

## A MODERN-DAY PERSPECTIVE ON ARNOLD VAN GENNEP'S *THE RITES OF PASSAGE*

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*Abstract: The paper takes a closer look to a cornerstone of anthropology, folkloristics and ethnography, Arnold van Gennep's The Rites of Passage. The book, published in 1909 is a vast and varied collection of rites collected by van Gennep from different cultures, rites depicted in detail and analyzed in order to provide a basic classification and structure. This perspective on life as a continuous passing from one stage into another, marked by rites, offers us a better understanding on the ease life seems to have in the past. Moreover, the book offers not only structure, but van Gennep's immensely vast knowledge on the many different cultures, tribes and customs he witnessed or collected recollections of, rites of birth and childhood, of initiation, of territorial passage, of betrothment, marriage, and childbirth, of reaching old age, of passing and funeral. All rites are made up of three stages: the separation, the transition and the inclusion, and all rites mark the shift from stage of one's life into another, from belonging to one group, to belonging to another, thus offering the people involved a chance of respite and reflection, providing balance, stability and a sound structure on which one could lean on in hard times.*

*Keywords: rites, rituals, passage, initiation, anthropology*

Published in 1909, *Les rites de passage* by anthropologist and folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) has become since then a staple of anthropology. The book translated first into English in 1960 and later into more languages has introduced the phrase of 'rites of passage' to psychology, history and religious studies. Moreover, it became one of the fundamental theories of folkloristics, Dundes arguing that "It is probably fair to say that no example of folkloristics analysis has had more impact on the scholarly world than this classic study" (1999: 100-101).

Arnold van Gennep dedicated his life to anthropology and folkloristics, never once having the chance to teach or condone his research in an academic institution in France. He is considered to be the father of "formal processual analysis" (Turner, 1969: 166), a pioneer of structuralism (Dundes, 1999: 101), a master of French folklore (Zumwalt, 1988). His works played a key role in connecting the 19<sup>th</sup> century late folkloristics and the contemporary ethnography. He was a major influence in establishing folkloristics' academic status and dedicated his life to folklore studies, becoming one of the most representative figures of folklore scholars in Europe.

*Les rites de passage* is the first book of its kind and is introduced thus by its author: "Detailed descriptions and monographs concerning magico-religious acts have accumulated in sufficient number in the last few years that it is now possible to attempt a classification of these acts, or rites, that would be consistent with the progress of science" (van Gennep, 1960: xxv). The author, having comprised an enormous collection of descriptions and recollections of rituals performed not only by tribes and isolated

groups, but also tightly organised social structures already well established in the society, like the Catholic Church, thus gathering together the experience of human life, the different groups belonging not only to different cultures, continents or beliefs, but also to different centuries.

While each society can be divided into many social groups, according to many criteria, there are two distinct divisions that have witnessed the test of time: the secular and the religious, the profane and the sacred. For a person to pass from one group to another (age group, professional caste, social class, even from one citizenship to another), they must first fulfil a series of conditions, "all of which have one thing in common: their basis is purely economic or intellectual" (van Gennep, 1960:1). When it comes to the passing from the secular world into the magico-religious one, the division is so great between the two worlds, that the person cannot pass without an intermediate stage, the transition being always marked by ceremonies or acts of a special kind, derived from one's belief, a particular feeling, mood or frame of mind.

If we were to look down on a scale of civilisation, we were to see, according to van Gennep, "an ever-increasing domination of the secular by the sacred" (van Gennep, 1960:2), magic or holy entering every single phase of a person's life, his everyday living. In this way, the life on an individual can be easily defined as a series of passages from one age to another, from one occupation to another, a progression from one group to another, each of these accompanied by ritualistic, special acts. Thus, life becomes a succession of stages with similar beginnings and ends: birth, childhood, puberty, adulthood, marriage, parenthood, advancement to a superior social class, career/professional advancement and death. In his studies, van Gennep discovered "a wide degree of similarity among ceremonies" of passage from one group to another, drawing the conclusion that life resembles nature, due to its periodicity, cyclicity, and dependency on celestial changes.

