Street Baptism: Chicano Gang Initiation

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Initiation into Chicano barrio street gangs has developed over the years into a kind of “street baptism,” functioning as a rite of passage for the initiate and a rite of solidarity for the gang. At the same time, it fulfills a pragmatic need to screen potential new members for fighting skills and courage valued by the gang as well as some of the psychological needs for youths attempting to cope with adolescent age and gender role identity crises. Most gang members are initiated at about age 12 or 13 and, for a majority, the ritual simply formalizes the membership toward which participation in street activities had long been preparing them. The initiation typically involves several gang members attacking the prospective member at the same time; the initiate is expected to fight back, but cannot show any fear or weakness. The severity of the beating inflicted depends both on the initiate’s prior standing with the gang (those who grew up with the gang members or who have relatives in the gang fare better) and on the mind-set of those conducting the initiations (severe beatings are far more common when the participants are intoxicated, for example.) Similarities between the “street baptism” and male initiation rites in pre-industrial tribal societies suggest that both address similar problems in youths’ gender and age role identity resolution.

Key words: initiation, urban gangs, Chicano youth; US, California

Street gangs in Chicano barrios (neighborhoods) have regularized a gang initiation ordeal which serves several functions. While long and deep exposure to street socialization has made many youths at risk to become gang members, this “street baptism” of gang initiation has become a clear marker and accelerator of gang behavior. For the gang, the baptism functions as a ritual ceremony to show admittance and dedication to the gang. For the initiate, the baptism is an introduction to the gang and “sanctifies” him (or less often, her) as a true member. This event represents different facets of the gang subculture, such as group membership, social solidarity, ritualistic behavior, ceremonial processes, gender clarification, and symbolic changes.

Data and information for this analysis have been gathered over several years, from 1978 to 1982 and again from 1989 to the present (Vigil 1988a, 1988b, 1993a, 1993b, 1994), in a continuing ethnographic investigation of more than two dozen different barrios of Mexican Americans in the greater Los Angeles area. Old and more recently established gangs in urban and suburban neighborhoods were examined. In all, more than sixty life histories and three hundred questionnaire-guided interviews were gathered along with many pages of ethnographic observation notes. Although female gang members were included in the study, the emphasis usually (as here) was on males. The focus was the cholo (marginalized) gang youth, from 12 to 19 years of age, who belonged to and identified with the barrio street gang. These gangs have been fixtures in some communities for over 40 years (Vigil 1988a) and recently have spiraled out of control with gang violence — drive-by shootings, random shootings, school ground fights, and so on — daily capturing the attention of the media and law enforcement.

Most of the older Southern California barrios, both urban and (originally) rural, came into being as visibly distinct, spatially bounded neighborhoods separated from other neighborhoods, located, e.g., “across the tracks,” in a government-owned housing development or in ravines, hollows, etc. — what Bogardus (1926) called the area’s interstices. Families of unskilled and semi-skilled workers settled into the small houses or apartments, which were often located near major worksites — railroad yards, brickyards, or concentrations of small factories. Socioeconomic and cultural barriers reinforced the physical boundaries. Later, most of the rural enclaves were incorporated into the suburbs that grew up around them, but they remained visibly distinct from the surrounding tract home neighborhoods. Newer urban and suburban barrios arose in once prosperous, but now rundown, neighborhoods as the Mexican American population continued to grow. In these, as in the older barrios, relatively low skill levels of the workforce led to recurrent joblessness and poverty for many households.

For example, the White Fence barrio is located across a river and freeway from downtown Los Angeles. It was first settled in the 1920s by Mexicans who worked nearby and built their houses in the ravines alongside an affluent Anglo neighborhood. Centered on its small Catholic church, the community remains one of the poorest in the county and still features empty lots on many blocks. On the other hand, the Cucamonga barrio began, also in the 1920s, as a Mexican farm

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laborers’ settlement. It was located in a vineyard and close to the citrus groves near the boundary between San Bernardino and Los Angeles counties. By the 1970s, it was surrounded by middle-class housing tracts, but still had many unpaved roads and no sewers (Moore and Vigil 1993). While these barrios have distinctive differences, they and most others in the region share a history of sociocultural marginality, poverty, crowded living conditions, and institutional neglect (Vigil 1988a).

