhygienic' - aspects of a ritual, we end up wasting energy trying to find a sterilised way to work around it, a compromise that keeps everybody happy. I believe this not only holds us back, but may actually also develop within us a reluctance to surrender to how things really are. By bringing human self consciousness into the realm of spirit, I think we often tragically lose the raw power of nature which lies underneath.

Going back to masculine rites of passage, another vital part of

Above: boys during a Kenyan circumcision ceremony

initiation that I think we are missing is the community to which the men return upon completion of the ritual.

These initiations - alongside possibly hunting - were generally the only activity within a tribe that would be an entirely masculine endeavour, and so - although the rites were facilitated purely by men - the initiates would return to a community who knew intimately about the severity of what they had just been through, and thus they would be duly celebrated upon their return, and treated with the respect that they had earned.

The rite of passage may have been facilitated by men - but the women and children all helped to facilitate and underline the vitally important beginning and after stages of the rite, by acknowledging the process

The life of these young male initiates hadn't just changed within the initiation itself, but also on their return to the community, as the entire world around them treated them differently, and this helped to solidify the transition that had occurred within their psyches.

It needs to also be reminded that the entire community would also be intensely spiritual, with a set of beliefs and a cosmology held consistently throughout the tribe, from elder to baby, and both with the women and the men. They were, if you like, all on the same team; walking in the same direction.

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By doing this, whatever had occurred during the liminal stage of initiation itself, had much more chance of 'sticking' when the initiated man was back in their ordinary life once again.

I think we are desperately missing this in our society today, and even if we did have an intact and intricately devised initiation rite for our boys, without the community being part of the before and after stages, what hope would our new found men have of integrating the wisdom they had learned.

In parallel to this, I have noticed recently some of my own clients - both women and men - have been completely 'blown apart' by plant medicine ceremonies they have taken part in. I have reflected about this, and have come to the conclusion that it is not so much the ceremony they undertook itself, but rather it is their return to the mundane world that threw them completely off centre.

Right: villagers welcome back a boy who has undergone an initiation in a Kenyan village

If nobody acknowledges the process a person has been through - which includes any form of sacred experience, be it plant medicine ceremony, initiation or any other form of spiritually transcendent experience - their integration becomes much harder, and in our spiritually devoid society, the return to the wider community can be very turbulent.

Each indigenous culture has their own binding cosmology and mythology, complete with their creation story and an awareness of sacred moments within their history. Throughout their entire cultural timeline, even with the developing technological advances each culture makes, each man would have been through the same initiation, and this would have tied them together through shared experience.

It is my belief that before we devise ritual initiations, we must understand what belief system we are using them to support. If we can, as a culture - starting in a small way - begin to form our own cosmology, learning from our old and often forgotten ways, and in so doing honour the plants, and spirits, and land in our locality; then I think we can begin actually initiating our boys into something, instead of just teaching them to be a bit nicer

Left: Kenyan Masai boy wearing an elaborate head piece during his initaiton ceremony

Perhaps a solution to this would be the creation of some form of council of elders, so that the person coming back after initiation could go to them for guidance.

This council system is highly valued in indigenous societies, but it is obvious that the relationship between young and old in those societies is completely different to the relationship we have in the West.

In a wonderful article on male rites of passages -'The Many Ways Society Makes a Man', by the American writer Chip Brown, which was published in the January 2017 issue of National Geographic Magazine [1], Brown explains his experience of witnessing a circumcision ritual of the Kenyan Bukusu people [2].

This is that culture's male initiation rite, and in the article Brown questioned the validity of the rite, as its origin was to enable each man to become a fierce warrior; but today's initiate - a young man named Shadrack - instead of picking up his spear and taking part in cattle raids and hunting parties, was returning to his school to continue his studies the week after the initiation. However, a Bukusu anthropology professor explained to Brown that; "You can be fierce in school, You can repackage traditional virtues to suit today's life."

As material life for the culture changes, the rite stays the same. Shadrack's elders, who had been initiated in order to go to war, still had their wisdom to share, even though Shadrack would never have to live in their shoes.

To me this proves that the outcome of an initiation isn't necessarily to produce a warrior or a hunter, it is instead to produce a man who has faced intense fear, in order to come to understand his place in the wheel of life, and his ancestral line, and accepted them both with humility.

They have come, through undertaking the initiation, to understand the necessity of pain within life, and so they are able to welcome the virtues of tough love and the need to be severed from childhood anxieties, by facing them head on and coming out the other side.

These qualities would no doubt make a good warrior, but they would also make a good leader, a good father and a valued member of any community.

Above: Brandon de Wet (front), a white 17 year old South African teenager who volunteered to undergo the traditional Xhosa peoples' circumcision ceremony as a sign of support for his black friend Yanelisa Somyo

Again, in comparison, in most popular modern day Western men's groups, there is a sort of pseudo-council of elders, who probably haven't even been initiated properly in the first place themselves.

I would also add that if they have been - to some degree - initiated themselves, the initiations they went through are likely to be useless as preparation for them to work with boys two generations in advance of their own, because our society has moved on so quickly since they themselves were at the age of initiation. Here, perhaps, we begin to understand what is underneath these tribal initiations. Their real power lies within the culture's cosmology, the cosmology the initiation in turn supports.

This cosmological cohesion is the backbone of the culture to which it belongs. If the painful, and almost violent, rite of passage is the tip of the iceberg, underneath and hidden from view are the hundreds of myths and legends, songs, ceremonies, medicinal plants, unique clothing and dancing, the heartful beauty of each culture. This is the foundation that each man - from a thousand years ago to now - is being born into.

These rites, and others like them, however archaic and violent they appear to the outside world, are in effect a form of 'ancient technology,' one that is specifically devised to rebirth the young men into something that they would then protect at all costs - the world around them.

It is my belief that before we devise rituals and initiations, we must understand what belief system we are using them to support. If we can, as a culture - starting in a small way - begin to form our own cosmology, learning from our old and often forgotten ways, and in so doing honour the plants, and spirits, and land in our locality; then I think we can begin actually initiating our boys into something, instead of just teaching them to be a 'bit nicer.'

By doing this, I think that we can start to empower our boys to be comfortable in their own manhood - whatever that may look like - because they will know that they are part of a whole, and not just an anonymous individual without a greater role.

I think, in this way, we could unite our young with our old, because they would be able to relate through shared experiences, and this will enable us all to support the young men upon their return, and teach them how vital they are - not just to their nearest and dearest, but to the entire world's existence.

Eddy Elsey is a shamanic practitioner who offers one-to-one healing sessions and group workshops, with the aim of removing the taboo from authentic shamanic practice.
His organisation 'Street Spirituality' holds mixed 'shamanic immersions' and masculinity retreats for men.
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NOTES:
1: Chip Brown's article about male initiation from the National Geographic magazine can be read online here: https://on.natgeo.com/3704TzN

2: Read an account of the circumcision rite of the neighbouring Kenyan Samburu people in Sacred Hoop Magazine issue 59

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