

The Puberty Ceremony of the Chimbu Girl in the Eastern Highlands of New Guinea

By JOHN ALAN ROSS

Introduction

The puberty ceremony for the Chimbu girl¹ is of great importance in that it terminates her childhood and the practices which are common to it; it also commences that time when she must be taught to assume the responsibilities and knowledge being necessary in preparing her for marriage and motherhood. The transition from childhood to adulthood begins at that time in the girl's life that is most enjoyable and looked forward to with great anticipation, and later, looked back upon with deep emotion. During the years of adolescence the young girl will devote considerable time to her ablutions, and to carefully greasing her skin with pig fat. Very frequently she will be highly adorned with colourful leaves, new bark cloths, and all but covered with vegetable dyes and clay paints. Most predominant to this newly acquired manner of dress is the *bilum*, a net bag suspended from the head down over the back for carrying all things that the woman has with her. As a child the girl wore a small *bilum* that was more symbolic than functional; the *bilum* worn at this time is very gaily coloured with vegetable dyes and intricately woven with fur, and it is a symbol of the potential labours she will encounter after her marriage. A drastic metamorphosis in the girl's social relationship is apparent in that she associates only with those girls of a comparable age and is seldom seen in company with younger or very much older members of her sex. The puberty ceremony initiates that period during which the girl will be preoccupied with frequent courting parties. This time is also important as it is the first instance in which she will receive any kind of formal education as to her prescribed duties and obligations to her family and clan. The education will also inform her on personal hygiene and acquaint her with contraceptives and abortives.

¹ See the note given by the editor on the article of WHITEMAN, p. 410. — The spelling of the Chimbu words which have been added by the author is different from that recommended by A. SCHÄFER SVD for use in the Catholic Mission; see A. BURGMANN, A. Schäfers Vokabular der Chimbu-Sprache in Zentral-Neuguinea. *Anthropos* 48, 1953, pp. 268-273.