An age-graded cohorting tradition in each barrio ensures a fairly steady, if small (usually no more than 10%), supply of youths (often the brothers, nephews, cousins, and sons of older members) to carry on the gang reputation for fighting and defending, its “turf.” Even though the adolescent group that constitutes the gang participates in normal youthful activities such as socializing, playing sports, and driving cars, it is the more destructive habits that reflect the troubled and deeply disturbed lives of its members. Poverty, stressed families, insensitive schools, intergenerational strife, and culture conflict are among the precursors to the creation of gangs and gang members (e.g., Covey et al. 1992). Moore (1991), for example, found that more than a third of the gang members in her systematic sampling of two East Los Angeles gangs had been raised in father-absent households. Similarly, in an ongoing study of the families of gang members in an East Los Angeles public housing development, I found that these families were significantly more often headed by single females than a control sample of randomly selected households from the same project (Vigil 1994); moreover, the “gang family” households also contained more household members. Children seeking respite from crowded, unsettled households spend increasing amounts of time outside in the streets. There, in an often dangerous but also exciting environment, they come under the influence of similarly displaced peers and older street toughs.

Thus, such youths are often pre-conditioned for gang participation while they are still in elementary school. Junior high school “is where extensive gang membership activity typically begins. It is ...where street youths from different barrios come into regular contact with one another...[and] with other children also willing to experiment and flirt with new role behaviors” (Vigil 1993a:97). Home conditions have not been conducive to completing assigned homework, and by now the street-socialized youth have lost interest in school, “ditching” often to hang out with youths with similar inclinations. With more time on their hands, the youths begin to get into minor (and subsequently more serious) illicit behaviors, drawing them into contact with the criminal justice authorities. Many are incarcerated for varying lengths of time in youth camps or even prisons. Thus, over the generations, the gang has become a social group with cultural rules and values derived from “street socialization” which has replaced what was lost when parents, schools and police failed.

Gang baptism occurs especially during the adolescent status shift when age and sex development and assertion are most crucial. The gang initiation ordeal of “jumping-in” a new member (a timed affair in which two or three gang members beat up a novitiate) is a “shock” treatment for many personal and group objectives. At its simplest level, the ordeal is a mechanism wrought by street youth to recruit, test, and turn out more gang conflict-oriented youth and thus perpetuate the existence and purpose of the gang. In many ways it is a trade-off: we’ll protect you if you help protect us from our enemies.

At its most profound level, however, it is a surreal coming of age under the auspices of the street. The streets, with their dark, overwhelming, fear-inspiring threats, have left many youths unprotected and unsupervised. Where there is the need for protection and escape from fear, there is also the need to vent pent-up aggression born of trauma and rage. In such a context, the initiation is an inverted “gang-bang” (Klibaner 1989), where the gang members get to do to a new member what they do to rival gang members.

The Inverted Gang-bang: Type, Time, and Place

For most individuals, the path toward becoming a gang member begins early, and initiation into it for the most part simply formalizes membership; some can even avoid such trials. Specific routines of induction do exist, however, and how these are practiced varies with particular gangs and individuals. Generally, although details of the initiation vary, its ceremonial character and function have been much the same from one site to another and over time. In any event, these routines indicate the public nature of membership in the gang and provide insights into the psychological underpinning of gang behavior. An initiation is commonly viewed and accepted as an ordeal that entails a physical beating by several other gang members. Gang entrance ceremonies are most commonly prescribed for peripheral and temporary members, less often for regular gang members whose early experiences have tended to lock them into the gang subculture.

In nearly all cases, the initiation occurs when the individual is in junior high school, at the age of 12 or 13. A much smaller number are initiated in grammar school. Each of such early initiates the author has encountered came from long-established barrios and had older relatives who were already gang members. Only a handful of initiations occur when the individual is already in high school. Such individuals that the author encountered lived in established barrios, however, and they had refrained from joining until peer pressure overwhelmed them. Before high school is over, they usually quit the group.

Most initiations take place somewhere in the barrio, usually near the “hangout” or at the home of one of the initiators. Geronimo, from Barrio Nuevo Estrada, described his initiation (which occurred when he was in junior high school):

If you wanted to get in, one, two, three guys, you go against them, so I went up against them. It was in the front yard of one of the guys’ homes. It was during the afternoon. They surrounded me. If you just stood there and let them hit you and they whip your ass and you don’t do nothing, you’re going to get an ass whipping for nothing. I guess I took an ass whipping to be able to back up the barrio. They would go about thirty seconds. They would count like this: one [5 seconds elapse], two [or 5 seconds elapse], and so on.