In classifying the rites, Gennep firstly divides them into two categories: sympathetic and contagious, the firsts being defined as "based on belief in reciprocal action of like on like" (van Gennep, 1960: 4), while the later revolves around the "belief that natural or acquired characteristics are material and transmissible" (van Gennep, 1960: 7). Another classification is that of dynamistic rites, based on an impersonalized power, such as mana, and animistic rites, based on a personalized power represented by single or multiple beings, animals, plants, such as totems, may that power be anthropomorphic or amorphous. Rites are also easily classified into direct and indirect, positive and negatives, but what is important to remember is that one rite can belong to four categories at the same time. For example, the act of avoiding to walk under a ladder can be classified as dynamic, contagious, direct and negative. Most of the rites of the same kind can be easily classified under a category, but the classification is always just a matter of proportion, an animistic and positive rite, having an included dynamic and negative counterpart that is proportionally smaller.

Of course, the focus falls back onto the importance of the transitions from one form/cosmic world/ social class to another and van Gennep places the rites of passage into a special category of their own, one which they fully deserve. Upon further study,

rites of passage are subdivided in rites of separation or preliminal rites, rites of transition or liminal rites and rites of incorporation or postliminal rites. All the subdivisions are part of every passage rite, but they are not equally important or elaborated. For example, birthrites generally put more emphasis on the separation aspect, marriage rituals focus more on the transitional aspect, while in the rites connected to introducing the new-born to their family and community the postliminal rites are the ones weighting more.

The first category of rites approached by Gennep are the territorial passages, a category definitely richer and more diverse in the past than it is in the present, nowadays the passage from one territory into another requiring documentation, rather than a successful ritual through which the visitor can prove his good intentions. While the borders between territories disappeared, blurred and certainly became rarer, their existence implies a neutral zone or a transition zone which is not limited only to rites of territorial passage, but to all ceremonies or rites of passage, becoming a symbol, rather than a physical space between lands. What is interesting about the neutral zone arises from the fact that when discussing smaller spaces, towns, neighbourhoods, religious temples or house, it becomes physically smaller (a street, a bridge, a sign, the threshold of a door, a wooden beam or a stone) until it disappears altogether. The neutral zone is more often than not a portal, the door between the worlds with multiple rituals tied to it. Even more, transition rituals are not only ceremonies connected to the portals; the author also points out evidence of rites happening when crossing a mountain or crossing a river, rites happening when changing residence, or when exiting a house, a temple of another building (van Gennep, 1960: 22).

Of course, in religious settings, there are multiple, easy to identify rites of entering or exiting a sacred space (kissing icons, sign of cross, bowing to sculptures/pictures, exiting on a different door than the one you came through, etc) and the territorial passage from one country to another sometimes requires special documentation. The question is 'what other rites have we maintained and still adhere to in secular contemporaneity?' It is my opinion that almost all social instances that we consider today to be 'polite' are remnants of rites of territorial passage, such as knocking on a door and waiting for a spoken acceptance before entering a room/house/ office, wiping our shoes on a mat before entering a house or taking our shoes off, taking off hats or scarfs, bringing a housewarming gift when visiting a friend for the first time or visiting someone's new residence for the first time, etc.

The study under scrutiny highlights that territorial passages imply the existence of two different entities: the group already inhabiting a space and the individuals/foreigners/strangers coming into that space. Van Gennep notices a pattern of ritual behaviour in such instances that follows the same stages, even if the length and intricacy or importance of the stages differ. The rite follows five main stages: stop, almost always required by the already established residents; a waiting period, imposed on the foreigners; a transition period; the individuals' entering the community; and lastly the incorporation of the foreigners into the community. There are many, multiple particular rites that are included in this basic procedure that we recognise to be true

even in present day social situations, such as physical contact (a handshake, fist bump, kiss on the cheek, etc), an exchange of gifts, that can include food or beverages, the act of eating/ drinking/ smoking a pipe together, or, rarer in the present, sacrificing an animal, anointing in religious/ spiritual instances, foreigners and members of the group being attached together, being covered together or sharing a seat. Greeting are probably the most common rites of incorporation of an individual in a group, while the sharing of wives is rare and forgotten in civilised societies. All the rites that revolve around established groups or individuals, may them be of incorporation (happening not only when including new adult members, but also in the case of adoption) or separation (in the case a group is sent to enact revenge on another, to war or exiled) are gradual, carried out in stages as not to disturb the daily routine, but to ease into the new.

