

Van Gennep's stages of a rite of passage



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Van Gennep's stages and understanding a rite of passage in relationship to one or more rituals

Wittgenstein (1987, p. 14, Chapter I. Introduction) set a large challenge for anthropology that has yet to be taken up. After reading the *Golden Bough*, he argues that Frazer made a crucial mistake by trying to deduce what things mean. He accused Frazer of not understanding that practices signify nothing but themselves, and that the extent of anthropology could be to delimit and work out the practical structure of such tasks. For the past fifty years or so, anthropology has largely ignored Wittgenstein's remarks and has built an anthropology that privileges the observer. It privileges the observer because it is only the observer who can read into phenomenon their underlying socio-cultural meaning. It is precisely this sort of reifying reductionism that we find in Van Gennep's (1909) theory of the rite of passage.

Rites of passage present an irresistible and difficult focus for the ethnographer: they are constellations of compacted meanings removed from the process of everyday life. In the author's own experience, they are also some of the most frustrating things to analyse. Presented with so many unusual phenomenon, the ethnographer asks, what does this mask mean only for your informant to respond with a shrug. This difficulty of compacted meaning may partly explain why ethnographers are so quick to ignore the phenomenon involved in a rite of passage in favour of reading it as a structural process. This difficulty may also explain why, fully one hundred years after it was published, Van Gennep's Rites of Passage theory remains unchallenged in the anthropological world.

That said, Van Gennep's overall structures has remained remarkably adept at matching up to all the rituals people apply to it. However, there should not be taken as a mark of its success. It one is to recall that the 'success' of Evans-Pritchards structural-functionalism (Kuper: 1988, pp. 190-210, Chapter 10 Descent Theory: A Phoenix from the Ashes), was more based on the tastes and cultural paradigms of anthropologists than it was on its correspondence to any ethnographic reality. This essay will argue that Van Gennep's stages of rites of passage do indeed cohere to many rituals, however, like Turner's schemes (1995), these stages do little to explain to us the significance of ritual. In order to do so, this essay will argue, it is necessary to turn to how the phenomenologically experienced reality of ritual constitutes the social reality of a ritual. To make this argument this essay will focus on three rites of passage: French marriage ritual in Auvergne (Reed-Dahany: 1996), Yaka healing rituals in Zaire (Devisch: 1998, 1996) and refugee experience in Tanzania (Malikki: 1995). The last example proves the most difficult for Van Gennep's theory: because though it corresponds to his stages, nothing about the experience of refugees would correspond to the socially rigid categories Van Gennep claims are central to rites of passage. From this example, this essay will argue to understand rites of passage we need to consider more fully the relationship of time-out-of-time in culture. For until we confront the question of what allows a certain unit of time to be taken out of the experience of the everyday, we will be no closer to understanding how rites of passage deal with other senses of time-out-of-time.

Van Gennep (1909, Chapter I The Classification of Rites) attempts to demonstrate that there is a universal structure underlying all rites of passage. While there might be physiological factors involved (e. g. coming to puberty) the mechanisms that determined the rites of passage are always social, and these social constructions display a cross-cultural similarity. Rituals and ceremonies in Van Gennep's scheme serve the function of guaranteeing one's path through liminal transitory categories as one passes through the stages of separation, transition and reincorporation that he claims are present in all stages of rites of passage. What we can note about this model already is that the ritual serves the purpose of a unit of causation in a socially determinist model of society: there is a societal need that ritual fulfills. Because of this functional model, we are none the wiser as to how a society determines the exact elements of a ritual, or how people experience the ritual.

Van Gennep's approach is based on a socially functional model: though he is far more inclined to admit the power of the individual in the social form *sui generis* than is Durkheim (Zumwalt: 1982: 304). That said, he still claims (Van Gennep, 1909, p. 72, Chapter Six Initiation Rites) that in mutilation: the mutilated individual is removed from the mass of common humanity by a rite of separation which automatically incorporates him into the defined group. His emphasis here is on the social end process: as if it could somehow be separated from the phenomenological experience of the pain. Thus, the process of scarification that marks many initiation rituals is merely placed as part of the logic of social cohesion: following such a pattern, it is hard to explain the beating and terror that often accompanies initiation rituals.

Indeed, it ignores the central challenge Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 115, Part I The Body, Chapter III The Spatiality of One's own Body and Motility) posed when he asked: How can we understand someone else without sacrificing him to our logic or it to him?

