

SEPARATION, MARGE` AND AGGREGATION: A STUDY OF SCHEMA OF RITES DE PASSAGE IN THE LIGHT OF LIMINALITY

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Abstract

Liminality is being applied to the study of wide array of disciplines like landscapes, migration, Diaspora, dramatic performances, the mental condition of people suffering from different diseases and even bungee jumping besides rituals. The theory of liminality is being explored and new dimensions, terms and definitions are also added with each new study like liminoid, limivoid, liminal persone, communitas, etc. Initially, when Arnold Van Gennep had started the journey of research in understanding the role ceremonies in changing the personality of an individual, he had given a new perspective to the terms like, separation, marge' and aggregation. Arnold van Gennep had studied the rituals deeply to explore the recurrent types of conflicts that are acted out during important ceremonies. The way individuals change during high and low ceremonies and rituals and become social personalities is well explored by Gennep. The symbolical meaning of the rituals and their implications is a matter of core concern of the theory of liminality. Gennep's study is not limited to cultural practices only but it also contains the examination of the state of change when the tribes go to war, when a group passes through a passage, or the performances during first fruit festivals or a harvest festival. The rituals when a new individual is added to a cult, a new status like motherhood, kinship acts etc also come under the ambit of liminality. The present paper shall focus on the analytical exploration of the concept of separation, marge' and aggregation as proposed by Van Gennep. How the symbolical rituals impact the life of an individual? How the transition acts as a source of permanent change? How far the rituals are in-sync with the natural cycle of the body? What is the role of natural environment or periodic changes during the performance of the rituals described by Van Gennep?

Keywords: Marge, Liminality, Permittivity, Rituals, Transitivity.

INTRODUCTION

The French Anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep studied the dynamics of individuals and their behavior in group life. Initially, the anthropologists had neglected the study of cultural practices and ceremonies into its entirety and Gennep was critical about this approach. Hence, he was neglected by well known sociologists and anthropologists of his times. They were not ready to break the pattern of their studies. Gennep paid special attention to individual's transition during the ceremonies which a person had to go through during the important phases of his/her life. He clearly defined the shaking changes that occur in one's personality into three main phases that is separation, transition also called as marge' (a French word for margins) and incorporation that he actually called as aggregation in French. This was the schema' or structure or process of transition. Not all the ceremonies are called as the transition ceremonies. The ceremonies that have life changing impact comes under this pattern. For example, "the funeral ceremony, rites of incorporation, marriage ceremony, pregnancy, first time motherhood etc." (Gennep, viii)

METHODOLOGY

The *Rites de Passage* shall be analyzed through qualitative study. The canonical text shall be studied for the purpose of critical analysis of tenets as proposed by Gennep. Each chapter shall be thoroughly studied and the view points of later critics on Liminality shall be considered to understand the nuances of the theory under consideration. The studies and theories based on different ancient rituals and practices have always been studied with renewed interests by critics.

LIMINALITY AS PROPOSED BY VAN GENNEP

Van Gennep was the first anthropologist who distinguished between religion and magic. Otherwise the new age secular social scientists were considering all the activities as mere magical practices during the nineteenth

century. To a great extent the impact of Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution was also responsible for this, the new age scholars and scientists were discard anything that could not testified by the experiments of science. Scientists in the field of life sciences and physical sciences were also coming up with marvels of machines and revelation of new secrets of the natural phenomenon was also on rise. Europe was thrilled by the everyday innovations. Psychologists like Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, William James and others were also coming up with new startling revolutionary researches. These days people are inclined to multi-disciplinary studies but in the middle of 19th century all the academicians, explorers and researchers used to study all the new studies of any field just out of interest. By the middle of nineteenth century, the European countries had captured many areas in Asia, Africa, Australia, North America and South America. Hence, studies were pouring in from all sides. Within Europe, industries were putting in lot of efforts for creation of new machines. It was a time of thrill and excitement and feeling of pride for the Europeans. After all they had become the champion's of the world and they owned the moral duty of, 'the White Man's Burden.'

