

Rites of Passage

[Rites of Passage Diagram](#)

[Rites of Passage Outline](#)

Despite societal variation, rites of passage have been at the core and foundation of virtually every educational, social and spiritual dynamic – pervasively expressed throughout society. This is especially true of tribal-traditional societies, which represent over 99% of human history. The entire life-cycle of an individual, from birth to childhood to old age to death itself, for both men and women, is marked by a series of rites of passage – pervasively expressed throughout the life of an individual.

Rites of passage are *particularly pronounced* in those societies whose foundations are built upon three key focuses – 1. the importance of social solidarity, and group cohesion and cooperation, be it in male or female associations, 2. the need for its members, in varying degrees to be sure, to realize spiritual transcendence, and 3. a reliance on what can be called "traditional wisdom," a knowledge based in the teachings of the elders, found at the beginning of time in the great creation stories, and brought forth as you walk upon the earth and encounter its animals. As the Inuit people say, "all true wisdom is to be learned far from the dwellings of men, in the great solitudes." This is knowledge found in societies Margaret Mead calls, "postfigurative societies," look to the past as the guide.

We find rites of passage used among the Aranda of central Australian, who perform a series of circumcision, subincision and fire ordeals, to strengthen the cooperation among male hunting groups and gain access to the *Alcheringa*, the Dreamtime. We see it when a young Crow man goes to the mountains to fast for three days without food and water to gain his *baaxpee*, his medicine. We see it when an Inuit is apprenticed to a powerful *angokoq*, a shaman, and becomes a healer. We see rites of passage among the Kwakiutl when a man emerges from the dark forests, alive, having overcome the *Hamatsa*, or cannibal spirit, his role as a leader now established in the eyes of others. And we see it as a Ashanti young girl is snatched from her mother's arms and taken to "bush school," to emerge a year later as an adult woman.

Correspondingly, rites of passage are much less important in those societies that emphasize – 1. the role of the "individual" as the most pivotal social unit, in contrast to the family, clan or some other association, 2. which are fundamentally secular in nature, and 3. which rely upon knowledge based exclusively upon empiricism and rationalism. This is knowledge found in societies Margaret Mead calls, "prefigurative societies," look to one's peers and the future as the guide, where a premium is placed on "discovery" and "innovation."

Nevertheless, in Euro-American society rites of passage are implicit, operative, and critical. Induction into the military or a fraternal organization, or participation in a religious retreat, all entail rites of passage. Indeed, the bar mitzvahs, baptisms and confirmations, and the marriages and funerals of the monotheistic religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all are rites of passage. The educational processes of Euro-American society, from kindergarten to high school through college are but a series of rites of passage. Every adolescent teen goes through and experiences a rite of passage, albeit, much less structured and ritualized when compared to similar rites of passage for youth in tribal-traditional society or as institutionalized in a religious tradition.

There are at least *three distinct functions* rites of passage provide. Rites of passage serve not only to publicly acknowledge the transition from one educational, social or spiritual status to another, but more fundamentally, to facilitate within the individual and bring about such a transformation in the first place. In so doing, the individual acquires knowledge, which can be religious, social, political and economic in nature. Such knowledge can relate to the spiritual power of a shaman, or to a woman's role and status in her family. As such, rites of passage facilitate, 1. transformations of all types, 2. the acquisition of new knowledge, status, and/or identity, and 3. the public acknowledgment of the transition.

Four universal components to the symbolic structuring of any rite of passage are evident. These structural components can be found expressed not only in ritual behavior, such as initiation ceremonies, but also in the literary motifs of oral and written literature. In the instance of American Indian oral narratives, next in prevalence to the trickster motif, is the orphan quest motif. Let me outline here what are extremely elaborate and complex processes. While my reference point is tribal-oriented societies, rites of passage pervade the entirety of the human experience. Consider the Crow oral tradition of [Burnt Face](#) and its ritual extensions, as in the Sundance and Vision Quest.

First, a rite of passage presupposes *an orphaned status*. The individual neophyte is symbolically understood as an "orphan," somehow incomplete. In oral literature themes, the individual is represented as alone and often abused and bullied by an adversary, in need of help. Whether it be in ritual or literature, the individual is as an impoverished child, either without parents or lacking in some significant attribute, such as the knowledge and skills of an adult, the integration provided by social kinship or the spiritual insight and power of a shaman. For the adolescent teen in Euro-American society, it the classic feeling of being lost and confused, all alone, without friends, rebellion from one's parents, "no one understands me." In all cases, something vital is missing. A void needs to be filled.