It is usually a spontaneous affair. Some are initiated at a party when most of the initiators are under the influence of alcohol or other substances. One 18-year-old from White Fence, who had grown up in the barrio, recalled his initiation at age 14:

They came up to me at a party, all at one time. It was a big party...They told me if I want to get into the barrio. I said I don’t know, ese [guy], I want to get in, but I
want to think about it. They said, when you get into the {barrio} you have to be {trucha} [alert, prepared], for you’re taking a big risk and you can get killed by anyone just by being from White Fence. I thought about it, and said: “Orale [O.K.], I’ll get in.”...I was about 2:00 in the morning. I was loaded, but I knew what I was doing. I went out into the alley and eight homeboys followed me. Like, there was a big crowd, you know, a lot ran out after them, but eight of them did the thing. “Orale,” one of the homeboys said, “take a trago [a drink], ese, before you do it.” I drank the rest of the bottle, about half of it. Then one of the homeboys hit me in the mouth. I kept on going for about twenty seconds, I was going head-on, throwing with one of them. Throwing mine in and they would get theirs in. All the eight guys were coming at me at the same time. I never got a second of a break, for every moment was a serious hit. They downed me about four times, and I kept getting up. I was all fucked up, I had a broken nose and everything.

When the onlookers, especially the homegirls who by now pitied him, thought he had enough, they said, “He’s a homeboy now.” He shook hands with everybody to confirm the fact.

Some describe the initiation as a gauntlet trial of running through two lines of gang members. For others, however, especially among members of younger contemporary cliques, it is a timed affair, from thirty seconds to two minutes, with two to eight gang members doing the pummeling. Whether the initiation is administered by a small or large group, or timed or untimed, the severity of the beating is dependent on a number of other factors. If members are intoxicated at the time they initiate, the beating can be intense and open-ended, as in the example cited above. There are even instances where a nonresident of the barrio has had to undergo a stabbing to show his mettle, as this account from the Chicano Pinto Research Project (1979) shows:

They stabbed him and threw him into the bushes. The dudes that got him in were loaded and were muy locos (real crazy), and he kept getting up and he kept saying he was from the neighborhood. They kept getting him in and getting him out and finally they just stabbed him.

More commonly, however, the beating is merely a formality, especially for a long-term {barrio} resident. As one youth said, when they would jump us in, they would start a fight. Some other guy jumps in, then another. They would get me down, then start hitting and kicking me, to see if I had huevos [balls; literally, eggs]. They're not out to really hurt you, you know, they just want to see if you can take the punches.

Individuals already known as “able to take it” are accordingly subjected to briefer {pro forma} attacks.

Whatever the circumstances, the initiate must accept the group’s determination of where and how the ordeal takes place. The beating must also be endured without complaint (although this does not preclude fighting back); the slightest whimper or other expressed sign of pain could result in rejection of membership. The initiation thus acts as a prerequisite to weed out the weak and uncommitted. Successful endurance of the ordeal also reinforces the attraction of gang membership. Even those informants who admit to substantial trepidation prior to initiation assert that it enhances their desire to belong to the gang. In fact, the desire to belong, prove oneself, gain respect, and show loyalty are all intertwined with the appropriate (by gang standards) role behaviors expected of the initiate.

The Role of Initiation in Gang Life

More than three and a half decades ago, Bloch and Niederhoffer likened gang initiations generally with “puberty rites in primitive societies” and added that “we may conceive of much of gang practice and the spontaneous, informal rituals of gang behavior as arising because our culture has been unable, or has refused, to meet the adolescent’s needs during a critical juncture in his life” (1958:30). In the same work they noted that, for the new member of a gang, “once having succeeded in passing through the ceremony with honor, the psychological aftermath of the experience contributes towards creating bonds of solidarity with those other initiates who have shared this vital experience with him” (1958:123).

Structurally, the {barrio} gang exists in part to provide psychological support for youths who have not received adequate reinforcement from family and other social caretaker institutions. Initiation can additionally be viewed as affirming one’s ethnic orientation. Some of the street solidarity and ethnic loyalty is based on defiance of school and law enforcement authorities, which many adult residents and nearly all the resident disaffected youth consider insensitive to low-income Mexican barrios. Thus, the event also tends to affirm one’s ethnic identification as well showing they are “Chicano.” (On a psychological level, of course, it may also satisfy sadomasochistic urges, opportunities to intimidate and coerce, and even simply a sense of excitement in aggressive, socially sanctioned — by street standards — combat.)

