

We present to you four religious ceremonies that recognize the seriousness of the passage between

ALMOST A WW



QUINCEAÑERA

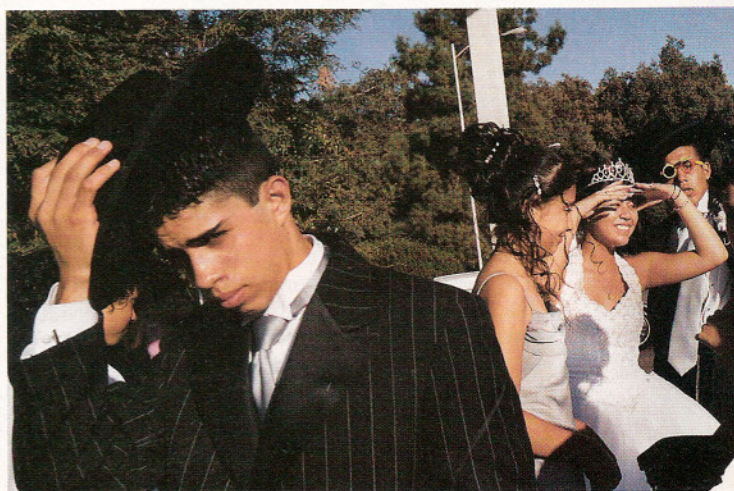
Some Latina girls celebrate turning 15 by throwing a *quinceañera*, which is like a Catholic mass, a birthday party, and a prom all rolled into one fabulous package. The word comes from the Spanish words for “fifteen” and “year”—*quince* and *año*. Besides being really fun, a *quinceañera*, says Regina Saiz, a Mexican-American who lives in Goshen, CA, “is a way to show people that ever since baptism, I’ve been following God’s path and living my life with God.”

ABOVE: Regina and her mom bought her wedding-cake gown at a bridal shop for \$400. “I thought it was such a beautiful dress,” she says, “and right away I knew it was the one I wanted!” *Quinceañera* girls wear white dresses as a “symbol of purity,” says Regina. The kid in the picture is her nephew Alex; her mom, Lupe, is on the left, with her aunts Rosemary and Marcelina in the background. Lupe, who almost lost Regina during a difficult pregnancy, is ecstatic today. “The doctors didn’t expect me to live,” Regina says. “But Mom kept her faith, and she wouldn’t let me go.” When Lupe retold this story at the church



ABOVE and BELOW: All of Regina's friends at the party after the church service. Just like a prom queen, the birthday girl (*la quinceañera*) has a court of honor. Regina's is made up of her best friends—the girls wear silver floor-length gowns, while the guys rock pin-striped zoot suits. "My parents and I chose the suits together," says Regina. "We thought the guys would look sharp in them, and they did." What's with the black-and-silver color scheme? Regina laughs: "Go, Raiders!" —*Laura Schiff*

after Regina's *quinceañera* mass, the entire congregation started crying. **TOP RIGHT:** According to Deacon Jim Rooney, who officiated at Regina's *quinceañera* service, the crown that's put on Regina's head during the ceremony represents "the victory that she has won so far in her life. She's been living in an environment where it is often very difficult to live your Christian life, and she has been able to do it." Regina says, "I've stayed away from the bad stuff, like drugs. Part of the point of the *quinceañera* ceremony is that you're supposed to be going pure up to the Blessed Mother."





SUNRISE CEREMONY

When Wyndi “Nea” Baca, 13, who is Mescalero Apache, got her first period, her mom, Jackie, didn’t just give her some Kotex and leave it at that. “My parents asked me if I wanted to have a sunrise ceremony,” Nea says, “and I said yes.” That was two years ago, and the family’s been planning for the rite of passage since then. The whole community takes part in the “feast”—a four-day ceremony during which Nea and the other girls who are being celebrated sing, pray, and dance, day in and day out. Why

did Nea choose to go through this whole thing? She says she wanted to feel stronger and more powerful, and “live longer.” Also, she adds, “it might help me come out of my itty-bitty shell” of shyness.

ABOVE LEFT: This is the tepee that Nea and the others will dance and pray in after dark, while medicine men sing and play their drums. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The maidens, including Nea, who’s wearing her custom-made ceremonial dress, try to kindle the evening’s fire. Yes, they are doing it the old-fashioned way—by rubbing sticks together. It’s hard work, and the girls can’t get a spark to take hold.



