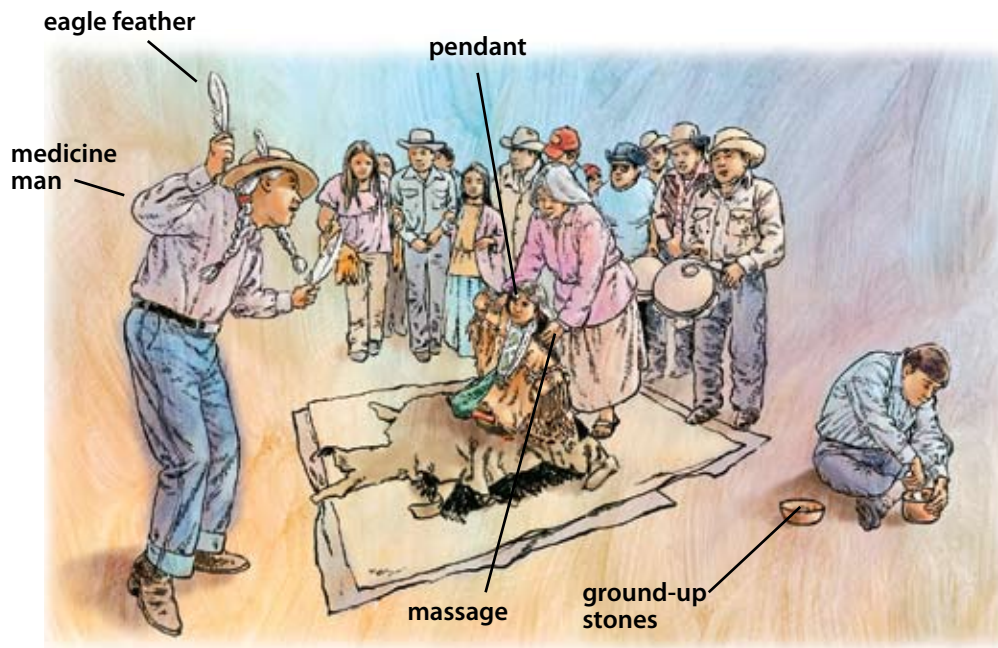




Coming of Age the Apache Way



The Apache Indians live in the southwestern region of the United States, and many of them still keep their traditional customs. A young Apache woman named Nita Quintero described one important custom:

The Sunrise Dance lasts for four days. It's the biggest ceremony of the Apache people—when a girl passes from childhood to womanhood. When my time came at 14, I didn't want to do it, because I felt shy. But my parents wanted it. My mother explained, "Then you will live strong to an old age." Older relatives and a **medicine man** helped us choose my sponsors, an older couple not related to us. I call them Godmother and Godfather.

The ceremony started on Friday evening. Godmother dressed me and put an **eagle feather** on my head and a shell **pendant** on my forehead. The dress is very special. It is made of soft leather, with 200 tiny bells. My mother and my aunt made it for me. For the rest of my life, I will wear this dress for special days. The most important thing that Godmother did in the ceremony was to **massage** my whole body, to give me all her knowledge. Then I danced around the fire for many hours.

On Saturday, I danced again, facing the sun at dawn. The medicine man sang to me in our Apache language. Even though it's my first language, I didn't understand all his words. After that, I ran for a long time so that bad people will never catch me. It started raining and my dress got very heavy, but I didn't feel tired.

The next day, Godfather painted my dress and my skin with paint made from corn and four colors of **ground-up stones**. After the painting, my father poured corn and small candies over me, so that I will never be hungry in my life. Then he passed out many kinds of food to all the people to wish that they will always have lots of food. On Monday, the last day, there were more blessings and visiting with our family and friends. We gave everyone presents.

I'm really glad I had a Sunrise Dance. It makes me understand how much my parents care about me and want me to grow up right. Now my childhood is finished, and people know that I am a woman. If I have a daughter some day, I want her to have a Sunrise Dance, too.



▲ Nita Quintero dances for hours during the Sunrise Dance