Initiation / Transformation

Initiation is a notion applied to a wide variety of ritual action, including vocational rites, initiation into secret societies, and the transition to adulthood. Both scholarly and popular notions about initiation have been strongly influenced by the work of Arnold van Gennep, Mircea Eliade and Victor Turner, who postulate that initiation exhibits a tripartite, processual pattern, the aim of which is to transform the initiate’s spiritual, psychological, and social state. But initiatory transformation, even if actual, needs to be evaluated in terms of ethical, psychological, and political implications. Initiation rites may be deeply disjunctive, detached from physiological roots, and out of time with bodily rhythms; when they are, they can place ritual participants in severe double binds. Initiatory rites may indeed by transformative, but we must critically evaluate the kinds of transformations generated.

Change is natural: the seasons come and go, butterflies emerge from larvae, and erosion grinds down mountains. That people too change is plain enough, aging and illness being obvious examples. But societies also create cultural forms and institutions designed to actively promote change, or, to use a stronger, less naturalistic term, transformation. Much ritual—healing rites, funerary rites, magic, sacrifice, rites of inversion, rites of passage—traffics in symbols and processes of transformation. Sacrificial rites, for example, take a mundane thing or ordinary living being and turn it into something of value and potency. But the genre most often yoked to the idea of transformation is initiation.

General Features

The word initiation is of Latin origin, and it refers to any ritual means of taking on a new role; literally a “beginning” or an “entrance.” Taking an oath of office, for example, could be considered initiation, though such rites are usually classified as civil ritual. Initiatory rites are sometimes referred to as “status elevation rites,” which suggests a working definition: initiation rites are rites that change an individual’s status (or at least purport to change it).
In scholarship, the term initiation is applied to a variety of ritual action. There are (1) vocational rites (priestly ordination) and initiations into religious or monastic orders (the Zen Buddhist *Jukai* ceremony); (2) initiation into secret societies (clan rites or the mystery traditions of ancient Greece); (3) rites that confirm membership in entire religious traditions (circumcision in Judaism or baptism in Christianity); and (4) rites associated with entrance into adulthood. Most discussion of initiation focuses on this later type, on how societies weave together the biological changes of adolescence with cultural attitudes towards adulthood. Initiation, in the simplest and commonest use of the term, transforms boys into men and girls into women.

Though a wide variety of ritual action goes under the name initiation, there are some shared family characteristics. Initiation involves mentorship (initiates, disciples, elders, gurus), and has a pedagogical dimension in which initiates generally assume a posture of obedience. Initiates are taught geography, stories, history and myth, practical knowledge and skills. Initiation rites often involve inflicting pain, which is sometimes extreme, through vigils, fasting, body scarring or tattooing, beating, and observing taboos. Initiates are often separated and secluded from the larger group, where they undergo trials and ordeals, often designed to create the experience of humiliation or intimidation paradoxically coupled with an elevation in social or spiritual status. Deceptions and reversals of expectations, the revelation of sacra and sacred knowledge, the receiving of names, and exchange of gifts are typically part of the ritual action.

Sam Gill, to briefly consider but one of a multitude of examples, describes the Hopi initiation of children into adulthood. Unusually, the Hopi are one of the few tribes that initiate boys and girls at the same time. The rite takes place in February, a time of renewal when the Hopi celebrate the opening of the kivas (underground ceremonial spaces) and the return of kachinas (masked spirits, deities, mythic beings) to the human world. Children are ritually whipped; an act which Gill suggests encourages secrecy. The following day, a culminating kachina dance takes place in the kiva, during which the dancers remove their masks, revealing to the children a startling truth: the kachinas are performed by
the members of the community. Children see their kin in costume, an act that engenders a profound experience of confusion and disillusionment. The children, in Gill’s term, are ritually “disenchanted.” Hopi children regularly encounter the kachinas in ceremony, stories, and visual art, but are guarded from perceiving the kachinas as masked figures. Coming of age, becoming an adult, coincides with the loss of a naïve-realism, a sense of disillusionment, access to the kiva, and entry into Hopi religious life. The task set for the new, adult-member of the community is that of coming to a more nuanced and complex understanding of reality and Hopi religious life. The “experience,” remarks Gill, “makes return to a previous way of life impossible” (1987: 66). The children are transformed.

