



**Lecture # 16**

# Rites of Passage

Lecture 16

Certain changes occur in individuals at puberty - all societies have to cope

# Universal:

- Physiological changes
- Movement into adulthood

# Western psychoanalytic theory also views as **universal**:

- Important restructuring of personality occurs at this stage - “identity formation” (Freud and Erikson)
- Adult = separation, independence & autonomy
- Storm and stress

# Anthropologists:

- Not drastic restructuring
- Independence but not necessarily autonomy/separation (ex. Hollis and Leis)
- Not necessarily storm and stress (ex. Mead, Shostak, Hollis & Leis)

# BUT

- Fact - physiological changes - societies have to recognize the movement of individuals into adulthood.
- HOW?

# 3 Choices:

- Western society the transition is not recognized (= troubled)
- transition is recognized and smoothed over  
EX. Samoa, !Kung, Ijo
- In many cultures the transition is  
**DRAMATIC.**



# Purpose of drama:

- Emphasize that childhood and all its parts have been left behind.
- Make sure accept deep cultural ideals.
- Announce now adult and responsible for his own acts and share of group responsibilities.
- Group solidarity (war)

cow jumping  
Hamar tribe - Ethiopia

# group think

- Biological and psychological aspects of adolescence render them susceptible to group think mentality.
- Normal standards of human decency are suspended allowing them to commit crimes in the name of the group.
- include puberty rites (severe ordeals, rigorous spiritual and physical training)

# Examples:

- Samurai warriors
- Kamikaze pilots during wwll
- Hitler youth and soviet young pioneers
- Chinese red guards
- Terrorist organizations

# Initiation rites at puberty =

- social mechanisms that by over dramatizing the transition helps young find their place
- ease psychological crises at this transition point
- partial modern equivalents (bar/bat mitzvahs, debutant balls, quinceanera, retirement parties)
- parts of pop only, not as elaborate, more restrained (?)

# What are initiation rites and what is their function?

- Arnold Van Gennep (1909) *Les Rites de Passage (The Rites of Passage)*

# Van Gennep

- ethnographic studies - lots of rituals
- rites had common order and similar functions.
- 1st anthropologist to note regularity and significance of rituals
- the customs associated with the transition from one place or stage of life to another = “Rites of Passage.”

# Rites of passage:

- involve changes in social status
- mark any change in place, condition, social position, or age
- The rite itself is often stressful (ex. vision quests)



- enhances the solidarity of the participants
- “communitas” = an intense feeling of community spirit, a feeling of great solidarity, equality and togetherness.
- (ex. boot camp, preseason)

# All rights of passage have three phases:

- separation
- liminality
- incorporation

# Separation:

- withdraw from the group
- “death” - severed from old way of life
- separated socially and often physically

# Transition (Liminality)

- most important
- the period between states
- Liminality always has certain “in limbo” characteristics

# characteristics:

- occupy ambiguous social positions
- exist apart
- relations not of old or of new
- shut off from normal social contacts
- under restrictions (ex. food taboos- Hua)
- contrasts
- ceremonies
- special language

# Incorporation

- officially restores the individual to normal social life
- visual symbol of new status
- reenters society
- “rebirth”
- sex: Mylitta, certain Russian sects, Van Gennep - “cow suiters,” Dalmatia “to steal without getting caught”

# Why?

- Changes = disturbances (society & self)
- **FUNCTION** = reduce the harmful effects of these disturbances.

# Initiation at adolescence

- three phases
- why elaborate M and/or F or neither?
- girls 37%; boys 30%
- genital surgery - 64% M; 33% F (worse)





# Depend on subsistence strategies:

- H&G - F (No cutting)
- Horticulture - both M & F
- Complex - neither

# why?

- help individual adjust (psychogenic)
- help society adjust (sociogenic)

# Ritualized homosexuality is central to initiation rites for males in some cultures

## **Ritualized homosexuality**

The practice commonly referred to as 'ritualized homosexuality' consists of non-reciprocal genital contacts between a younger and an older male, usually in the form of fellatio (or, more rarely, sodomy), practised in the context of initiation rituals. Certain kinship relationships between the two participants are often favoured for these relations. The practice is prescriptive, in that every male must partake in it, first as a receptive participant and later as an active agent. Most men go on to marry and engage in heterosexual activity after a period of ritualized homosexual practice, although, in some societies, homosexual practices continue alongside heterosexual marriage. Ritualized homosexuality had a lim-

# Sambia

- *Ritual & Gender in New Guinea* by Gilbert Herdt (1984)
- 50 tribes

- New Guinea - relations b/t M & W tense and hostile
- fear of menstrual blood and polluting nature of women
- women dangerous
- sanctions keep apart, residential separation
- taboos for women
- heterosexual intercourse depletes
- ritualized homosexuality

# men's cults and rituals express antagonism

- intense initiation rites for young men to cleanse them of the polluting effects of their mothers and remove all female contaminates
- +- 10 month long violent ritual - secluded from all women
- bleeding (leaves, sticks, urethra, tongue) and vomiting (lengths of cane) to purge

# Possum-Liver Spitting Ceremony

- ceremony demonstrates which boys will become war leaders, great hunters, shamans
- man scales cult house roof, make hole sticks face through
- Guardians lift each boy up toward hole
- raw possum liver is placed on tip of tongue



- possum symbolizes masculinity and the hunt
- boy's goal is to spit this up through the roof opening and smack shaman's face
- ones who fail dismissed instantly, ones who succeed praise

# flute ceremony

- pass a flute around try to get boys to suck on end - practice mechanics of fellatio
- “You boys open your mouths for the flute!”
- if do crowd praises
- if don't threaten, hit with flute, “Hit them hard!”

- “All of you boys look at this elder. What do you think he has done? All of the men have sucked the penis and grew big. All of them can inseminate you: all of you can suck penises. If you suck them, you will grow bigger quickly.”

# Assignment:

- Roose, Chapters 1 & 3