In tribal societies, initiation practices aid in building social cohesiveness and sexual differentiation. This is especially the case “in tribal societies, where equality of status among adults of the same sex is emphasized” (Barry and Schlegel 1980:134; Schlegel and Barry 1991). While egalitarianism among gang members is also valued, there are other elements in the gang subculture which the gang initiation emphasizes. For instance, because many gang members come from households that are female-centered and the streets are dominated by males, the initiation serves to mark passage to a new status. In their cross-cultural survey, Burton and Whiting (1961) pointed out how initiation serves to clarify such cross-sex ambiguities, and the gang subculture serves this same purpose. Thus, gang baptism jointly marks passage to a new status, enhances social cohesiveness, creates a ceremonial atmosphere, encourages ritualistic behavior, and serves practical gang goals.

Marking Passage and Sex Role Differentiation

As with the two examples of gang initiation noted above, marking passage for these members meant that they now were expected to abide by gang rules and routines and perform acts in the name of the gang. There are clear ego, group, and role psychological aspects to the baptism. The initiation itself is charged with symbolic, rite of passage messages which signal a rebirth of an individual as a gang member who adheres to the street subculture. When a beating is administered, at least two
signs emerge: the act of gang members pummeling an initiate under the purview of other gang members who witness it, and the actual imprints of the beating (i.e., the bruises, abrasions, blackened eyes, nicks, etc.) left on the novitiate.

These two signs symbolize that established gang members recognized the newcomer as a “homeboy.” The new homeboy also carries that evidence, the street imprimatur, upon him and proudly displays the wounds as a badge of honor wherever he may go. Moreover, the act marks a key period of puberty, the childhood to adult (or more appropriately, “manhood”) transition, where a new affiliation is formalized. Such a group event has tremendous personal ramifications. Typically, gang initiates (of both grammar school and junior high ages) mentioned a desire for group acceptance or to “prove oneself,” that is, to demonstrate manliness, as motivation for undergoing the ritual.

The rite of passage, with all its new gang role expectations and symbolic qualities, operates at the personal level to assuage the “psychosocial moratorium” that Erikson (1968) spoke of as occurring during the adolescence transition when a new age/sex identity is sought. This is especially important for those youth who come from female-centered households and have lacked adult male role modes. Where ambivalence and ambiguity of one’s sex identity may have reigned before, the initiation helps dramatize a clarification, even if it is an ephemeral, superficial personal adjustment, to announce that a boy has been transformed into a “man.” A significant event related by a 16-year-old youth who just underwent the baptism illustrates this point:

I remember my Mom used to comb my hair...she used to comb it to the sides. So one day I took the comb from her and started combing it back. That’s when I started thinking I was all chingón [in control; literally, fornicator].

Thus, with gang baptism, street gang swagger, slang cholo talk, and a locura (quasi-crazy, wild behavior) mind-set are expected and enhanced. The new gang member is now ready to perform gang tasks. Among these “manliness” tasks are to join in forays and raids against rival barrio gangs and to more habitually ingest alcohol and drugs, like un hombre con huevos (a man with balls).

Social Solidarity

Social cohesiveness and solidarity is strengthened by the initiation. Each time a new member is “jumped-in,” all the witnesses reexperience their own baptism to connect with the newcomer. Thus, the event acts as a reaffirmation to solidify the group psychology of the gang. This mental leap entails that the individual surrenders his identity and allegiance to the barrio gang. Now, the person can affix his nickname (most gang initiates, in response to a 16-year-old youth who just underwent the baptism, relate that their neighbors non-gang peers respond to the role of his name: El Loco de White Fence. It is the plague of public authorities and home and business owners, but to gang members, it is a public demonstration of an intent to be “famous all over town” (Santiago 1984). Thoughts and actions emanate from this group psychology, as a person claims por mi barrio todo (for my neighborhood, or gang, everything).

As an affair viewed and sanctioned by the group, it is also a ceremonial celebration. It happens at a fixed point in one’s life (roughly, junior high school) to commemorate that the controllers of the street now control you and have affixed a “branding” for all to see, especially you. In one instance cited above, other members of the large party, including homegirls who usually are excluded from such events, followed the initiators outside and became the audience to the ceremony. One of the homegirls, in fact, stepped in to end the affair with her proclamation, “He’s a homeboy now.”