**Classical Theory**

In classifications of rites, initiation is typically considered—alongside marriage, funerary and birth rites—as one of the “rites of passage,” a phrase coined by Arnold van Gennep, in his 1908 work of that name. The publication of Mircea Eliade’s *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* in 1958, the appearance in 1960 of an English translation of van Gennep’s *Les rites de passage*, and Victor Turner’s influential and widely read *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure*, published in 1969, were the three pillars on which classical rites of passage theory was constructed. The generation of scholars following these three men has done the work of developing, adding to, applying, and critiquing their contributions.

Van Gennep was dissatisfied with how ritual had been treated by James Frazer, who was chiefly concerned with the formal meanings of rites and their relation to myth. The crux of ritual, claimed Van Gennep, and of initiation in particular, is not meaning, but efficacy: initiation is principally an instrument for the transformation of an individual’s social status. Van Gennep was pivotal in drawing attention to the social-cultural work conducted through ritual action. Ritual is not mere re-
enactment of beliefs, narratives, or values, but enactment; a rite of passage does
not simply mark a transition in the life cycle, but affects it. Van Gennep
anticipated the thought of social functionalists such as Bronislaw Malinowski by
advancing the reasonable idea that rites must be understood in their social
contexts, and that the elements of any particular rite need to be analyzed and
understood in relation to the larger ritual enactments and ritual systems in which
they are embedded. Van Gennep also called for a “sequential method” that
studied a rite in relation to both what preceded it and followed it.

Van Gennep’s 1908 text is predominately concerned with initiation. Van Gennep
identified a paradigmatic pattern to initiation rites (separation, transition,
incorporation), which he derived from the study of ethnographic accounts of male
adolescent rites in indigenous cultures: a group of boys is separated from
domestic space and their mothers, taken to a sequestered, liminal zone where
they endure ordeals and receive teachings that generate and mark their
transition to adulthood. Upon return, they are incorporated into the village as full-
fledged men. Society is composed of a set of recognized status positions, and
the task of initiation is to move individuals through these social positions, which
are often, though not always, age and biologically related. Movement through
social positions is performed ritually via movement to and through a separate
physical space. The emphasis on passage and transformation in Van Gennep’s
theorizing meant an emphasis on the middle or liminal (threshold or passage)
stage of initiation, since this stage in a rite of passage is where the work of
transforming the individual is done.

Mircea Eliade similarly advanced the idea of a paradigmatic or archetypal
pattern, though his concerns were more spiritual than Van Gennep’s societal
perspective. For Eliade, initiation involves a spiritual death and rebirth, a
transformation that implies a middle stage of revelation or transformation of the
self. The initiate ritually “dies” to an old state, enters the womb of renewal and
transformation, and returns to the world reborn and remade; implicitly, liminality is
where the sacred is found, and is therefore more important than separation or
incorporation. Eliade viewed initiation as the fundamental means by which people
become human and the cosmos made sacred, believing initiation to be a metacultural and transhistorical phenomenon.

For Victor Turner, who was deeply influenced by Van Gennep, all authentic ritual (which he contrasted with ceremony) is transformative, and therefore requires *liminality*. Turner used Van Gennep’s schema to study the internal dynamics of social change associated with rites characterized by liminality and *communitas*; initiation rites, along with pilgrimage and festivity, were the focus of his attention. Turner defined and described liminality in contrast to social status systems by identifying a number of oppositions: transition and process versus stasis; communitas and equality versus social hierarchy and structure; sacredness versus secularity. Turner altered prominent social-scientific views of ritual by emphasizing ritual’s processual and potentially transformative dimensions. He demonstrated that just as initiation can resolve the tensions and struggles involved with coming of age, transforming children into adults, ritual in general can be employed to diffuse and resolve a wider crisis in a community. If ritual was at one time viewed as a static reflection of social hierarchies, power, and roles, the work of Van Gennep, Eliade, and Turner presented a more robust, muscular approach to ritual and initiation.

