Reading 4–2
The Rites of Passage: Conclusions
Arnold van Gennep

Source: Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (1908; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 189–94.

Credit: *The Rites of Passage* by Arnold van Gennep, translated by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, with Introduction by Solon T. Kimball. University of Chicago Press. © 1960 by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee.

This reading is the conclusion to a book that describes the most famous of all categories of ritual, "rites of passage," first identified by the Belgian folklorist Arnold van Gennep in 1908. Van Gennep, although a contemporary of Emile Durkheim, and not at all averse to studying human behavior from a sociological perspective, worked independently of Durkheim's Année sociologique *school. Comparative library research led van Gennep to notice that when significant transitions in life are undergone, as at birth, puberty, marriage, and death, society often marks these transitions with what he called "rites of passage." He proposed that rites of passage in their exemplary form consist of three stages, each of which corresponds to a step in the progress of an individual or group through the complete ritual. These three stages are separation, liminality (or transition, or limen), and incorporation. In this triadic system the individual or group first undergoes separation from an original status, then is temporarily isolated from society, and finally is incorporated into a new status.*

The stage of separation connotes the idea of severance from the existing status. In the traditional Western wedding, for example, the bride is symbolically separated from the rest of society by a veil. Liminality is the stage that places individuals in no man's land where they find themselves "betwixt or between" statuses. They are marginally positioned—physically, psychologically, perhaps both—somewhere between their former status and their forthcoming one. At the altar the bride is located between her father, who represents the status she is departing, and her husband-to-be, who represents the new status she is about to enter. The final stage typically entails a meal shared by all involved members of the community or maybe a dance in which the initiate rejoins society in his or her new role. At a wedding, the exit of the bride and groom, arm in arm, through a throng of well-wishers symbolizes their reintegration into society in a new status. Ethnographers have applied van Gennep's fruitful insight to their own work (see Turner 1967, 93–111), and some have shown that local populations may emphasize one stage at the expense of the others. Other anthropologists have developed the notion of liminality to include spheres of social life not

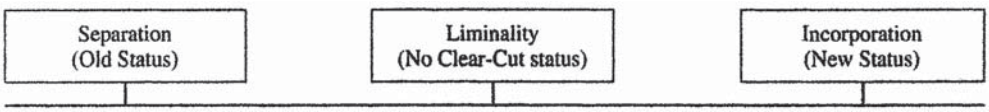


Figure 4.2. The three stages in a rite of passage

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considered by van Gennep, as Victor Turner has done with his influential notion of communitas.

Turner defines communitas as a set of "relationships between those jointly undergoing ritual transition" (Turner 1974, 274), as, for instance, among initiates undergoing a rite of passage. Within this situation, and since they are outside of the social structure and the institutions of society, their relationships with each other in the state of communitas are not subject to the norms of society. Instead of being governed by the conventions upon which social structure depends, their mutual relationships are spontaneous, and their interaction uninhibited by the conventional rules imposed by status or role-playing. This is not to say that individuals in communitas merge their individual identities, Turner says, but they are liberated from social conformity. Turner sees communitas as offering some benefits to society, most notably creativity and dynamism. Having escaped—however fleetingly—from normal social restrictions, individuals in a condition of communitas may, he suggests, experience feelings of unbounded exhilaration at being freed—even if temporarily—from irksome regulations. This feeling stimulates their sense of novelty, and provides those in communitas with the opportunity to take a fresh look at the social conventions they have abandoned. From this novel perspective they may even come to devise ways of improving or perhaps even replacing the traditional rituals and beliefs of society.

Our brief examination of the ceremonies through which an individual passes on all the most important occasions of his life has now been completed. It is but a rough sketch of an immense picture, whose every detail merits careful study.

We have seen that an individual is placed in various sections of society, synchronically and in succession; in order to pass from one category to another and to join individuals in other sections, he must submit, from the day of his birth to that of his death, to ceremonies whose forms often vary but whose function is similar. Sometimes the individual stands alone and apart from all groups; sometimes, as a member of one particular group, he is separated from the members of others. Two primary divisions are characteristic of all societies irrespective of time and place: the sexual separation between men and women, and the magico-religious separation between the profane and the sacred. However, some special groups—such as religious associations, totem clans, phratries, castes, and professional classes—appear in only a few societies. Within each society there is also the age group, the family, and the restricted politico-administrative and territorial unit (band, village, town). In addition to this complex world of the living, there is the world preceding life and the one which follows death.

These are the constants of social life, to which have been added particular and temporary events such as pregnancy, illnesses, dangers, journeys, etc. And always the same purpose has resulted in the same form of activity. For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross: the thresholds of summer and winter, of a season or a year, of a month or a night; the thresholds of birth, adolescence, maturity, and

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old age; the threshold of death and that of the afterlife—for those who believe in it.

