

Predicaments of “Rite of Passage”

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Abstract. “Rite of passage” is a core concept in the ritual or religion research. From premier use in 1909 to nowadays, the “rite of passage” has not a clear definition yet. After analyzing the usages in van Gennepe’s famous book, and Turner’s developments in 1960s, we have not found an exclusive meaning. We argue that “rite of passage” should not be used as a concept in future scholarly study.

Introduction

From the advanced paper to the college textbook of social science, especially in cultural/social anthropology, we can see the appearance of rite of passage in them, which is also written as ritual of transition or transition ritual. Sometimes it is used just as a kind of literary rhetoric, but it is also applied in analyses like a no problem concept. So we must make clear the exact meaning of “rite of passage”. It is equal to answer the questions:

1. Which kind of act we can call it “rite of passage”?
2. What are the relationships between “ritual” and “rite of passage”?

In a popular anthropological textbook, Bowen only writes: “People make transitions or life stages by carrying out certain transition rituals or rites of passage.”[1] This can be a definition? I think not. While I find a similar description in another popular textbook [2], I am perplexed whether the two authors exactly know what the rite of passage is. Naturally my first step is to check the work of van Gennepe, in which there is the original usage of rite of passage. Finding the answer of two questions above is my ultimate purpose.

Van Gennepe’s Basic Description of the Rite of Passage

In 1909, ethnologist van Gennepe brought the rite of passage into the world of social science through his book *Les Rites de Passage*. He broke a different way from Durkheimian in understanding rituals. Van Gennepe found that people perform certain rituals in transitional points of life like birth, puberty, marriage and death etc. He called them rites of passage, all of which were to “accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another.” Which kind of situation changes? Van Gennepe thought it usually related to the transition from the secular to the sacred, or on the contrary. He pointed out these rituals make the transition in three steps: “A complete scheme of rites of passage theoretically includes preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)”.[3] Van Gennepe thought there was a wide gap between secular and sacred, if we want wake across the gap we must carry on the rite of passage. The preliminal rite is a farewell to ordinary environment in where we live. The liminal rite makes the change happen. In the postliminal rite, a new world greets our achievement.

Next, van Gennepe discussed lots of ethnological examples to prove the effectiveness of his method. This is a long and not interesting part of the book. In the conclusion, van Gennepe told us that his “interest lies not in the particular rites but in their essential significance and their relative positions within ceremonial wholes—that is, their order.” He argued “beneath a multiplicity of forms, either

consciously expressed or merely implied, a typical pattern always recurs: *the pattern of the rites of passage* (original italics)” [4].

What is the rite of passage?

Van Gennep was living at the era of beginning of social science. *The rites of passage* is not rigorous like today’s research. First, we cannot find the definition of the rite of passage. Second, it seemed that van Gennep himself did not think the rite of passage could be a abstract concept because he always used the plural of rite of passage. Van Gennep did not put the rite of passage into the sixteen categories at the first chapter of the book. By the way, we also can see a confused classification of rites in this chapter. The van Gennep’s aim was maybe to show us the pattern of rites of passage which he thought existed. So, we can “translate” pattern to structure - a modern academic term. That means van Gennep has found a kind of ritual structure.

But it is perplexed that there are contradictory statements in the book. “I do not maintain that all rites of birth, initiation, etc., are rites of passage only”- which kind of ritual structure they also have? There are other ritual structures? In some ethnic groups which see childbirth as a normal behavior, “the pattern will be transposed to the rites of childhood, or it may be included in the rites of betrothal and marriage”[5] - the structure can be changed to a ritual? Facing a literature so obscure, nobody can make clear.

The Difficulties of the Rite of Passage

For van Gennep, the core transition of rites of passage is the transition between secular and sacred. But this dichotomy has been abandoned by anthropologist. If we want to use the rite of passage, we should make clear what change happens exactly.

Gluckman tried to answer this puzzle in 1962. In his article titled *Les Rites de Passage*, which is the same with the book of van Gennep, Gluckman made the social relations the first place. Gluckman said: he would “set out his (van Gennep’s) main theory, which was about the sequence of rites used to alter people’s social relations”. [6] Gluckman argued the people’s social relations changed after transition ritual.