Ethical and Psychological Considerations

In the 1980s, as cultural and critical theories rose to prominence, the theorizing of initiation gave way to critique of both theory and practice. The new direction was marked by Ronald Grimes’s 1990 work *Ritual Criticism*, which called for a hard-nosed examination of the political and normative nature of rites and ritual theory, but also, following Victor Turner, for awareness of the critical dimensions of ritual—ritual itself as a way of doing criticism, encouraging reflexivity and creatively responding to social and individual needs and concerns. In subsequent works, Grimes applied his notion of “ritual criticism” to the rising phenomenon of
ritualizing passage rites (initiation, weddings, births, funerals) and the appeal to classical rites of passage theorists, whose ideas were principally drawn from a selective reading of male initiation rites, for justification. Criticism of theory and criticism of practice coalesced, since so much of the creative ritualizing around initiation in North America and Europe was being driven by a theoretical paradigm derived from a fusion of psychologized versions of Van Gennep’s, Eliade’s, and Turner’s ideas.

One limitation of classical theory immediately apparent is that it tends to use male initiation as the paradigm for all passage rites. Initiation is a complex phenomenon, yet much scholarship continues to rely heavily on the tripartite pattern first espoused by Van Gennep, a case of theory often over determining descriptions and interpretations. For several decades, the phrase “separation, transformation, incorporation” has had the ring of scholarly incantation. Although male initiation rites of many cultures may be said to exhibit a three phased structure, it is not clear that all passage rites do. Actual descriptions of rites reveal far more than simply three phases—detailed phenomenological descriptions of rites reveal the limits of abstract, universalized summaries or models. Bruce Lincoln, in *Emerging From the Chrysalis*, a study of women’s initiation rites in five cultures, does develop a three phased model, but it is not the classic pattern of *separation, transition, and incorporation* that defines the rites he studied but one of *enclosure, metamorphosis, and emergence*. Women, writes Lincoln, “are universally barred from ‘office,’ and initiation nowhere confers upon them new sociopolitical power or prestige” (102).

Van Gennep’s tripartite pattern has been overextended in its application to initiation, universalizing select male rites; it also bears traces of Hegelian dialectics and Trinitarian theology, implicitly drawing on a conceptual paradigm that has long influenced the western intellectual tradition. Moreover, the tendency to implicitly or explicitly equate liminality with the sacred and transformative power is to privilege male access to and control of the sacred, since liminality is generally associated with roles traditionally occupied by males (tricksters, clowns, shamans, court jesters, initiates). As Lincoln notes, women’s initiation is
often “a religious compensation for a sociopolitical deprivation,” in which men “speak of her a goddess to make of her a drudge” (105-106).

Vincent Crapanzano’s work on Moroccan circumcision rites questions the assumptions of transformational models of initiation. The Moroccan rite “declares passage… [but] there is no passage whatsoever—only the mark of passage, the mutilation that is itself an absence, a negation” (32). In Crapanzano’s analysis, the rite creates not communitas but fear and submissiveness; it is not processual but circular; there is no linear transformation from boyhood to manhood. Circumcision does not move male children forward, but simply returns to them scarred (physically and emotionally) to the world of women. Van Gennep and Eliade gave little attention to the fact that initiation may be exploitive, and it may not always do what practitioners or even ritual theorists say it does. Purpose and function are not always neatly in synch.

Crapanzano’s work exemplifies an attitude of suspicion towards initiation, critically examining the secrecy, deception, and violence found in many rites as tools in the maintenance of privilege and power. Is circumcision, for example, to be spoken of as “marking” or as “abuse”? Harold Garfinkle, writing around the same time as Eliade, pulled no punches in naming initiatory rites “degradation ceremonies” in service of social control.