Pregnancy and childbirth are grouped together in one category of rites that, in my opinion, alongside the initiation rites, are almost, if not completely, extinct in the present. Once more, the entire experience of pregnancy and childbirth is sectioned into the same three stages: the separation, the transition and the incorporation. The separation happens in the early stages of pregnancy, the pregnant woman being considered in some tribal communities a stranger and thus becoming isolated from the other sex, her biological family and even other members of her own sex. The transition period is considered to be the remaining of the pregnancy, sometimes peppered with smaller scale rituals that ensure the good health of the mother and of the child. The reintegration happens after the childbirth and is made up of two co-dependent elements: the physical return and the social return, which, in our society coincide. What is interesting to notice it that the complexity of the rites in tribal communities increases in atypical cases, such as birthing twins. The first birth is especially important and the newly mother gains with it not only a better and higher social standing, but also a more powerful and stronger bond with the spouse, the in-laws and the community.

Rites related to new-born's birth and subsequent childhood are a collection of moments that do not necessarily follow the same three-stage pattern, but can be grouped into rites of separation, transition and inclusion. The first rites are those of separation and start with the severing of the umbilical cord, being followed by protection rites and gradual incorporation into the community. The new-borns, like their mothers, are initially considered separate from the society they live in and must slowly be incorporated, their transition beginning with the moment their mother socially returns from childbirth. Not only the cutting of the umbilical cord, but other separation rites like: first bath, first cutting of the nails, first haircut, have hygienic purposes alongside the role of separating the child from its mother. Rites of incorporation, that gradually happen, are: naming the child, nursing for the first time, presenting the child to the close family, the baptism, presenting the child to the community, the first tooth, etc. What must be noted here is the fact that this gradual incorporation that happens throughout the childhood will only be fully achieved after the initiation rituals have successfully been completed.

Childhood rites are best described as a collection of 'firsts' unable to be clearly organised into a pattern, due to the fact that these first moments have no connection to

the cyclicity of nature, and also because they happen at different biological ages not only in different cultures, but also in different families and even for children of the same family. It is no wonder, that in the absence of rites to mark these moments, in our present-day society, parents feel the almost compulsive need to capture in photography and mementos all these 'firsts' so important for their child. Without a rite to make the proper transition from new-born to an infant, a toddler and so on, in the secular world, parents have maybe found behaviours that fulfil their subconscious need of marking these precious moments.

When approaching initiation rites, the first distinction operated by van Gennep is between puberty rites and initiation rites, since no institution as important as the initiation of youngsters into full-fledged adult members of the community can be founded "on an element undeterminable and as irregular as puberty" (van Gennep, 1960: 66). Puberty as a concept is proved to be unreliable, since in the case of both sexes, physical puberty is not coincidental with physical changes, as none of them happen at the same time: for instance, the discovering of sex as pleasure for the first time, or the first menstruation or the circumcision either. Even more than that, it is important to distinguish between social puberty and physical puberty and to recognise the fact that puberty rites are a class of their own, different from initiation rites and the transition rites from childhood to adulthood.

Despite the multiple variations and the tens of initiation rites from all over the world presented by van Gennep, there is a general pattern to be observed. The pattern consists of six consequential stages throughout which the initiate passes to become a complete member of the society he is a part of. The pattern begins with the separation from the rest of the community, from the previous environment and the following isolation of the initiates in the wild, within a special or sacred territory or space. These are followed by the loss of the parent-child connection or bond, usually marked by a rather violent ritual in which the motherly figure often weeps for the loss. Related to the same separation mindspace, the next stage is symbolically suggested by death, as the loss of childhood. Within this stage, the novice is considered dead by his family and community until they have finished their novitiate.

Further on, after the loss of community, the loss of physical protection, the loss of a bond with the parents and their ancestry, the ultimate loss of death, the initiation process sets on building through the stage of instruction. This step represents the opportunity for the novices to be educated in the matter of tribal laws and their gradual witnessing the ceremonies and rituals that have been restricted to them so far. The final act represents the culmination of the initiation process and the first step in the reincorporation of the initiate. It involves the sacred/ religious ceremony, corroborated with the physical mutilation which varies from tribe to tribe, from people to people, making the initiate resemble the adult members of his community. Besides the already discussed trend of separating from the usual/ typical/ secular in order to be integrated into the sacred, there is the tendency towards separating from the sacred in order to be later, after the transition period, incorporated into the ordinary. Both of these variations have the same result, that of the initiate retaining a special magical-religious quality.