BOTTOM: Nea gets advice from her aunt Wynette, who is her medicine woman and sponsor, which means she'll stay with Nea and guide her through the ritual. The pollen that Nea wears on her face comes from marshland cattails and is yellow like the sun. It symbolizes power, strength, and holiness, and is sacred to the Apaches. The butterfly on her shoulder is one of many that are embroidered all over her ceremonial dress. **RIGHT:** Every night during the ceremony, the girls dance for several hours. "The dancing was my favorite thing," says Nea, "though it was kind of hard because of my boots, which were sort of big on the bottom. And I didn't get much sleep the last night and I was kind of tired." "She was amazing," says her proud mom. "So strong and powerful, even after dancing all night long." The medicine men must have agreed; they gave Nea the Indian name of Dancing Butterfly. **TOP:** At the end of the ceremonies, after dancing the entire night, the girls run triumphantly toward the east—in the direction of the rising sun. Although many members of the tribe were watching, Nea forgot her shyness. "I didn't feel nervous about anything. It was kind of good to see all of those people," she says. It is said that when she is old, an Apache woman can be reborn just by walking eastward and turning around counterclockwise four times, remembering what it once felt like to be young. —L.S.



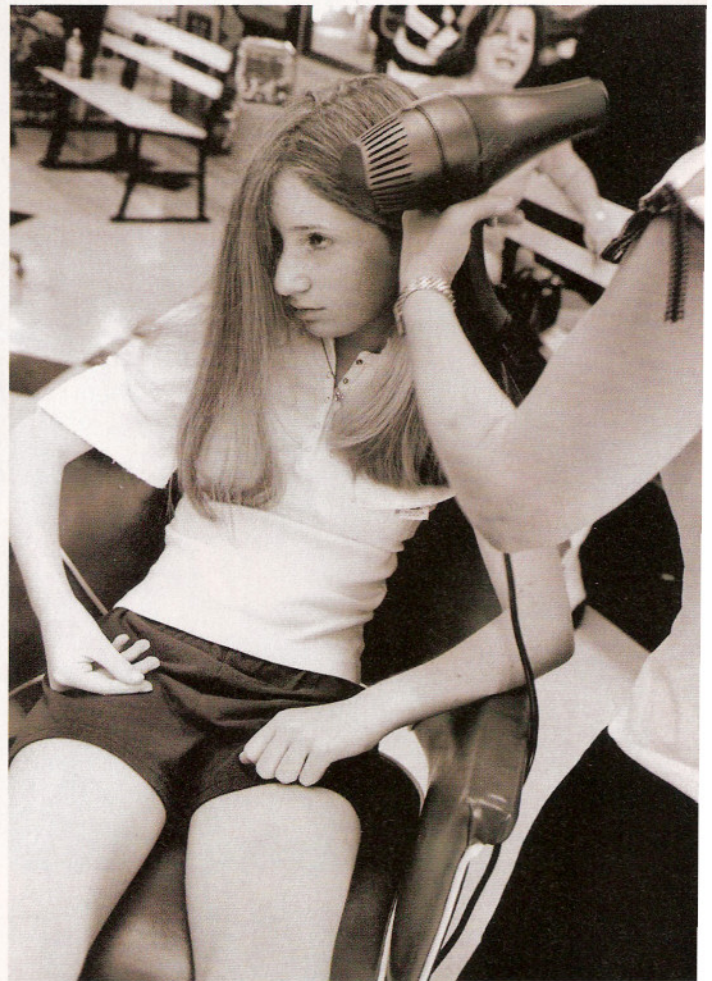


BAT MITZVAH

Like many Jewish girls, Maddie Miller, of Beverly Hills, CA, decided to have a coming-of-age ceremony called a bat mitzvah—that's Hebrew for "daughter of the Commandment"—when she turned 13. (Until about 60 years ago, only boys went through the ceremony, and most Orthodox Jewish girls still don't get bat mitzvahed.) Maddie started getting ready for the religious service almost a year ago. "It's when you become a young adult," she says. "I want to get used to

doing stuff, like preparing for this, on my own." She has to sing several blessings in the synagogue and read a portion of the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament (in Hebrew, not in English, mind you). Though the performance aspect of the ceremony seems like it might be stressful, Maddie says, "I learned my readings quickly, so I decided to do two more, because I had a lot of extra time to study."

ABOVE: Maddie's dad, Larry, blesses her during the ceremony.