Hazing rites, which tend to receive public condemnation, are a form of initiation. In 1995, video tapes emerged that had been shot during initiation rites conducted by Canada’s Airborne Regiment on their base in Petawawa, Ontario. The Regiment was a commando, or “special forces,” unit modeled on U.S. Green Berets. In the video of an initiation conducted in 1992 by the unit, One Commando, we see about fifteen men passing bread to one another. They vomit and urinate on it prior to eating, an obvious perversion of the Christian liturgical act of consecration, which precedes communion. We see initiates do push-ups on a mat that has been smeared with feces. One initiate, the regiment’s only Black member, is on his hands and knees, being led on a leash like a dog, and tied to a tree. The letters KKK are written on his back, using human feces for ink. As the participants continue to drink beer, we see one of the “elders” pretending
to sodomize the black initiate. Another fakes fellatio with a different initiate. During the scene, the men continue to drink and spin around a stick or jump from tables blindfolded. One aim of such transgressive acts is to inculcate submission to authority. Another is to build solidarity on a unique experience outside the bounds of social norms, an experience not to be revealed to a wider public. In this regard, hazing has similarities to the violence and secrecies of domestic abuse, where the victim, paradoxically enough, often remains loyal to the abuser. In hazing, shame and disgust are generated and then transformed by the ritual process into a dark loyalty, trust, and Esprit de Corps. In gangs and in military contexts, another function of hazing is to create the willingness and dispositions necessary to torture and kill human beings.

Initiatory rites may indeed by transformational, but we must critically evaluate the kinds of transformations generated. Passage rites involve more than the resolution of a tension between nature and culture that proclaims fundamental paradoxes of human being—they may be highly politicized sites through which power is wielded and maintained. Robbie Davis-Floyd, in her analysis of the ritualization of hospital birth, argues that societies use life cycle passages to literally inscribe their most fundamental values and assumptions into the body. Davis-Floyd treats the medical procedures of western hospital birth as a principal initiatory rite of modern western culture, arguing that the literal openness of women during birth is the prime occasion for society to reinforce dominant values and beliefs on the bodies and minds of its members; in the case of hospital birth, these values are principally those of technocracy, efficiency, and a distrust of instincts and the body. Studying the exploitive and controlling nature of such secular initiations has hazing and hospital birth may lead us to a more critical view of the initiatory practices of religious traditions.

Ritualizing and Transformationism
Eliade opened his classic 1958 text on initiation by framing the plight of “modern man” as that of living in a “desacralized cosmos,” and linked this state to the “disappearance of meaningful rites of passage” (16). Since Eliade, part of the theorizing of initiation includes the claim that in industrial, modern, secular society, passage rites have either disappeared entirely or are no longer effective, and a connection is typically made between a (supposed) pervasive spiritual and social anomie in western culture and a lack of initiation rites to guide and move young people into adulthood. This assumption has generated a good deal of ritualizing, a term introduced by Grimes to distinguish formal and traditionally accepted rites from the practice of deliberately cultivating new rites. In western societies, the call for recovery of rites of passage has been strongly directed at initiation, and in particular male initiation. In the absence of passage rites it is not uncommon that major transitions or stages in the life cycle become ritualized. In the case of adolescent males, as Ray Raphael demonstrated in his 1988 work *From Men to Boys*, unsupervised, spontaneous, unconscious and often violent ritualized initiation practices commonly occur (also see Alves).

Classical rites of passage theory has been a prominent source for ritualizing coming of age ceremonies for young men and women. The ritualized practices and theoretical framework in the popular and influential *Crossroads, The Quest for Contemporary Rites of Passage*, published in 1996, and *Betwixt and Between, Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation*, published in 1987, both edited by Louis Carus Mahdi, draw heavily on classical theories of initiation, and are representative of the widespread ritualizing of passage in Eurocentric culture. But such practices are not without problems.

Much contemporary ritualizing has cobbled together the work of Van Gennep, Eliade, and Turner with the archetypal psychology of Carl Gustav Jung and Joseph Campbell’s narrative of the hero’s journey. The Vision Quest Program, for example, designed by Steven Foster and Meredith Little as an initiation rite for graduating high school seniors, is designed to play a “maieutic” role in the initiate’s life, “a birthing of self-knowledge and means to a “direct experiencing of IT” (1986:4). Here, initiation is sounding very much like a spiritual discipline or
therapeutic process. Raphael, in his study of ritualizing in male America, argues that the vision quest model for initiation practice is an isolationist model, a "perfect model for a rite of passage in an individualistic culture." Raphael argues that the vision quest model represents "the privatization of our initiations [and] fails to provide any structural support to help us with our personal struggles, and so it does little to help ensure success in our difficult time of transition" (1988:198).