Gang Tradition and Practical Implications

Because the gang requires fearless fighters, and the streets are such a fear-inspiring place, there is a need to recruit and retain “tough” gang members. The initiation is a way that gangs developed to help screen, test, and authenticate gang members. Most of the earliest gangs did not have an initiation because they formed spontaneously and unevenly. Over the decades, as the street conditions which spawned gangs persisted and there was intergenerational continuity, a gang subculture evolved with norms and values. Initiation ordeals are one of the gang’s subcultural traditions.

It has become a ritualistic affair that is interwoven with the “psychosocial moratorium” and the group psychology of the gang in that a new member is subjected to a type of gang “magic.” Because toughness is associated with manliness, or machismo, one of the expected outcomes of this magic is that the novitiate is endowed with huevos or that kind of physical and mental power in order to be allowed into the gang. If the test proves him worthy, he gains the approval of the gang members. He is accepted and can now count on gang members to offer protection and friendship.

However, there is a practical side to this tradition. While gangs serve many purposes, for most of their time is spent in the usual adolescent and youth socializing and partying (cf. Vigil 1988a:Ch. 7), one important and highly publicized activity is gang conflict. Gang-banging, as the gang members refer to it, entails ongoing fights and shootings with rival barrio gangs. There is a traditional aspect in these conflict activities, as some of these gang rivalries span several generations, sometimes son following father amassing battles in a long, protracted “turf” war.

The initiation allows for the selection and screening of good “battlers.” It is a type of ritual homicide in that the former person (pre-initiation) is killed and a new person (post-initiation) created. As noted, many of the initiators revel in this opportunity to mete out punishment, as personal aggressions help let off steam in a controlled way (e.g., a type of ritualized locura binge). This, in many ways, keeps them in shape for the real battles which await them, sometimes on a daily basis; like training and practice before fights with rivals.

Conclusion

The gang baptism is a remarkable phenomenon. While many
expectations of parents and school teachers and learn to behave accordingly, the gang members “jump hoops” for established gang members. Since the gang, and the subculture that is a part of it, have taken over where other caretaker units (i.e., parents and schools) have failed, there has evolved a gang initiation ceremony to assert the gang’s claim on newcomers. The ostensible purpose for this “inverted gang-banging” is to test the physical and mental mettle of novitiates and weed out the weak and uncommitted. Then the new “street baptized” homeboy can join to help against enemy barrio gangs.

The latter is the practical goal, but there are other objectives to the initiation event and different messages which reflect it. As an example, the gang imprimatur becomes an element in one’s tattoos, a public announcement of one’s new status. Scrawling gang graffiti of one’s nickname and the barrio gang’s name is further advertisement that the initiation “took.” Providing new gang members with a set of role expectations and behaviors is also something that is encouraged and accelerated in the aftermath. Many of the symbolic outcomes are focused on aggression and masculinity: the signs of the beating, the sullen, defiant stare of “I can take it,” a witnessed public “ritual homicide” to match the “soul murder” a person willingly submits to because of a sense of self-worthlessness, and the non-verbal, body language “pats-on-the-back” one receives from gang members as they welcome a new member of the “select group.”

Until such time that major social institutions, such as the family and schools, are able to win over social control from the street gangs, the latter will continue to socialize and enculturate large numbers of barrio youth and subject them to a street baptism. Street baptisms, of course, are culminating events that usually succeed a long, deep series of experiences that compel a youngster to join a gang. I have elsewhere discussed these background experiences leading to and accompanying gang participation as “multiple marginality” (Vigil 1988a), which constitutes a set of ecological, economic, sociocultural, and psychological forces, and events.

In large measure, the initiation is a “boyish” inclination to mark a “manly” passage under the pressures of the street. Personal and social factors are intertwined in understanding this process. It is notable that gangs have spontaneously formulated this initiation in such a way that it resembles what many pre-industrial tribal societies have followed as tradition. Gender differentiation and clarification and social solidarity and cohesiveness are both served by the gang initiation, just as they frequently are in such groups.

NOTES

1 Over the years, the term “gang” has been defined and redefined many times; (cf. Covey et al. [1992] for a recent review). In Chicano barrios in the U.S., gang has generally meant a territorially affiliated group of youths (typically organized into age-graded cliques) dedicated at least in part to fighting other, similar groups.