Second, a rite of passage involves *a separation, a journey and a sacrifice*. The neophyte may be physically removed by the elders from his or her village and taken to a "bush school" for a period lasting several weeks or even months. The neophyte himself may venture on a vision quest to a far mountain site, the quest lasting up to several days. An apprenticeship may occur, initiated by the neophyte with an established sage, teacher or healer and lasting for many years. It could also be the case that an individual, often while ill and close to death, is involuntarily visited by a spirit guardian. At the age of nine, the Lakota, Black Elk, recounts the journey he took, traveling through the sky, where he was accompanied by 48 horses, 12 from each direction, after becoming seriously ill. In all these instances, a symbolic "journey," full of challenges of all kinds, transpires. It is a journey to a world distinct from the ordinary. "All true wisdom is to be found far from the dwellings of men." The "symbolic" or literal journey facilitates, 1. a removal from one socially and spiritually defined space and relationships, 2. entry into a new realm, the "liminal," and 3. a receptivity to the sacred, to traditional knowledge, to the wisdom of family traditions.

The neophyte enters a "liminal state," "betwixt and between," removed from the mundane and the ordinary. The neophyte is physically and socially cut off from the only world he or she has known. In the "bush school," the neophyte goes nameless and unwashed, without social definition and status, guided and instructed now by the elders and other initiates of the community. In the instance of a vision quest, the neophyte will undergo several purification procedures. A sweat bath may be taken, rubbing the self with sweet sage and incensing of sweet cedar, for instance. The site of the vision quest may be a distant butte or hill, far away from the human community. At the site, a bed of sage will be prepared to keep away unwelcome visitors and ghosts. A rock wall to shield fire from curious onlookers. The individual humbles himself, showing total humility, of no great worth than that ant he shares that hill with. "Crying for a vision," as the Lakota say.

While at the site, which may last from two to five days, a sacrifice is given, going without food and water. You "die" a little as you watch your life leave your body under the hot sun. As the Inuit say, when you go out and seek a vision, you must have an "intimacy with death." And a shaman is even more "soft to die" than ordinary people. Lame Deer, a Lakota holy man, once said, "you go up that hill to die."

During a Hopi Katchina initiation, the young and very frightened initiates are taken to the kiva chamber, below the surface of the earth, close to the underworld where the Katchina spirits reside, spirits with the power of life and death. The initiates had already lost their names, their identities, unwashed, unkept. There in the middle of the room is the *sipapu* (a small hole in the floor), its opening now exposed, a passage way to the underworld. Hear the songs of the Emergence time, the creation time, as the *Yei*, the Holy Ones bring forth the world. Then in the darkness, and coming down the ladder, steps *Masau'u*, spirit of the corn fields and of death itself.

His touch means instant death. To add to the sense of death, the man who has become *Masau'u* had only a short time before gone to the burial area and dug up a recently departed. Now wearing the partially decayed cloths and smelly of death itself, the initiates are brought to the threshold.

Kinalik, an Inuit woman, very intelligent and kind-hearted. Her initiation to become an *angakoq* (shaman) was very severe. She was hung-up to several tent poles planted in the snow and left for five days, during midwinter, in the intense cold and harsh conditions. After the five days she was taken down and carried to the village. An *angakoq* then shot her, in order for her to attain an "intimacy with death." Instead of a lead bullet she was shot with a stone, so she would have a "kinship with the earth." She became a very powerful *angakoq* herself.

Any rite of passage involves a "ritual death." The symbolism of "death" has multiple meanings.

To "die" is to validate the process. One seldom elects to give up one's life, as death is that stage in one's life that comes from the gods. You've been "chosen" by powers greater than yourself.

To "die" is also to be brought to the threshold of the sacred, to journey to the "other side camp," to follow the road all those now deceased have traveled to the abode of the ancestors and spirits. An Inuit hunter walking along the ice suddenly attacked by a walrus who hooked him with his tusk. He is brought by the walrus down below the ice and swims off, as his partners could only watch helplessly. They try breaking the ice, but fail. After a great length of time, the man was "given back." He lay there on the ice with a gaping wound over his collarbone and breathing through it. His ribs were broken and lungs gashed. He is taken to a small snow hut and left without food and water for three days. When the hut is approached by his family, there stood an *angakoq*, with the Walrus as his "medicine."

