

## The Emotional Meaning of Ritual\*

Do human beings need rituals? Have they become an obsolete “evolutionary appendix” in the modern world, or are they an indispensable part of the human condition?

Right at the start, I wish to adopt a clear stance with regard to this repeatedly controversial discussion in ritual studies: From the perspective of cultural anthropology, I assume that human beings need rituals, that they are an anthropological necessity, and that their usefulness relates to specific bio-psychological stress-relieving processes. This basic assumption guides the following arguments.

Because use of the term *ritual* is becoming increasingly inflationary not only in everyday language but also in an academic context, the first thing to do is to specify the subject. I shall follow Axel MICHAELS (2003) who defines rituals as standardized, set *actions* that can be distinguished clearly from everyday ritualizations (daily routines) through the criteria of *intentio solemnis* (the formal resolution), *religio* (the transcendent alignment that goes beyond the dimensions of daily life), and *transformation*. As *actions*, rituals are also always *embodied*, that is, they always include bodily aspects (sensory processes, motor processes, etc.), and this distinguishes them from “purely” mental or cognitive procedures. “One who is only thinking or feeling, is not engaging in a ritual” (MICHAELS 2010 translated by B. R.-R.; cf. BELL 2006).

The following analyses are also based on this understanding of ritual. However, they focus particularly on the element of transformation, and thereby on a very specific type of ritual, namely, the so-called “rite de passage”, the transition ritual.

### Transition rituals/*Rites de passage*

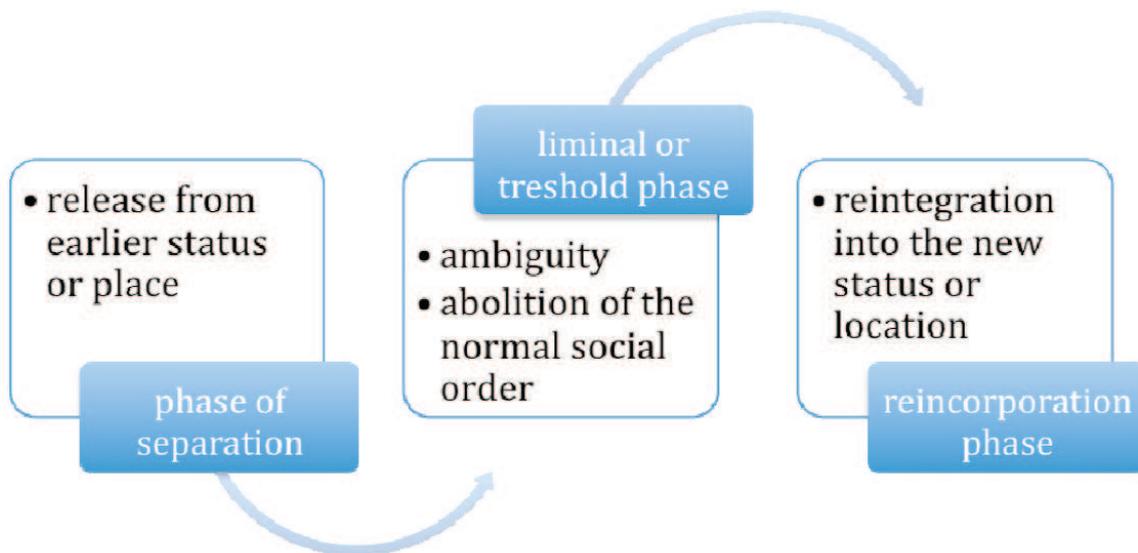
This term was introduced by the French social anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) whose comparative analysis attempted to systematize the vast collection of ethnographical descriptions of ritual practices in the greatest variety of cultures available at the beginning of the 20th century. He published the results of his studies in 1909 in his major academic work, *Les Rites de Passage* that has since become one of the classic social anthropological studies of rituals.<sup>1</sup> In this work, van Gennep shows that a large proportion of the ritual practices in all cultures accompany status passages in the life cycle. He considered that the reason why rites of passage are so universal lies in their social control function: Rites of passage mark and communicate a change in place or state and the crossing of a threshold – for example, from boyhood to becoming a warrior – thereby making it easier for both the community and the individual concerned to adopt a new orientation while simultaneously cushioning possible disruptions of the social order. Drawing on a vast amount of ethnographic

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<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, his work was slammed by contemporary French critics (including Marcel Mauss) and has yet to receive the recognition it deserves in France. The intellectual climate of French social scientists at that time was influenced decisively by Durkheim, who ignored van Gennep. The latter never managed to establish himself in France and did not gain a professorship. However, his work was frequently well received in other countries. In 1911, *Les Rites de Passage* received a very positive review in *Man*, and after being translated into American English in 1960, it rapidly took its place in American social anthropology. However, it was not translated into German until 1986 (by Sylvia Schomburg-Scheff) where it was received well enough to be reprinted in 2009.

material, Van Gennep shows how these rites of passage also reveal the same basic tripartite structure: A phase of separation that releases the individual from the earlier place or state is followed by a threshold or transformation phase, in which the individual is caught between two worlds and/or positions. The passage is consummated by the reincorporation phase in which the individual becomes integrated into the new location or status.



**Figure 1:** Structure of Rites de Passage according to van Gennep 1909

This phase model is still valid today. It stimulated and systematized the analyses of transition rituals by members of the following generation of social anthropologists such as Mary Douglas, Meyer Fortes, Max Gluckman, Edmund Leach, Monica Wilson, and Victor Turner, who belonged primarily to the structural-functionalistic school and correspondingly also focused their analyses on the social function of transition rituals. They interpreted them as a means of expressing social relationships and antagonisms, controlling social conflicts, and stabilizing unity and order. The emphasis lay on the significance of transition rituals for the community. This aspect was also crucial for Victor Turner, whose work on the structure and symbolism of ritual processes drew directly on van Gennep while further developing the latter's concept of threshold or transition in his famous 1964 essay *Betwixt and Between*. According to Turner's theory, the intermediate phase – the liminal phase – is by far the most important part of the ritual process.<sup>2</sup> As a phase lying between two clearly defined places or states, it is characterized by lack of structure and by ambiguity because the previous regulating principles have been suspended. Conditions in the old life phase no longer apply; those of the new, are not yet valid. In this sense, it forms the pivot of the transformation from

<sup>2</sup> “This is the fact that when persons, groups, sets of ideas, etc., move from one level or style of organization [or regulation of the interdependence of their parts or elements] to another level, there has to be an interfacial region or, to change the metaphor, an interval, however brief, of *margin* or *limen*, when the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance” (TURNER 1982, p. 44).