Initiation rites are not only happening in tribal communities, but in highly organised religious and secular instance as well. The same general pattern is followed when ordaining a priest; a more simplified rite is used when initiating someone into a professional caste, even in present-day situations. A particular case of a more complex initiation rite is that of crowning or enthronement, the king or queen being considered sacred and closer to the divine than anyone else.

Outside the religious contexts, initiation rites have almost been abolished, but my questions is: aren't some of the behavioural patterns noticed in teenagers unconsciously mimicking some ancestral knowledge stored in our collective unconscious? This may explain why sometimes teenagers irrationally seek to destroy any parental bond or connection, why they are so eager to leave home and strike out on their own, why they crave to display what they and the society consider to be adult behaviour (drinking, smoking, sexual intercourse) and, maybe, why they are so eager to forever modify their physical appearance with piercings, tattoos, scarring or even branding, as a way of celebrating adulthood, as the culmination of their non-existent initiation rite, as a way of triumphant self-mutilation.

Another interesting aspect to notice in relation to the initiation rites is the similarity with the birth rites, such as the loss of connection which the mother initiation brings about, just like the cutting of the umbilical comb. Another similar element is the fact that the initiate may take on a new name, just like the new-born is given one, this name having a dual purpose: that of offering individuality and a bond to the family/caste/community or a mark of their social status easily recognisable by others. One more element to keep in mind is the fact that in some tribal communities, the novice cannot be initiated, before their parent has performed a ceremony or rite of passing into old age, a ceremony of public acceptance of his new social position.

Maturity follows social puberty and its clearest expression is the founding of one's family. The most important transition from one social category to another is granted by marriage, since, for at least one of the spouses, it involves a change of family, clan, village, tribe (van Gennep, 1960: 116), residence and even the appropriation of a new culture. Since the marriage involves not only the two spouses, but their families and communities as well, the period of transition associated with this rite is especially long-lasting and of considerable importance. Referred to as betrothal or engagement, it is considered, among many cultures, an autonomous part of marriage, being characterized by its own separation, transition and incorporation rituals.

Only after the betrothal, there follow the marriage rites, which, according to van Gennep, "consist chiefly of rites of permanent incorporation into the new environment but which often include rites of individual union also, though the latter do not occur as frequently as one would first expect" (1960: 117). In my opinion, in present-day society, the percentages are reversed, marriage rituals and ceremonies being focused on the union of two individuals, and only sometimes referring to the union of the two families. The complexity of marriage rites is given not only by the persons and objects involved in the marriage, but also by the variations of the family they are about to constitute and the various groups of people involved and interested in the union, such as: the two sex

groups, the patrilineal and matrilineal descent groups, the family (close or extended), groups such as clan, age groups, professional caste and the local group (villagers, neighbours, etc.) Marriage is an even more complex rite due to its economical nature and importance, being intertwined with the marriage rites proper.

Marriage follows the same three steps: separation, transition and incorporation. In the case of marriage, separation is a lengthy ritual in many cultures, due to the strong bond between the spouses and the age groups and sex groups they are a part of. This separation takes sometimes the form of capture or pretend kidnap of the bride, of flights from home with the help of friends, destroying something connected to bachelorhood or childhood, cutting or shaving hair or beard, covering with a veil, chancing one's name or personality, passing or jumping over something (threshold or broom being the most obvious examples and many others).

In the case of marriage, incorporation is the most significant and emphasised stage ending the financial negotiations, the ultimate goal of the marriage rites being the founding of a new family, perfectly integrated into the rest of the community. The incorporation can be divided into rites of individual incorporation and rites of incorporation with a collective significance. Some of the rites of individual incorporation are: the exchange of belts, bracelets, rings or clothes, tying one spouse to another with a cord, tying parts of the spouses' clothing, reciprocally touching each other, using objects that belong to the other, offering the other spouse something to eat or drink, sitting on the same seat, being covered with a veil or a single piece of clothing, drinking from the same cup, anointing each other and many others. Rites of incorporation with collective meaning intermingle an individual with a group or two groups and some of them are related to the exchanges of gifts, collective ceremonies such as ritual dances, wedding feasts, exchange of visits, putting on the custom clothing of married men or women (van Gennep, 1960: 132).