Van Gennep was studying rituals but from scientific point of view and not just from the humanities theoretical point of view. His seminal text which was originally in French, *Les rites de passage* was translated into English by Monika B. Vizedom. Gennep starts by classifying the popular rituals. Not only he focuses on common rituals within the society but also talks about what happens when one tribe moves from one territory into another territory. The behavior of individuals and the groups in which they live is also scrutinized in detail. Pregnancy, birth and childhood ceremonies of different tribes and similarity among them across continents is an interesting revelation of how despite the tribes living miles apart are so similar in their approach towards puberty and fertility. The initiation forms the core of liminal state. Similarly betrothal and marriage celebrations explore the common pattern that exists among various tribes when a man has to physical unite with a woman. Funerals, which marks the complete physical separation of an individual from the other living beings, also comprises surprisingly similar pattern of rituals across continents.

All the major rituals of a person's life under study follow a common pattern according to Van Gennep that is *separation, marge'* and *aggregation*. The transition that happens follows a linear process and the lived experience that one goes through during the above mentioned processes is under analysis. The objective of these rituals was to inculcate a kind of discipline and obedience of the norms of that particular tribe or society. The rituals as observed through the study reveal that they promote adaptation and co-existence. The individual free will is channelized through rituals for the greater good of the community. Victor Turner analyses it scientifically and logically, "Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or holy possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that governs structured and institutionalized relationships and accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency." (Turner, 137)

Since the society is made up of several minor groups and the groups show their distinctiveness through different behavior in the form of customs, rituals and lifestyles. " Rites de Passage are found in all societies but tend to reach their maximal expression in small scale, relatively stable and cyclical societies, where change is bound up with biological and meteorological rhythms and recurrences rather than with technological innovations." (*Forest of Symbols*, 93) Certain customs are peculiar and transformative like Gennep says, " for a layman to enter priesthood or for a priest to be unfrocked calls for ceremonies, acts of a special kind, derived from a particular frame of mind. " (Gennep, 1) This example itself reveals the permanency of certain rituals where *separation, marge* and *aggregation* from one status into another is irreversible. Within one society an individual goes through a series of passages which are largely in sync with physiological changes or occupational changes.

The seminal research work, *Primitive Culture* (1871) produced by Edward Burnett Tylor also acted as a foundational work for researches in anthropological studies. In the mid-nineteenth century there was a wave of enthusiasm for anthropological studies like Frazer's *Revue de l' histoire des religions*(1906), Andrew Lang's *Myth, Ritual and Religion* (1891), Edward Clodd's *Tim, Tit, Tot: An Essay on Savage Philosophy in Folk Tale* , Theodor Koch, *Zum Animismus der sudamerikanischen* (1900). The studies on ceremonies done by Gennep are different because he finally categorized these ceremonies into, "a complete scheme of rites of passage theoretically includes pre-liminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and post-liminal rites (rites of incorporation)." (Gennep, 11) One of the interesting examples that Gennep has given is the study of the territorial passages; it shows that many signs and symbolic ceremonies were performed when people crossed over the borders, frontiers and the natural boundaries. The sanctity of a territorial passage was considered sacred like the mother earth. "The prohibition against entering a given territory is therefore intrinsically magico-religious. It has been expressed with the help of milestones, walls and statues in the classical world, and through more simple means among the semi-civilized." (17) Gennep observes that one person crosses one territorial passage into another, "he wavers between two worlds." (18) Gennep calls it, " spatial area of transition." (18) Some of the examples that Gennep quotes is from different cultures like carrying fire, sacrificing a bull and spilling its blood as an offering to the invisible guarding angel of the new territory, " the liminal space is the sill of a doorway which has to be crossed when entering a house." (Chakraborty) So the spatial territory is important like when somebody enters a temple he/she lowers his head at the entrance of the temple. Some people even kiss the steps of the stairs of a temple as a mark of respect. So

the outer space and the inner space is marked by sanctity. The threshold becomes pious for visitors. In many countries there are rituals associated with the main door of the house. Like on festivals the main door is decorated specially with a line of mango leaves or horse shoe for good luck or lemon and green chilly hanging to ward off evil. The door symbolizes entry into a sacred space. Thus separating it from the outer world. So it is a threshold and the people who are allowed to enter the door are aggregated with their own family or tribe. The door or gate or entrance of a village or a city also holds special place. The modern interpretations of liminal spaces in malls, under the subway, in the tunnels are however different, " With liminal spaces we are able to come to terms with confusing memories of our past and simultaneously imagine a future that will inspire us to build a better world." (Ramcpu) But instead the interior spaces that we have created, the chambers, the closed cells in offices devoid of natural light may make us feel, " lost in the hallways of our own creation." (Ramcpu)