Turner, also in 1960s, advanced van Gennep’s crude expression to a more abstract and fine analysis based on Gluckman’s statements. As sociology tells us, an normal society must have a stable structure in which most people’s behavior follows the social order. This is the state of society which Turner’s theory assumes. If people want to make same changes, they will carry out a certain transition ritual. A transition ritual can be analyzed to three phases, the first separation phase, second marginal/liminal phase, third incorporation/aggregation phase. Before the separation phase, the society is in the original structure, this phase is a farewell to the old structure. In the marginal phase, all kinds of social order are broken, people in the ritual can even act crazily what is prohibited in the normal condition. This step is a resistance to social order, there is no social structure now. Finally, the incorporation phase brings people back in a new social order. A new social structure has been built and the society will be more solid than again. So, Turner called this the ritual process which has three steps, structure - antistructure - structure.[7] The theory of ritual process is accepted so widely that few scholar cares what van Gennep’s discusses of rites of passage are.

Turner thought the marginal phase is the most important and interesting one. For this phase often has the longest duration. People states have been changed in this phase and they always act abnormal. From this phase, many key elements of the society can be found.

The Turner’s discuss clearly tells us that the rite of passage is a kind of structure of ritual. But like van Gennep, he neither defined the rite of passage. No matter how beautiful the Turner’s theory is, the two questions I mentioned above in introduction are waiting for us. We don’t know which kind of

action has the structure of transition ritual. We don't know if there are other structures except transition ritual. Leach said: "In all human societies, the great majority of ceremonial occasions are 'rites of transition'"[8]. I want to know what the remain is. Leach did not give us an answer.

Having a Meal in a Restaurant as an Example

Nearly every person in modern society has the experience of having a meal in a restaurant. It is so quotient that few ritual researchers will think it worth a glimpse. But I want to exhibit its properties of the transition ritual in next analysis.

Whether we need to reserve a table or not is depending on the restaurant. Some need it some not. After the preparation finished, we go for the restaurant. When we arrive at the door of restaurant, the rite of passage begins. We go through the door, this is the separation phase. We can see the door as the boundary dividing two worlds. The ordinary one and the restaurant one.

The waiter/waitress leads us to the table. We sit down and read the menu. Once we have ordered what we want, we have new social relations with the restaurant, the buyer and the seller. There is a contract relation in law. Outside the door is the ordinary world where we follow the normal action rules. In the door, we need to act according to the order of the restaurant. Some restaurants demand customs dressing formal suits, some demand special clothes. In some restaurants we can not talk aloud. In some restaurants we act full with passion, on the contrary. It's a marginal phase.

In the end, we finish the meal and pay for it. We go back the ordinary world through the door. This is the incorporation phase. Some new social relations between us and the restaurant have been built. We should act like a normal person again, but sometime we do not act like before and we act differently from who never go to that restaurant. We usually share the experience with other people, happy or unhappy. It means some new social orders appearing.

Maybe you will not agree with my arguments above. There are at least two deadly defects. First, the behavior rule out and in the restaurant is constituted by society; there is no abnormal act at all. Second, after the rite of passage, there is no big different than before.

Now is my answer. A basic property of ritual is prescribed. There is no abnormal behavior in the marginal phase. If somebody act "normal" in this phase, it is truly abnormal. All "abnormal" behaviors are prescribed. What we can say is just there are some different rules between in and out marginal phase.

Similarly, is there a new social structure after incorporation phase? No. The rite of passage is not a social revolution; the social structure will not change.

Conclusion

Sum up, if we think the rite of passage is a kind of ritual. We only know the act called a rite of passage will make some changes of social relationships. We cannot say exactly which kind of relationship being changed by rites of passage. Additional, we have no ability to make a distinction between ritual and rite of passage.

While we look the rite of passage as a kind of structure of ritual according Turner, we do not know whether there is another kind of structure.

There two ways before us. First, we find a new definition of rite of passage, for me, it is hopeless. Second, I suggest that we no longer use it in analysis again.

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