Not surprisingly, since marriage is the founding stone of any society, many of these rites or 'language' can be found not only in religious/spiritual ceremonies, but also in the secular ones, such as the courthouse or civil marriages. Beyond the ceremonies, people still maintain customs and behaviours that are strongly connected with ancestral rites, the most popular being related to the couple sleeping apart the night before the wedding, not seeing each other until the ceremony, exchanging rings, the ritual first kiss as a married couple, the first dance of the newly married spouses, the celebratory meal shared with friends and family and many others.

Funeral rites is the last category approached. Van Gennep surprisingly holds that, even though one would expect the separation stage to be the most prominent, the data collected point out that it is the transition period has a tremendous duration and complexity, sometimes granting it autonomy. The transition rites usually start with the placement of the corpse/ coffin in the deceased' house or some other place with spiritual or religious significance. Being especially complex, the transition stage is sometimes subdivided into several parts, systemized in the form of ceremonies and commemorations. Funeral rites, perhaps out of all the rites presented, contain the most variables. They vary widely, depending not only on the culture and the religion or belief

or beliefs in the after-world, but also on the sex, age, social position on the deceased and on the cause of death.

Separation rites in funeral rituals include: various procedures of transporting the body, burning of tools, clothes, hut or other possessions of the deceased, rituals of washing, anointing or other rites of purification, and numerous taboos. To those, we add the procedures of physical separation such as: the grave, the coffin, the cemetery, the mat, the placement in the trees, covering the body with stones or the especially solemn act of closing the coffin or the tomb.

The most common incorporation rites involve the shared meals or the commemorative celebrations that occur after the proper funeral, their goal being that of reuniting the surviving members of the group with one another and sometimes, even with the spirit of the deceased. Sometimes, though incorporation rites in funeral rituals have the purpose of integrating the deceased into the world of the death, they are the most extensively elaborated, being endowed with the deep significance (van Gennep, 1960: 146). Some of these incorporation rites are similar to hospitality rites or rites of incorporation into a clan, family or adoption.

Mourning can be considered a separation from the community, an isolation filled with taboos and negative practices. And yet, van Gennep argues that it is actually a transitional period for the survivors of the deceased, a period they enter through separation from the community they live in and when it ends, they will reintegrate into the society. During the mourning, the family and friends of the deceased form an atypical group, being temporary situated between the world of the dead and that of the living.

On reading about the tribal rites performed in funeral, approached by van Gennep, one easily recognises many of the customs we perform when burying a family member, no matter the culture or the religion they/ we are a part of. This can be explained in two ways: on the one hand, funerals are always marked by a religious/spiritual ceremony and religious organisation have managed to hold onto the rites better than the general, secular population. On the other, for the surviving family members and friends of the deceased, the funeral of a family member or friend is one of the hardest moments to pass through; this can be a reason why people lean on the structure of customs and rites as if they were a map that can help them navigate the painful situation, endowed with significant emotional values since it has been used by the deceased and, most likely, by their entire ancestry.

At a superficial glance, rites are something belonging to the past, to uncivilized people and their forgotten customs, but, at a more patient, careful glance, we notice them all around us. They are a constant of our social life possessing even more significance in atypical instances, such as pregnancy, illness, journeys, death and so on. They offer us a way of structuring our life, of giving it meaning, and they offer the people that experience it a chance to stop, wait, rest and then begin refreshed in a different way. In the absence of rites, of a logical sequence of rituals, steps, ceremonies and thresholds to pass through from birth through death, life can be perceived like scattered meaningless moments with no connection to one another.

In fact, not only for humans, but for every living being “life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn” (van Gennep, 1960: 189). We have all the good reasons to wonder how a person can be satisfied with his/her life, be assured of the purpose in the universe if there are no visible significant ways regarding how the changes of form and conditions, the changes from one age to the other, from one social status to another, from one social condition to another can be accomplished. Bastardized, forgotten, mutilated and reduced to hasty moments, rites have been pushed aside as something belonging to the uncivilized past, when, in fact, we need them today more than ever to ground us, when so many of us feel lost in the storm of life.

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