

The Classical Anthropological View: Van Gennep, Turner and Eliade

Van Gennep (1908)—Structuralist

Rites of passage are “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position, and age.” Includes calendrical rites (e.g., New Years)

Three phases: separation, marginalization, incorporation.

Time phases: pre-liminal, liminal, post liminal

Rites of passage can be subdivided into rites of **separation**, rites of **transition**, and rites of **incorporation**; but there are not rigid classifications.

Origins--hypothesis: Social change is seen through the lenses of biological change. Social birth, social puberty, social generation (marriage), and death.

Social states in society—blue collar, white collar; warrior, medicine man/woman, chief

Social groups that cross boundaries—family; clan

Sacred and profane: There are special acts reserved for transitions between states. These acts are different from daily activities and they are designed to limit discomfort and injury—they are sacred and protected by the society.

Religion is the theory of the sacred, magic/ritual is the technique to achieve the sacred.

Question: One challenge we face is that American ideology encourages the breakdown of social status that has traditionally been a way that humans understand who they are and what place they have in society—and now, with the internet there is even less social demarcation. So, how do we find our identities?

Turner (1968)—Functionalist

While Turner used Van Gennep’s definition, he narrowed its scope to exclude calendrical rites—rites of passage had to transform individuals not societies or time under Turner.

Turner focused attention on the liminal period and rites of transformation and thus is the most likely author of our current understanding of rites of passage (Americans are still by and large functionalists in their beliefs—we have not converted en masse to an existential or post modern understanding of our world). Turner identified two types of liminality: that of status elevation and that of status reversal. He discussed the role of status changes in the context of humility and humanity in a community.

Turner was the first to write a psychological account of rites of passage.

Masking Function (remove identity)

Identification with feared things (just like Halloween).

Question: Since few of us participate in rites of initiation in which death is an element—how much power does the fear of death hold over us in our society?

Mircea Eliade (1958)—Different Point of View

Contemporary of Turner, philosopher of religion.

Eliade emphasizes the cyclical elements in rites of passage based on the comparison between rites in different cultures, religions and times. Symbolic nature, preparatory function of rites of passage.

He identifies the life cycle as the metaphorical basis of ritual but does not go so far as to suggest that everything is biological. He holds that our understanding of the world is based on and limited by our biology and our culture.

With this perspective, the tension between science and religion in our culture becomes much clearer. In the Victorian Era, it was thought that all things would be understood through science, but that has not come to pass. As science's explanation becomes more and more complex and less and less accessible, it takes on the same detachment as the mystical guarding of rites, but in a wholly different way. Its explanations move farther and farther from morals and any one culture or religion—the systems that we fix our understand of the world in are moving farther and farther apart. Thus, we fail to understand why our children float away from our culture but it is because other worlds of understanding are drifting so far and fast between generations.

What is your experience in this light.