

Concepts on pilgrimage as a social process



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To what extent do Turner's concepts of 'liminality' and 'communitas' cast light on pilgrimage as a social process? The concepts of "liminality" and "comunitas" is "evanescent, like a wisp of smoke in the wind." (Shure, 2005)

It attempts to achieve some formalization of a social process in a theoretically perspective, though academically this can be achieved; it is very hard to master the full and in-depth concept of the pilgrimage. As all academic essays require the clear and standard definition of the question, Turner's concepts will subsequently be explained and furthermore the meaning behind both the "pilgrimage" and "social process" will be dealt with in detail. Turner draws on concepts of Van Gennep's model of rites of passage; liminality is a state of transition argued by Turner, it is "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (Turner, 1969, p. 95)

The attempt of the essay will show how the liminality identifies itself as period of transition with the social process of a pilgrimage, identify the equality and communitas will attempt to illustrate the process of a pilgrimage, however is structure truly lost during a pilgrimage and what is the concept of a social process and does a pilgrimage really fit into this definition, is a pilgrimage one of equality and individuality or that of a structured formation or a social experience.

"The rite of passage", focuses on the fact that a member of a group neither belongs to the group she was a part of or the group she will belong to after the liminal stage has been completed. A typical liminal stage can be seen as the child between becoming an adult and staying a child, puberty as a liminal stage in every individual persons own life pilgrimage. (Turner V. E.,

1978) Continuing with the notion of liminal periods one can observe that in Mary Douglas' Purity and Danger, illustrates that the individual is a polluting force on the external groups as liminal individuals are of "no status, insignia...kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally" (Turner V. , The forst of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual, 1967, p. 98) Liminality, In the use of Van Gennep's model of the three, Turner illustrates the phases of the ritual, the ritual is an catalyst and exemplifies the transitional period. The transitional period is identified as the liminal period. (Turner V. , 1967, p. 94) Seclusion from everyday life is a typical consequence to the liminal period which is the attempt to remove the individual from the society, subsequently forcing the individual into an interior pilgrimage of development of self. The application of classification is often used, in doing so this continues the transition and the removal of previous identity, furthermore denoting the status of transition. Turner develops this concept further in the ambiguity that is suggested, the concept of seclusion, and the non identification of the individual of gender or class. Turner continues to suggest the equality of this transitional period however many anthropologist are hesitant to apply this to an overall spectrum as in various societies the formation of structure is still imposed. (Turner V. , 1967)

Turner's three phase concept is simplistic in concept and difficult in application, phase one being the communication of sacra, where secret symbols are communicated to the ritual subjects in the form of exhibitions of sacred articles, actions, and instructions; the symbols represent the unity and continuity of the community. This then transcends into the liminal period of "ludic deconstruction" (Deflem, 1991, p. 13) and then subsequently the

recombination of the individual; Turner develops on this and we move into the phase three, which is the removal of all social structure and what is left is solely the authority of the instructor and aim of the ritual. (Turner V. E., 1978) This phase three fuelled Turner into formalising the concept of *Communitas* as the identification of one.

Anti-structure and *Communitas* are blood brothers in the opposition to structure, Turner clearly notes that *communitas* is present within in a liminal stage when structure is not present (Turner V. , 1969, pp. 94-96) as criticised above Turner clearly identifies this to be present within a period of liminality in a ritual process. The removal of all social elements and the exclusion from this constitutes a community bond, one of human kindness; constituting this ritual *communitas* of individuals in a separate transition society such as the concept of limbo between heaven and hell, between life and death. Turner further explains *communitas* in the Ritual Process, explaining that they refer to two further modalities of society. (Turner V. , Pilgrimage and *communitas*, 1974) A Dialectic process between various *communitas*, a general view of equality of individuals (later works such as Eade argue against this concept) and that of the structured individuals in a hierarchical system such as in the Hindu religion. The Dialectic has been used throughout time such as in Revolutions and the “ maximization of *communitas* provokes maximization of structure, which in turn produces revolutionary strivings for renewed *communitus*”. (Turner V. , 1969, p. 129)

Communitas is observed as something that is a phase in a process of a ritual not something that will continue after the process has been completed as the fate of any type of *communitas* is inevitably a “ decline and fall into

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structure and law” (Turner V. , 1969, p. 132), after which a new form of *communitas* may rise again. (Turner V. , *Pilgrimage and communitas*, 1974, p. 282) The concept of a pilgrimage and the community are centred to many scholarly debates, Eade and Sallnow question the role of the pilgrimage in sustaining or negating the social structure. (Sallnow, 1981) In following onto the concept that is discussed, the contrast to Marxist understanding to the pilgrimage as a structural maintenance juxtaposed with Turner’s pilgrimage concept of spontaneous *communitas*. Therefore in discussion of the experience does it not bind one to the larger concept of a community? (Eade J. a., 1991, p. 5)

