

Tommy Johnson
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As a child, it became apparent that the absence of certain “aspects, or people” truly affected my development. Although my mother is my rock, not having a father was difficult, as I needed a male figure to instill the attributes of a man. Thus, the absence led to me becoming one of those children who was misguided and desired something or someone to put me in the proverbial “right” direction. Fortunately, this absence began to be filled in 2008 when I joined The Chiku Awali Rites of Passage program. The program not only educated me on the importance of African heritage and life skills, it offered professional and caring African American men who filled a void in my life.

The actual “rites of passage” ceremony was, by far, the most important event that marked my transition from childhood to adulthood. This momentous day started out with an overnight retreat the night before at a vintage-looking mansion where the floors creaked and gave me chills down my spine while walking through the vast halls. The atmosphere did not help, as I was extremely nervous for the ceremony slated for the next morning because I had to perform an African dance and deliver a speech in front of a large audience. I vividly recall, all of us, walking through the streets of Spring Valley, NY where we were greeted by a multitude of awkward stares. They must have contemplated why a group of young men were walking in a straight line adorned in white African garments. When we arrived at the ceremony grounds, there were so many people and my nerves heightened. Instinctually, we fell in line to start our dance and it was then when I realized the confidence that I had gained in myself over the past year. A year earlier if someone had told me to do something, especially dancing, in front of a crowd I would have become extremely small inside and not have been able to execute the dance. In addition, we each had a solo to perform and when it came to my turn, I froze for a

second before releasing, letting everything go, and trusting myself. I was relieved when the dance was over and felt accomplished. Following the solos, mothers came up and fed a cube of sugar, which symbolizes the sweetness of life. Afterwards, fathers came up to feed a slice of lemon to symbolize the adversity we will experience in life. This proved to be the most arduous part of the ceremony for as I was the only one without a father present but a male family member stepped in, reassuring me. When this aspect of the ceremony ended, we commenced to presenting our speeches. I found that practicing public speaking in the program, a most valuable skill for any individual, prepared me exponentially, for this moment. I could see the pride on the many faces in the crowd as I confidently allowed each syllable, word, and phrase to resonate with the audience.

There was a time in my life where I felt like an outsider and was seeking someone to guide me in the right direction. The Chiku Awali Rites of Passage program assisted me in becoming a focused, a grounded, and the motivated young man I am today. I was exposed to many new ideas and had a number of experiences that opened my eyes to the world around me. This yearlong process, culminating in a momentous ceremony has, and will, forever define me as a man.