The domain of phenomenology is closely linked to that of ritual. Jackson (1996, p. 3, Chapter I Introduction) characterises phenomenology as a project designed to understand being-in-the-world. This attempt to understand how inter-subjective experience is constituted is a possible answer to the question Merleau-Ponty poses above how does one understand the other. Characteristically, phenomenology attempts to answer this project by not privileging one domain of experience or knowledge, as none of them can encompass the totality of the lived experience. Instead, it is an investigation into (Ricoeur, 1979, p. 127, Chapter IV The Structure of Experience) the structures of experience which proceed connected expression in language. This is what Merleau-Ponty would call the preobjective.

This understanding of the importance of structures that escape linguistic formalisation has also been part of the emphasis of the study of ritual in anthropology. In Levi-Strauss' (1965, pp. 167-186, Chapter Nine The Sorcerer and His Magic) classic examination of north American healing sorcerers he emphasises how the experience of the healing takes place between the triad of patient, sorcerer, and social body. He also emphasises the importance in this relationship of the sensory experience of the sorcerer. However, despite this emphasis, he is undertaking his analysis from a recorded text, and his emphasis is on the structural coherency sorcery provides rather than its

embodied experience. He writes (ibid: 181): In a universe which it [the social body] strives to understand but whose dynamics it cannot fully control, normal thought continually seeks the meaning of things which refuse to reveal their significance. So-called pathological thought, on the other hand, overflows with emotional interpretations and overtones, in order to supplement an otherwise deficient reality. The sensory experience of the ritual as understood by Levi-Strauss is constituted as a means-end relationship to get to the desired goal, the assertion of the cosmological unity of the social body. Here we can see the same pattern of assumptions about bodily meaning we noted earlier in Van Gennep.

This emphasis, a legacy of Durkheim, characteristically means that repetition, often the element of ritual that constitutes its definition, is overlooked as window-dressing to the mythical 'meat' of the ceremony which is that which can be vocalised (and thus objectified). This legacy can also be found in the two anthropologists whose writing about myth has defined the field, Van Gennep and Turner (1986, 1995). In Van Gennep, central to his notion of ritual as a rite of passage is a sacred-profane dualism, which is also kept in Turner's scheme, though he also includes the notion of the marginal or liminal. In this distinction we can see that both theorists only deal with the relationship between the sacred and profane in terms of social structure and fail to deal with these elements interpenetrate in everyday lived reality.

In a sense, their distinction is similar to that made by Mauss (1993, p. 12, Chapter I The Exchange of Gifts and the Obligation to Reciprocate) when understanding the gift. Mauss claims that the person for whom the sacrifice

is performed enters the domain of the sacred and then rejoins the profane world, which is separate from the sacred, though conditioned by it. For Turner's early work, and for Van Gennep, ritual is the heightened activity in which the sacred-profane worlds are mediated between. What is advantageous about these approaches is that they identify ritual as the situation or drama par excellence, as an organisation of practice constructed and defined by participants and it is a practice in which the participants confront the existential conditions of their existence.

However, there are problems with Turner and Van Gennep's approaches which parallel that of Levi-Strauss'. In both cases, the emphasis is on the formal unity of the social world. Kapferer (1997, pp. 55-61, Chapter II: Gods of Protection, Demons of Destruction: Sorcery and Modernity. The Transmutation of Suniyama: Difference and Repetition) illustrates some of these problems when analysing the Sri Lankan suniyama, or exorcisms. While he agrees with Turner that the suniyama constitute their own space-time, he also makes clear the extent to which they borrow from everyday life. Rather than seeing resolution and unity in the suniyama, he notes that the reactualisation of the ordinary world amid the virtuality of the rite is a moment of intense anxiety. In the events of the chedana vidiya, the tension, he argues, is not just about the destructive forces of the demon but also about the re-emergence of the victim in the ordered world. One can see in the suniyama that the lived world is not reducible to categories, despite the attempts at structuration. It is an excellent example of what Jackson (1989, p. 5, Chapter I Paths Towards a Clearing) calls man's' rage for order, and simultaneously usurpation of that order coupled with an awareness that the

order is always exceeded by the lived world. Kapferer refuses to push dualistic or triadic models onto the Sri Lankan suniyama, and argue for it being a continuous process orientated at the restitution of social action. One of the ways this uncertainty the rage for order and its ambiguity or infirmity is manifested is in sensory experience. It is here that the Durkheimian project is unable to provide a satisfactory analytical framework and where phenomenology can provide some edifying lines of inquiry.

None of these lines of inquiry are pursued by Reed-Dahany (1996), who illustrates the extent to which Van Gennep can be utilized, and also the extent to which Van Gennep's scheme founders in its constructionist model, in her analysis of marriage practice in Auvergne. She notes that (ibid: 750) in the early morning after a wedding, a group of unmarried youths burst into the room to which the bride and groom have retired for the night and present them with a chamber pot containing champagne and chocolate. The youth and the newly wed couple then consume the chocolate and champagne together. The participants describe it as something which appears disgusting, and yet actually tastes really good. Reed-Dahany utilises Bourdieu's work on taste to show how this reversal of the established bourgeois order simultaneously parodies marriage and bourgeois taste. Like the examples we see in Turner's work, the sacred ritual of marriage here is associated with the inversion of established meanings only for these meanings to be ever more forcefully reinserted after the period of liminal disaggregation.