The pilgrimage is an area of anthropology that had lacked any in-depth focus within the field till Turner’s “ *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*” and when formalising concepts on the pilgrimage one is prone to focus on the most powerful rituals performed by religious members and not necessarily the simplistic rituals of everyday life Eade & Coleman suggest that pilgrimage has been neglected due to this assertion of a pilgrimage of a liminal nature, and that of a daily life furthermore suggesting that a pilgrimage is something of extraordinary nature such as the pilgrimage to Mecca, a pilgrimage to a holy shrine Why in this definition has pilgrimage has been removed from everyday life and imposed on that of a religious ritual background, one could suggest that the simplistic notion of going in search of a new pair of shoes or a job is a pilgrimage of the individual. In doing so one is removing themselves from the pre-persona and transition into the new entity and within this liminal stage they are neither. (Eade, 2004) Though Turner states that the individual accounts such as “ documents or

oral narratives of the personal experiences” allow us to “ envisage the social process” of a pilgrimage, subsequently suggesting that even though a pilgrimage maybe an interior one between the divine or one or a social community to Mecca, a pilgrimage none the less is a social process. The pilgrimage as a social process is formed on the symbolic and structural elements, directly important when considering the apparent or lack of “ structure,” “ anti-structure,” “ communitas,” and “ liminality”. (Turner V. , 1974) (Turner V. , Pilgrimage and communitas, 1974) Turner observes structure as “ a more or less distinctive arrangement of mutually dependent institutions and the institutional organization of social positions and/or actors which they imply”. (Turner V. , 1974, p. 272) Therefore in such pilgrimages as Muktinath in Nepal such social relations as caste cause the formation of “ distance and inequality” (Turner V. , 1974, p. 272) (Edwards, 1972)

“ That religious pilgrimage serves to highlight social principles which are idiosyncratic to a particular religious system” (Messerschmidt, 1980) Most of Turner’s work was based on the Christianity bases of a pilgrimage as a result “ communitas behaviour was expected...inherent principles and idealistic expectations” (Turner V. E., 1978) though juxtaposed with the pilgrimage of Hinduism, it is very much a contradiction as a Hindu society is hierarchical and subsequently even though through transition this structured formation is enforced. In relation to the question being addressed, this example illustrates Turner’s specific concepts of liminality and communitas do not act coherently throughout all religious pilgrimages. Even though structure plays an element in this example of a pilgrimage. Pilgrimage does not inherently maintain or remove the structure, though Starke and Finke suggest that it

rather strengthens the bonds between the individual to a symbolic community. Therefore even though Messerschmidt suggests that structure is within the liminal stage and subsequently *communitas* does not exist, could not suggest that the symbolic bond that is being achieved is subsequently causing a *communitus* that exists in a greater place. (Stark, 2000) If we look at the Hajj, it is one of the largest and most well known religious pilgrimages to date, that brings pilgrims back into “ the time of the Prophets and into the utopian-like society that previously existed”. This pilgrimage is international, members of Islam ascend Mecca to fulfil a once in a life connection to a spiritual community, it is a pilgrimage of the individual however a social process which will forever be linked into history, with the notion of *communitus* one could further suggest that the linking with a spiritual holy place one is not just linking to a *communitus* of the present but that of the past and future. If all are equal at this period of time and structure therefore the *communitus* above time. (McCarter, 2005)

Turner’s concepts of “ liminality” and “ *communitas* cast a light on the social process of a pilgrimage in some specific notions. It has been clear that Turner has centred all research majorly on a Christianity stance and subsequently foreshadowing other religious pilgrimages that actually do not have the removal of the structure within the liminal stage and therefore the inherent structure is transposed from the pre to post formations of the individual. As the question directly asks to what extent does Turner’s concepts cast light, it can be seen that metaphorically Turner has been the lighthouse to the development of anthropology of the pilgrimage; however inevitably with the development of theories, Turner’s concepts

notwithstanding will always foreground others. Though as Modern development requires less need for lighthouses, so do the concepts of Turner no longer stand alone with theories of social process and pilgrimage. Turner illustrates that ritual is a response to a society's demand but that is actively involved in the human interaction and meaning. His actions and concepts are far from "static". (Deflem, 1991) Furthermore supported in new research of John Eade, one can see that within Turner's concepts the expression of a pilgrimage as something that is not a daily process has once again cast a shadow on the mundane concepts of a pilgrimage. One, can see that the direct social understanding of a pilgrimage is that of a religious one; the search for the divine inspiration and "where miracles once happened, still happen, and may happen again" (Turner V. E., 1978, p. 6)