Similarly washing, purification or sharing of a meal on special occasions acts as a separation and then reunion of a tribe or community through ceremonies like shared meals (*bhandara*) offered jointly by the extended clan (*biradaries*). Ceremonies associated with construction of a new house or house warming ceremony also involves some kind of scared rites and community meal, the purpose is largely to get blessings and for inviting the protecting angels for the newly built house. Not only this, when somebody leaves the house for a foreign land or goes to war, he/she is symbolically separating from the rest of the family, before leaving some sacred rituals are performed by the elders of the family for a safe journey and safe return of the person. Like in India, special religious rituals were performed to get the blessings of the family deity and women used to place a vermilion mark on the forehead of the person embarking on the journey. If the person is going to the battlefield, special blessings were given and the priests used to sprinkle holy water to ward off the any evil spirit. On return or aggregation, if the fellow emerged as a winner from the battlefield, a grand reception was thrown and again some special offerings were given to gods, besides showering of petals on the winner. Precious gifts were also offered to the poor sometimes even gold coins, depending on the opulence of the family. This was done to celebrate aggregation after marga that is the battle period in such cases. In case of the thrill associated with ceremonies associated with joy and victory, Turner says, " the experience of ritual -the celebrated feeling of spontaneous communitas as the simultaneous excitation of the two hemispheres of the cerebral cortex." (*The Anthropology of Performance*, 15)

The birth of a child still witnesses some of the remarkable ceremonies in the world. This ensures that every new birth is celebrated by the communities of the world. Right from conception of a baby by a woman, especially the first one marks the beginning of certain sacred ceremony. "Pregnancy ceremonies, like those of the childbirth, include a great many rites-sympathetic or contagious, direct or indirect, dynamistic or animistic-whose purpose is to facilitate delivery and to protect mother and child sometimes the father and the entire clan, against evil forces, which may be impersonal or personified." (Gennep, 41) In many communities the pregnant mother is kept in special huts or rooms. Lot of ceremonies are performed during the seventh or eighth month. These days such rituals are known as the Baby Showering Ceremony. The gestation rites across the world are basically meant for the protection of the unborn life and the mother. Special foods are offered to the pregnant mother for better nutrition. Henry R. Voth has done a detailed study of rites of birth in *Oribi Natal Customs and Ceremonies*, Anthropology Series published in 1905 and even Adolf Strausz's seminal work *Die Bulgaria: Ethnographische Studien*, 1898 is also of great use in understanding how the new baby and the mother are protected by other women for a few days from the malevolent powers. After the child birth, the marga period begins, the rituals that are performed may vary from culture to culture. It may continue for seven days or eleven days or twenty one days and in many cultures for forty days. The newborn baby and the mother's social return into the community or family is marked by special ceremonies called as rites of aggregation. In case of birth of the twins additional ceremonies are performed by the communities. The birth of twins symbolized some kind of miracle by certain primitive communities. Hence special ceremonies marked the birth of twins. Interestingly, the umbilical cord is treated in numerous ways by different communities. Some hide it and keep it safe in the custody of the elderly, some bury it away, some hide it under the threshold of the house but the purpose of all is to protect the child's personality from any external harm. Dietrich gives the reason in *Mutter Erde* (1907) , he says, " While rites such as the first bath, the washing of the head , the rubbing of the child have hygienic purposes, they seem at the same time to be rites of separation from the mother."(52) Such rites are basically meant for rites of incorporation with the planet earth which is normally considered as the mother of all the species. H A Rose records some of the interesting ceremonies in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (1907), William Crooke documents it in *Things Indian* (1906) , Voth in *Indian Antiquary* (1902) and G. Turner in *Samoa a Hundred Years Ago and Long Before* (1884).

The initiation of the child after attaining the age of five years also marks the beginning of a new phase. Up to the age of five a child normally remains clung to his mother most of the times and they are also into the habit of suckling milk from the mother's breasts. Since, after the age of five the child must join the community in order to become a responsible member and learn the art and trade of the community the child needs to spend more time with the elders rather than just the mother so to initiate this process many communities go for Rites of Initiation. Like in India, it is marked by the tonsuring of head. It is done at the age of five although now in the modern societies the tonsuring ceremony takes place as early as in the first year of the child.