We can see how such a ritual fits Van Gennep's scheme very well: the couple are segregated from society (both from each other before marriage, and

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then from society the honeymoon afterwards) before being reaggregated. Thus, Reed-Dahany has no problem in understanding the ritual of la rôtie as a ritual of reincorporation in the sense Turner had meant it. Through the partaking of food with the unwed they are allowed to re-enter society, the wet-substance consumed standing in for fecundity. Indeed, as Reed-Dahany notes (ibid: 752) Van Gennep himself had commented on these rituals in his work on folk customs in rural France and had pursued much the same conclusion. Yet what Reed-Dahany notes is that the focus for the people involved in the ritual are the scatological reference implicit in the ritual: these elements of parody of bourgeois society that take place at the level of bodily praxis are left unexplained by Van Gennep's scheme, in which any set of symbols is replaceable with another as long as they have the same social purpose.

This is why Van Gennep has great problems explaining rites of passage that are not formal. Yet, it is not the case that rites of passage and other temporal markers must be institutionalised. As Malikki (1995, p. 241, Chapter Six Cosmological Order of Nations) notes: historical consciousness is lodged within precarious accidental processes that are situated and implicated in the lived events and local processes of the everyday. In her work, Malikki looks at the creation of a mythico-history among Hutu refugees who fled the mass killing of 1972 in Burundi for Tanzania fifteen years ago. She contrasts two groups; the first, living in an urban environment, deploy their ethnicity and history only rarely, situationally and relationally, and attempt not to stick out. In contrast, at the refugee camp, the inhabitants were continually engaged in recreating their homeland. Malikki (ibid: p. 3,

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notes: The camp refugees saw themselves as a nation in exile, and defined exile, in turn, as a moral trajectory of trials and tribulations that would ultimately empower them to reclaim, or recreate anew, the homeland in Burundi.

One of the noticeable elements in this construction of a mythico-history is the way in which it internalised exterior categories, and then subverted them. For instance, Malikki draws attention to the way in the powerful discourse of inter-nationalism, refugees are in an ambiguous space, particularly polluting, between national boundaries. Malikki uses the work of Van Gennep and Turner to understand how the Hutu refugees in the camp had turned this liminal space into a trial of separation, which would empower them to return. The narratives that people told Malikki were incredibly standardised, they functioned, as Malikki notes, as moral lessons, that represented (ibid: p. 54, Chapter Two The Mythico History) a subversive recasting and reinterpretation of [events] it in fundamentally moral ways. In Malikki's work, we can see that rites of passage can be lodged in accidental processes and contingent historical events. Even here, they seem to fit the categories of Van Gennep's classification. However, one notes that nothing about these classifications explains the way these patterns were then sedimented into a rite of passage that structured and organised practice.

She notes that one of the key moments in this history is when the refugees arrive across the border in Tanzania, and are able to meet other refugees from Burundi (there appeared to be little widespread national connections before then ibid: p. 103, Chapter Two The Mythico History). Thus, collective

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effervescence of consciousness, which, as the narrative describes, allowed people to understand the final secret of the Tutsi's, was not just experienced verbally. The supplanting of the social order with chaos (though an ordered chaos) was accompanied by very physical processes. The fear of pursuit, the bodily feeling of cramp and hunger, the sight of corpses on the road: all these were processes that the refugees took great pains to describe to Malikki. The refugees referred to this moment as one of revelation, and this memory, which must have in part formed the social bond that allowed for the creation of the mythico-history, was a silent history of bodily feeling and gesture as much as it was one verbalised.

If we develop Malikki's understanding of the similarity between rites of passage and the refugee experience slightly, there is a parallel between the symbolic death and rebirth in the liminal stage of separation in a rite of passage, normally accompanied by ritual action that provides the unity of a shared painful experience, and the collective pain of that crossing into Tanzania in 1972. These phenomenological bodily experienced realities are not marginal to a group feeling of cohesion: rather than social aspects of the rite of passage stem from these silent memories of bodily experience.