I am certainly not the first to have been struck by the resemblances among various components of the ceremonies discussed here. Similarities have been noted between entire rites, as well as among minor details. Thus, for example, Hartland[1] observed the resemblances between certain initiation rites and some rites of marriage; Frazer[2] perceived those between certain puberty rites and funerals; Ciszewski,[3] those among certain rites of baptism, friendship, adoption, and marriage. Diels[4] followed by Dieterich[5] and Hertz,[6] pointed out similarities among certain ceremonies of birth, marriage, and funerals, and Hertz added to the list rites for the opening of a new house (but did not present evidence) and rites of sacrifice. Goblet d'Alviella[7] pointed out the resemblance between baptism and initiation; Webster,[8] that between initiation into secret societies and the ordination of a shaman.

Hertz[9] was interested in the order of funeral rites and alluded to what he called the "transitory stage"—the period that lasts from marriage to the birth of the first child and that corresponds to the "transitory stage" of the dead in Indonesia (especially in Borneo). But except for him, all these scholars, including Crawley,[10] saw only resemblances in particulars. For instance, the communal meal (Smith's "communion sacrifice"), union through blood, and a number of other ties of incorporation furnished the subject matter for several interesting chapters by Hartland. Certain rites of separation, like temporary seclusion and dietary wand sexual taboos, Frazer and Crawley found recurring in a great many sets of ceremonies. Diels, Dieterich, and, in general, all those who have been concerned with classical religions have demonic strated the importance in these religions of the so-called rites of purification (anointing, lustration, etc.). It was inevitable that marked resemblances would appear when a specific rite, such as the exchange of blood, was isolated for analysis in a monograph and when contexts were superimposed.

A host of ethnographers and folklorists have demonstrated that among the majority of peoples, and in all sorts of ceremonies, identical rites are performed for identical purposes. In this way, and thanks first to Bastian, then to Tylor, and later to Andree, a great many unilateral theories were destroyed. Today their orientation is of interest because, in the long run, it will make possible the delineation of cultural sequences and the stages of civilization.

The purpose of this book is altogether different. Our interest lies not in the particular rites but in their essential significance and their relative positions within ceremonial wholes—that is, their order. For this reason, some rather lengthy descriptions have been included in order to demonstrate how rites of preliminary or permanent separation, transition, and incorporation are placed in relation to one another for a specific purpose. Their positions may vary, depending on whether the occasion is birth or death, initiation or marriage, but the differences lie only in matters of detail. The underlying arrangement is always the same. Beneath a multiplicity of forms, either consciously expressed or merely implied, a typical pattern always recurs: *the pattern of the rites of passage.*

The second fact to be pointed out—whose generality no one seems to have noticed previously—is the existence of transitional periods which sometimes acquire a certain autonomy. Examples of these are seen in the novitiate and the

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betrothal. It is this concept of transition that provides an orientation for understanding the intricacies and the order of rites preliminary to marriage.

Third, it seems important to me that the passage from one social position to another is identified with a *territorial passage,* such as the entrance into a village or a house, the movement from one room to another, or the crossing of streets and squares. This identification explains why the passage from one group to another is so often ritually expressed by passage under a portal,[11] or by an "opening of the doors." These phrases and events are seldom meant as "symbols"; for the semicivilized the passage is actually a territorial passage. In fact, the spatial separation of distinct groups is an aspect of social organization. The children live with the women up to a certain age; boys and girls live separated from married people, sometimes in a special house or section or in a special kraal; at marriage one of the two spouses, if not both, changes residence; warriors do not keep company with blacksmiths, and sometimes each professional class has its assigned place of residence.[12] In the Middle Ages the Jews were isolated in their ghettos, just as the Christians of the first centuries lived in remote sections. The territorial separation between clans may also be very definite,[13] and each Australian band camps in a specific place when on the march.[14] In short, a change of social categories involves a change of residence, and this fact is expressed by the rites of passage in their various forms.

As I have said several times, I do not maintain that all rites of birth, initiation, etc., are rites of passage only, or that all peoples have developed characteristic rites of passage for birth, initiation, and so forth. Funeral ceremonies in particular, since they depend on local beliefs concerning man's fate after death, may consist primarily of defensive procedures against the soul of the deceased and rules of prophylaxis against the contagion of death; in that case they present only a few aspects of the typical pattern. Nevertheless, it is always wise to be careful about such conclusions; the pattern may not appear in a summary description of the funeral ceremonies of a particular people, although it is clearly evident in a more detailed account. Similarly, among some peoples who do not consider the woman impure during her pregnancy and who allow anyone to be present at delivery, childbirth is only an ordinary act, painful but normal. But in that case the pattern will be transposed to the rites of childhood, or it may be included in the rites of betrothal and marriage.