Invented initiation rites rely on a good deal of ritual borrowing. The Eliadean assumption that the ritual practices of "traditional" societies are fecund tools for the revitalization of modern, industrial society idealizes those practices and creates a hunger for them, encouraging ritual appropriation. Many North Americans of European descent have turned to the initiatory rites of Native traditions for their spiritual goods: sweat lodges, vision quests, sacred pipes, rattles, and spirit catchers make up the bill of fare of many workshops and retreats. But for many Native people, non-Native fascination with Native religious, symbolic, and ritual systems represents the ongoing colonization of Native North Americans. The appropriation debate first focused on issues of land claims and the return of artifacts and human remains, but has widened to include ritual practices. Rites have a local nature, and their effectiveness depends on social foundations. A rite is as much a social as a psychological or an archetypal phenomenon. Paul Radin in his study of Ojibway vision quests, observes that "by the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the whole social and economic structure of native culture so irretrievably shattered and broken up" the dream fast had become a "static and unchanging ritual utterly divorced from" the realities of life (1936:233). Anxiety over potentially troublesome life stages and passage drives interest in ritual experimentation, but the ritualizing of initiation rites is also driven by the forces of market capitalism, advertising, an ethos of spiritual questing, and the promise of personal transformation or healing.
The Work of Initiation

A legacy of classical theorizing of initiation is that the association of initiation (and ritual in general) with processes of transformation has taken deep root both in scholarship and popular culture. For Robbie Davis Floyd, ritual’s “primary purpose is transformation” (8). Tom F. Driver identifies “transformation” as one of the” three great gifts that ritual makes to social life,” the other two being “establishment of order and the deepening of communal life” (166). The widely read volume of essays, edited by Don Handelman and Galina Lindquist, *Ritual in its Own Right*, focuses on the “dynamics of transformation” in ritual. Richard Schechner’s oft quoted work on the interplay of ritual and performance also emphasizes the potentially transformative power of ritual action. When a performance (ritual or dramatic) is efficacious, Schechner speaks of *transformance*—performance as the “means of transformation from one status, identity or situation to another” (71). Michael Houseman, writing of initiation, notes that “ritual action, if it is efficacious… irreversibly affects ordinary intercourse in perceptible ways: before and after are not the same. From this point of view, ritualization is serious business, its efficacy quite different from the gratification that results from playing (or observing) a game or from observing (or participating in) a spectacle” (76).

Conserving and transforming are two of the typical functions ascribed to ritual action and general, and much theorizing and critique of initiation tends to revolve around the question of function and the question of efficacy. What does initiation do? In attempting to answer this question, theorists consider the tension between transformation (change) and the maintenance of social order (conservation), and seek to better understand the interplay of biology, culture, and power. Rites characterized by play—festivals and celebration, for example—tend to be non-instrumental acts. But initiation rites are enactments characterized by actual or claimed change. Transformations of the self through initiation may be ontological, cognitive, status-related, or some combination of these. And
transformation of the individual may well be in the service of maintaining a larger social order.

And how does initiation work? How does the performance of certain acts and utterances eventuate in transformation? Merely because of social convention, which much social-scientific theory suggests, or do initiation rites have more than symbolic or declarative power? Or might dancing and drumming for days on end during an initiation rite induce a cognitive shift that so alters our perception of the world that the moment of the dance does not merely formally mark a new social status, but also effects a break with a previous way of being? Such questions are notoriously difficult to answer, and a survey of ritual theory is beyond the scope of this brief article. The point, however, is that initiation is among those rites which scholarship persistently approaches in terms of the notion of ritual “work.” Initiation is not merely decorous, but of consequence.


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