

Chapter 1

Anthropology and the Rites of Passage

It was at the turn of the Twentieth Century that anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep identified broad patterns of regeneration within communal systems. From his observation of the cultural transitions of renewal which are given form through rites and ritual, he came to understand a particular genre of social transition that he named the *Rites of Passage*. This descriptive phrase became the title of his landmark book which was first published in 1908.¹

Van Gennep came to believe that the energy found in any system eventually dissipates and must be renewed at crucial intervals. This renewal and transition is accomplished in the social milieu by various rites of passage. These rites not only foster transition but protect the social structure from undue duress and disturbance. Developmental life transitions necessitating rites of passage include pregnancy, childbirth, childhood, departure from childhood, puberty, betrothal-marriage and death. In addition, territorial transitions often require certain rites of passage as one moves physically from one geographic area to another. He “finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds.”²

Rites of passage held great importance in the change of social status, movement between tribes and castes, and the progression of age. They also served a crucial purpose in remarkable but temporary events such as illness, dangers, journeys, and war. The rites of passage include ceremonies which mediate transition on all the most important occasions of life.³ Though assuming different types of rites, he did not differentiate between them as clearly as would later elaborators.⁴

Van Gennep defined the structure of the Rites of Passage in terms of the “preliminal,” which includes separation from a previous world, a transitional period; and the “post-liminal,” distinguished by “ceremonies of incorporation into the new world.”⁵ Unique among his contemporaries for observing not only the particularity of cultures, but also patterns of transition common

to them, he came to believe that the rites of passage, including separation, transition, and incorporation, vary little except in matters of detail.⁶ The underlying structure is almost 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."⁷

For a scholar of his time, whose study centered upon the uniqueness of cultural forms as found in their own contexts, this was a remarkable and risky thesis. If the recognition of anything resembling structural universals was suspect in van Gennep's day among his peers, we could only expect it to be more so in our present post-modern atmosphere. With a heightened sensitivity to the ways in which dominant culture attempts to define what should be universal for all, especially for marginal groups on the periphery of power, there is an understandable inclination to question both perception and motive. As Robert Bellah reminds us, certain presumptions about knowing claim an objective knowledge as though it is "knowledge without a subject . . . context free, untouched by human hands, validated by its own methodological canons."⁸ To the contrary, knowing subjects are not distinct from their world in a splendid objectivity; they are a part of the world they perceive. "Thus we could speak not of knowing subjects knowing a world, but of a world knowing itself through knowing subjects."⁹ It is understandable why such a suspicion toward claims to universal knowledge is prevalent even when certain evidence might lead to more structuralist conclusions.

For van Gennep, though, structural commonality and distinctive cultural variety are not mutually exclusive; they co-exist and interact. Common patterns emerge in distinct and unique cultures. Life itself is described in terms of passage, and the rites of passage are the vehicles by which the great transitions are traversed. He frames this in the broadest terms:

For groups as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and 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 old age; the threshold of death and that of the afterlife - for those who believe in it.¹⁰

At the annual meeting of the *American Ethnological Society* in Pittsburgh, March 1964, anthropologist Victor Turner presented a paper which both built on and extended beyond the previous work of van Gennep.¹¹ Presenting a model of society as a "structure of positions," Turner describes the liminal period as an "interstructural situation."¹²

The term liminal derives from the Latin, *limins*, and refers to the threshold passageway between two separate places. The liminal state is a transitional

one; positioned between states determined by social place, status, maturity, socio-economic position, caste, physical location, mental or emotional condition, health, war and peace, scarcity or plenty.¹³

Formalized rites of passage are found primarily in the small, stable, cyclical societies relating to “biological and meteorological rhythms and recurrences rather than with technological innovations.”¹⁴ It is in such contexts that the three phases of the rites of passage - separation, limin, reaggregation may most clearly be seen. It is through the participation in this transitional process that one becomes transformed.¹⁵ Life is characterized by the punctuation of “a number of critical moments of transition.”¹⁶

In the first phase of transition in the rites of passage, that of *separation*, there is a time of detachment and detaching from the earlier period, place, or state in the cultural or social context. In the last phase of this process, the time of *aggregation*, there is a return to a stable position, one that is socially located but different from the former phase—a transformed, altered condition.