BOTTOM: Maddie's party was held the day after the religious service, at a posh country club in Beverly Hills. (This is Maddie on the super-manicured grounds.) The event featured a fancy dinner, a DJ, a live band, a dance performance, an artist who made personalized T-shirts for all of Maddie's friends, and Maddie's name on the floor in lights. **ABOVE:** All of Maddie's friends at the party. It's important to her that they came, especially because she's decided to attend Hebrew high school classes on Wednesdays and Sundays, which she began this fall. It's an exhausting schedule, and, Maddie admits, "Sometimes it's a drag to go, because I'd rather be with my friends instead." She thinks it's worth the sacrifice, though: "I want to learn Hebrew—it doesn't have to be fluently, but pretty well," she says. "I think it's really important to know about your religion." **TOP:** Place settings at a table at the party. **RIGHT:** Maddie gets her hair done the day before the ceremony. After today, Maddie will not return to this salon, which is for children only. —L.S.

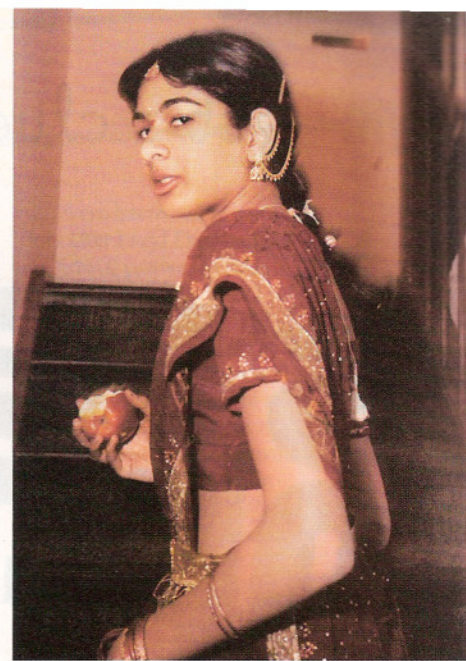




SARI CEREMONY

"All women wear saris in India—every day, all the time," says Rami, the grandmother of Thara Amilineni, 12. A sari is six yards of fabric worn with one end wrapped around the waist like a skirt. It comes with a matching top that may bare quite a bit of midriff, but the other end of the sari drapes over the woman's shoulder to cover her breasts as a sign of modesty. In Andhra Pradesh, the Indian state that Thara's family is originally from, a Hindu girl's maternal grandmother hosts a ceremony presenting a girl with her first full-length sari just before or at the onset of puberty (usually somewhere between ages 9 and 13).

ABOVE: "Not too much!" yells Thara's father, Ram, as aunts and cousins put on her makeup. Generations ago, sari ceremonies were the way a family presented a girl to the community as ready to be married. It was important that she look her best and wear her family's most valuable jewelry. Thara, who's from Stanford, FL, won't be getting married anytime soon—"I'm in seventh grade," she points out. But she looks radiant anyway with jasmine blossoms sewn in her hair and the same gold pieces many of her female relatives wore when they received their first saris. "You only do this three times in your life—as a baby for your naming ceremony, for the sari ceremony, and on your wedding day," says Thara of the preparations. But they're worth it: "It's a chance to be with my whole family," she adds.



BOTTOM: Venkat Kanumalla (center, in white), a Hindu priest, performs the *puja* (or religious ceremony) in Sanskrit, an ancient language that he speaks so quickly it sounds like a song. Because Thara doesn't know Sanskrit (almost no one does), Venkat pauses sometimes to whisper instructions to her in English. Afterward, she receives her first full sari and Venkat explains the meaning of the *puja* in English. Thara didn't know a lot about the ritual before. "I just thought this was something my family did—I didn't know much about the cultural significance," says Thara, who considers herself religious but doesn't have a temple close to her home in Florida to visit regularly. **RIGHT:** Even though Thara receives her first full sari tonight, she'll wear a half-sari or *oani* (like the orange one she wore for the first part of the evening) to most events until she's about 18. **TOP LEFT:** Arranging six yards of silk into a dress (and getting it to stay put) takes years of practice. Luckily for Thara, a slew of female relatives are there to help make sure her sari looks just right. Once dressed, Thara returns to the front of the room and sits while her family sprinkles rice on her head in a blessing. This is also the time for people to slip envelopes into Thara's hands, usually gifts of money. "It's cool," says Thara, "but I don't get to keep it. My parents are putting it all toward college." **TOP RIGHT:** Thara (in her new sari) doesn't have much time to sit down to the delicious Indian dinner served in her honor, and snacks on an apple in a free moment instead. The Hindu religion discourages eating meat or drinking alcohol on the day of a religious ceremony, so there wasn't any at the party. "But since Thara's a vegetarian, we wouldn't have served meat anyway," says her grandmother Rami. —Paisley Strellis