We will now turn to an analysis of the rites of passage in the Yaka healing cults of Zaire. In contrast to the social world of the Yaka, which is patrilineal, femaleness, uterine filiation and mediatory roles are cyclical and occupy a concentric life-cycle (Devisch: 1996, p. 96, *The Cosmology of Life Transmission*). It is within this contrast that the healing rituals takes place. The healing rituals are not a collection or commiseration, rather, they are bodily and sensuous, they (ibid: 95) aim at emancipating the initiates destiny

clearing and enhancing the lines of force in the wider weave of family. It is not just in the matrilineage that healing occurs however, for (Devisch: 1998, p. 127, Chapter Six Treating the affect by remodelling the body in a Yaka Healing Cult) it is in the interplay of physical links and individualising relationships a person weaves through his mothers lineage with the uterine sources of life and the primary and fusional object that the Yaka cultures in Kinshasa and south-west Congo localise the origin of serious illness, infirmity and madness.

The ritual allows for the rebirth of the individual, and occurs at the margins (physical and cultural) of the society. This re-sourcing of the body is very fundamentally sensory. For instance, in the period of seclusion a young Mbwoolu become body doubles, and become an inscribed body envelope that serves as his interface with the social body. It is important to note there that the Yaka identity is structured as an envelope and knot. Harmful things like thievery or sorcery are associated with this knot being tied too tightly or loosely, inversion of normal bodily functions, such as flatulence or ejaculation outside of coitus can be understood as the knot being tied too tightly or gently. The person in this sense is constructed inter-subjectively, spreading outwards in a myriad of exchanges and well formed knots.

The transference to the Mbwoolu involves an enacted cosmology where the objects and the initiate are covered with a red paste. Devisch notes that the notion of the person in these ceremonies is to be found to be located at the skin level, through a myriad of exchanges. At an early stage in the ritual, the initiates and the Mbwoolu figurines are floated in water, and this is the beginning of a process that continues throughout the ritual, as the initiate's

skin is turned inside out. In this process, the illness is displaced onto the Mbwoolu, and his insides become a receptacle for the power of the healing ritual. The figurines become a social skin to be idealised, socialised and protected.

The importance of sensory experience in the ritual is also in the moment where the master shaman bites off the head of a chicken and sprays the initiates with its blood. Devisch (ibid: 146) also talks about the importance of the fusional absorption in the rhythm and music, then (ibid) [the] tactile olfactory and auditory contacts envelop, and are finally interwoven into an increasingly elaborate utterance, by the mirrored gaze. By this Devisch is alluding to the process by which the initiate converts the primary fusional object into phenomena of identification by incorporation. In this process of incorporating the figurine into themselves, all the senses are in use. What is noteworthy and excellent in Devisch's work is that while he does occasionally lapse into statements about 'trance-inducing music', she is clear to emphasise that sensual phenomenon are not part of a means-end relationship to induce the required result, nor are they somehow secondary to the 'meaning' of the ritual. Rather, he emphasises that the sensory experience is in many respects, the ritual that the experience of being covered in red clay and submerged in water and having your skin reversed cannot be separated from the transference of your illness to the statues. What Mauss (1993, p. 2, Chapter I The Exchange of Gifts and the Obligation to Reciprocate) was right to emphasise when he claimed sacrifice was a total social fact was that questions of sacrifice are questions of Being first and foremost. They occupy a place where the social world is made and remade.

In Devisch, what is understood to constitute the central aspects of the Yaka healing cult are sensory experience. This is very different to the understanding laid out by Van Gennep and Turner. For while Devisch makes clear that in the Yaka healing cult one is separated from society pending one's reincorporation, he does not allow the socially functional explanation to obscure what the ceremony might mean. One can see the difference if we contrast Turner's work to Devisch's. For Turner, the performative and sensory aspects of healing function at its normative pole, the pole at which ritual healing is a resolution of social and emotional conflict. The power of dominant symbols, for Turner, derived from their capacity to condense structural or moral norms the eidetic pole and fuse them with physiological and sensory phenomena and processes - the oreitic pole. In Turner, the oreitic pole, where emotional and bodily praxis is centred, is a given. For Devisch, this given in Turner's work is a critical problem, for it prevents his understanding that the basis of creativity in ritual (1993, p. 37, 1. 6 Body and Weave: A Semantic-Praxiological Approach) is to be sought not in liminality but in the body seen as a surface upon which the group and the life-world is inscribed.

We have seen in three rituals how Van Gennep's classification superficially fits the pattern of behaviour. However, like in the work of Victor Turner, we have seen that Van Gennep cannot explain the detail of rites of passage using his system of classification. In his system, the details of a ceremony become marginal, whereas for the practitioners they are central. To explain such details we need to pursue a phenomenologically informed anthropology such as that which Devisch practices. For if a rite of passage is a primarily

embodied experience, then the body cannot simply be a receptacle for social value rather, one would argue, it can also be a generative movement, both of meaning and of experience

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