Ceremonies are normally different for a male child and a female child. Gennep has mentioned the ceremonies followed in several Australian tribes. Similarly attaining puberty was also marked with ceremonies in all the primitive cultures. The celebration of stepping into fertility zone perhaps ensured the continuity of the clan or community hence this stage was given a lot of importance. The primitive societies usually marked this occasion by circumcision, shaving of head, cutting down of a tree, slaughtering of an animal etc. At this stage, sexual instructions were also given. In many tribes, teenage was also the time of getting married off. Again, the ceremony for boys and girls were different because of menstruation in girls. In Assam, people used to observe *Tuluni Byah* to mark the beginning of menstruation. It is kind of celebration of fertility rites. It was also considered as a sign that the daughter has attained the marriageable age according to the old customs when normally the marriageable age was the time of stepping into puberty. Initiation into religion also occurred at this stage only. Similarly marriage rites were also elaborate leading up to several days. The primitive cultures followed the cycle of nature, they were in harmony with nature. Turner observes that, "the clues we have encountered in preliterate and preindustrial societies of the existence in their cultures, notably in liminality and structural inferiority, of the egalitarian model we have called normative *communitas*, become in complex and literate societies both ancient and modern, a positive torrent of explicitly formulated views on how men may best live together in comradely harmony." (*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 143)

FUNERAL RITES

Birth and death, being the most important phases of a living being marked the most interesting as well as mystical ceremonies. Funeral rites mark the separation of physical body and life from the mother earth. Egyptians had an elaborate system of leading the dead into the world of the dead. Death is considered as another journey into an unknown world. Gennep says, "The journey to the other world and the entrance to it comprise a series of rites of passage whose details depend upon the distance and topography of that world." (153) The old communities like the Assyrians, Babylonians, Celts, Polynesians, Australian tribes and others used to give a real boat and an oar considering the belief that the dead has to cross some ocean or river. Gennep says that the interesting thing to note is that "since the deceased must make a voyage his survivors are careful to equip him with all the necessary material objects such as clothing, food, arms, and tools as well as those of magico-religious nature like amulets, passwords, signs etc which will ensure him of a safe journey or crossing and a favorable reception as they would a living traveler." (154) Besides making special provisions for the dead the community employs special priests, "sometimes with special powers - magicians, evil spirits, deities are charged with showing the dead the way, or with leading them in groups." (155) In most of the cultures the priests who solemnize marriages are different from those who conduct funeral rites. So in charge of particular rites for particular occasion also requires specialization. Special fasts are observed, at many places, people shave off their heads, mourning songs are sung, the widow of the deceased man is supposed to observe certain rituals strictly. Some of the interesting scholarly work in this area is done by anthropologists that offers an insight into the secret ceremonies of different communities like *Book of What is In Hades*, *The Book of the Doors*, and *Guide for the Traveler in the Other World*. The rituals involves following of certain ceremonies by the kith and kin of the deceased. The family of the deceased is considered impure for a few days hence they spend their time at home eat sparse and simple meals. Any festivity or celebration is disallowed. After a few days like may be ten days, thirteen days, twenty one days or forty days, the relatives break the mourning period by performing a set of different rituals to aggregate or incorporate the mourning family into the normal day to day routine life. So the rites of separation takes place at the death of a person, the mourning period comes under 'marge', the rites of transition and the breaking of mourning period is called as rites of incorporation or aggregation.

CONCLUSION

Across the globe the ancient societies followed a common pattern to celebrate the different phases of life right from conception of an embryo to the death of the person. The foundation of different autonomous systems follow a pattern that recurs in most of the ceremonies. Ancient civilizations that were branded as crude and savage by the modern researchers actually followed the cycle of nature and prepared an individual for the natural environment and also passed on the legacy of the community. A personal touch was given to the training of the individual according to the best of his/her capacity. Unlike the common schooling system of the modern day that completely ignores individual differences and forces the individuals to follow the same curriculum right from age three to twenty five thus, killing the creativity for forever. So the structural analysis of Rites de Passage proves that the purpose of all these rights is to maintain periodicity of the natural cycle, multiplication of the tribe, normal growth, flow of normal biological activity in accordance with the cosmic rhythms.

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