Between the beginning phase of separation and the concluding phase of aggregation, there is the *liminal*. This betwixt and between time is filled with ambiguity. This liminal phase lacks past coordinates, without the form and structure which is to be.

The person who is moving through the rites of passage, the “transitional being” or “liminal personae,” is defined by “a name and by a set of symbols.”¹⁷ The condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, betwixt and between states of being assigned by convention, “a confusion of all the customary categories.”¹⁸

One of the characteristics of the transitional or liminal being is that of ritual uncleanness. Turner includes the insights of anthropologist Mary Douglas to give the clearest exposition of the polluting qualities of the transitional being, as they are neither one thing or another. “Liminal personae nearly always and everywhere are regarded as polluting to those who have never been . . . ‘inoculated’ against them, through having been themselves initiated into the same state.”¹⁹

In Douglas’s own work, she relates the observations of social anthropology regarding the concepts of pollution and taboo to the liminal state. The concept of hygiene and defilement is the key to understanding order and disorder; being and non-being; form and formlessness; life and death in ancient societies.²⁰

Within the idea of contagion there is an inherent avoidance of defilement. Rituals of purity regulate order and unity in experience and society. Because persons within a liminal state are presently placeless, their status is indefinable.²¹ Danger is present in this transitional state, “simply because transition is neither one state nor the next. . . . The person who must pass from one to another is . . . in danger and emanates danger to others.”²² Prescribed

rituals control the danger through physical and symbolic separation and segregation from the larger community until a public entry into a new status takes place. During this most dangerous separated phase, this liminal period of separation for protection and passage, the novice or initiate is temporarily outcast. Ironically, to exist at the dangerous margins is also to touch a unique source of power.²³ Hence the liminal state is simultaneously dangerous, polluted, potentially contaminating, as well as power-filled and the source of mysterious fascination.

Indeed, the liminal state is so dangerous and its passage so delicate that careful attention must be given to liminal behaviors; they serve a crucial role in safe passage. The tribe, therefore, gives great attention to its totem and accompanying eating prohibitions related to particular genus and species. There exists a symbolic power which may interfere with transformation.²⁴

Turner's well-known and cited work, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*,²⁵ further develops his analysis of the liminal personae. Life within a community is a type of dialectical process, one which moves between structure and anti-structure with each individual alternating between these poles by means of transitions to new and changing states.²⁶ Therefore, the attributes of the liminal personae, by virtue of their very transitional nature, stand in binary opposition to established structure. As distinctions of structure are suspended, liminal entities take upon themselves symbolic, transitional status and particular attributes: nothingness, sexlessness, anonymity, submissiveness and silence, and sexual continence.²⁷

A special camaraderie develops among those sharing liminal passages. Turner has called this special bond between liminal persons "*communitas*." This is a bond which transcends any socially established differentiations. Those who share the liminal passage develop a community of the inbetween. This creates a community of anti-structure whose bond continues even after the liminal period is concluded. A significant sharing of the liminal passage creates strong egalitarian ties which level out differences in status and station which have been established by structure.²⁸

If an individual within a social system fluctuates, as does the system itself, between structure and anti-structure, rituals in the form of rites of passage negotiate complicated and conflicted relationships. As Catherine Bell describes it, ritual operates as a mechanism "for the resolution of basic oppositions or contradictions."²⁹ Ritual belongs to a category of experience, but it also is an important form of analysis, an interpretive key by which one may understand culture and the ways in which people make and re-make their worlds. As in other rituals, rites of passage are based on two structural patterns: an activity and the fusion of thoughts and beliefs with that activity.³⁰ As a thought-action dichotomy, ritual functions to create solidarity, negotiate or repress either change or conflict, and define reality itself.³¹