The units of ceremonial life among certain peoples sometimes differ from those which are prevalent in our own and most other societies and those around which the chapters of this book have been organized. It has been pointed out, for example, that among the Todas there is a single set of ceremonies extending from the parents' adolescence to the birth of the first child and that it would be arbitrary to divide this set into ceremonies preliminary to puberty, pertaining to puberty, to marriage, to pregnancy, to delivery, to birth, and to childhood. This amalgamation recurs among many other groups, but in the last analysis this effort at synthesis is not affected by it. Although the pattern of the rites of passage occurs in a different form in these instances, it is present nonetheless, and it is clearly elaborated.

Another general observation seems pertinent. The preceding analysis has shown variations in the internal division of societies, the relation of the diverse sections to one another, and the breadth of the barriers between them, which range from a simple imaginary line to a vast neutral region. Thus it would be

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possible to draw a diagram for each people in which the peaks of a zigzag line would represent recognized stages and the valleys the intervening periods. The apexes would sometimes be sharp peaks and sometimes flattened lines of varying length. For example, among certain peoples there are practically no betrothal rites except a meal shared at the moment of the preliminary agreement; the marriage ceremonies begin immediately afterward. Among others, on the contrary, there is a whole series of stages from the time of the betrothal (at an early age) until the newly married couple's return to ordinary life, and each of these stages possesses a certain degree of autonomy.

Whatever the intricacies of the pattern, the order from birth until death most often consists of successive stages best represented in rectilinear form. Among certain peoples like the Lushae, however, it is circular, so that all individuals go through the same endless series of rites of passage from life to death and from death to life. This extreme cyclical form of the pattern has acquired in Buddhism an ethical and philosophical significance, and for Nietszche, in his theory of the eternal return, a psychological significance.

Finally, the series of human transitions has, among some peoples, been linked to the celestial passages, the revolutions of the planets, and the phases of the moon. It is indeed a cosmic conception that relates the stages of human existence to those of plant and animal life and, by a sort of pre-scientific divination, joins them to the great rhythms of the universe.

ENDNOTES

1. Hartland, *The Legend of Perseus,* II, 335–99.
2. Frazer, *The Golden Bough,* pp. 204–7, 209, 210 ff., 418, etc.
3. Ciszewski, *Künstliche Verwandschaft bei den Südslaven,* pp. 1–4, 31, 36, 53, 54, 107–11, 114, etc.
4. Hermann Diels, *Sibyllinische Blätter,* p. 48.
5. Dieterich, *Mutter Erde,* pp. 56–57.
6. Hertz, "La représentation collective de la mort," pp. 104, 117, 126–27.
7. Goblet d'Alviella, "De quelques problèmes relatifs aux mystères d'Élcusis," p. 340.
8. Webster, *Primitive Secret Societies,* p. 176.
9. Hertz, "La représentation collective de la mort," p. 130, n. 5.
10. Crawley (*The Mystic Rose*) points out the precise similarities in the rites of marriage and funerals (p. 369) and rites of marriage and initiation (p. 326); on the last point, see also Reinach, *Cultes, mythes, et religions,* I, 309.
11. Trumbull has even noted (*The Threshold Covenant,* pp. 252–57)—among the Chinese, the Greeks, the Hebrews, and others—an identification of the woman and the door.
12. [The reader will note that all these instances are not equally applicable to all societies.]
13. See the separation of the clans in the Pueblo villages as described, among others, by Cosmos Mindeleff, *Localization of Tusayan Clans.* (Nineteenth Annual Report of The Bureau of American Ethnology [1897–1898], Part II [Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1900]), pp. 635–53.
14. See, among others, Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South East Australia,* pp. 773–77 (on camping rules).

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Reading 4–3
"Between Belief and Unbelief Lies the Performance of Salāt": Meaning and Efficacy of a Muslim Ritual
Heiko Henkel

Source: Heiko Henkel, "'Between Belief and Unbelief Lies the Performance of Salāt': Meaning and Efficacy of a Muslim Ritual," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11, no. 3 (2005): 487–507.

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Just as ethnographers habitually assume that all adherents of religion pretty much "believe the same" ideas (see reading 3–1, by Jack Goody) so too have anthropologists tended to regard ritual as the reflection of a stable set of beliefs held by those who carry them out. For James Frazer and Edward Tylor (reading 1–1) this stable connection was a logical outcome of their argument about the origins of beliefs and rituals, an argument that gave temporal priority to the former. They assumed that belief has to exist as an antecedent condition of ritual—otherwise, what meaning would religion have? Heiko Henkel provides here an example of a ritual that instead of having only one set of meanings to those who partake in it can in fact accommodate a diversity of beliefs, a quality

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