To "die" is to sacrifice and give up something. If a quest is to be successful, if one is to receive a vision, the neophyte must offer up what is most cherished. Reciprocity and a gift exchange between the self and the spirit world must occur. While on the mountain top, the vision quester offers up his or her food and water, perhaps his own flesh as small pieces are cut from the arm, and most importantly, his or her own sincerity – *diakaashik* – "doing it with determination." The Sun Dancer watches as his or her water, life, drips from the end of his/her eagle bone whistle. During the "bush school," the sacrifice may be expressed as a circumcision, subincision, tooth-knocking out or some other form of scarification ritual. The circumcision and subincision "cutting" vividly symbolizes not only an offering up of flesh but a severing from one gender identity and an affiliating with another, i.e., the boys have been taken from their mothers' arms and brought into the world of men. In all instances, the offering of oneself assumes two active agents: a giver and a receiver.

To "die" is to render the neophyte void, as nothing, emptied, and thus very

receptive. He or she has been torn from the living, separated and stripped from one's mundane existence and identity, without a name and social conventions. Stripping away the mundane reveals and exposes within oneself what is most essential to the neophyte, the soul. During the initiation, "you watch as your flesh is ripped from your body and you see your own bones, you get down to your bones." A Siberian Yakut remembers how he witnessed his own dismemberment by spirit beings. His head was placed on a plank in the *yrta* (lodge) and he watched his body as it was chopped up. His limbs were then cleaned to the bone and the flesh scattered in all directions, to the spirits that cause sickness, who then eat of his flesh. His bones and body was then reformed and he became a powerful shaman who could cure those illnesses that had eaten of his body. As the Inuit say, an *angokoq* (shaman) must be able to "see his own skeleton," go beyond his flesh and blood – see his soul. And he must be able to name all the parts of his skeleton, every single bone by name aloud. In so doing, the *angokoq* consecrates himself, rendering his being sacred. In being emptied, in a void, you are now receptive to the imprint of the sacred, to the knowledge of healing or of adulthood, or the secrets of the fraternal order.

To "die" is to get down to the bones. When you "get down to the bones," you are symbolically getting down to what is most elemental, that which is most permanent, that which gives life to the body – the soul and seed. We can see this represented in all sorts of tribal art, "skeleton art." In addition, when you get down to the bones you are preparing the way for a resurrection, for a rebirth. In traditional hunting societies, the bones of animals and fish are seldom desecrated by allowing the dogs to gnaw on them, and are always ritually returned to the forests and rivers to perpetuate the rebirth and continuation of the animal or fish in question. When you "get down to the bones," you reveal what is most essential and are readied a rebirth.

While certainly not explicitly exhibiting such elements as *separation*, *journey* and *sacrifice*, and the symbolism of "death," the rite of passage experiences of Euro-American adolescents can nevertheless be implicitly important when experienced within some types of families. The nature of the dyadic relationships of a mother and her daughter, and a father and his son are particularly important during adolescents. There can be a marked difference in the transition of youth into young adulthood when comparing differences in the nature of these dyadic relationships. Youth tend to transition into adulthood more "successfully" in those dyads where the mother and daughter or the father and son relate in such a fashion that combines a caring and nurturing paternal role, with clearly established rules for and limits on appropriate adolescent behavior, with an acknowledgment by the adolescent of the knowledge and wisdom of the parent. "Success" is measured in such behavioral expressions as doing better in school, psychologically and socially better adjusted, a stronger sense of self-identity, greater self-reliance, and less engaged in what is considered deviant behavior. The parent has created within the family a sort of "bush school," within which the daughter or son enters a "liminal period," cut off from many of the influences of peers and media, and in which the daughter or son is now most receptive to the knowledge disseminated by the primary elder, the parent. In certain Euro-American families,

an implicit and very structured form of rite of passage thus does occur, with important implications for health of both the community and individual.

Third, a rite of passage involves the *acquisition of power and knowledge, the void is filled*. Having been rendered receptive, as warmed wax, the neophyte can be molded in the imprint of the sacred. The soul is exposed to the spiritual teachings and sacred archetypes.

It is during the "liminal state" that the neophyte may witness the creation time as the mythic beings are brought forth in the performance of the great ceremonials and in the telling of the rich body of mythology. In the "bush school," the initiated elders dance and tell of the sacred truths during the night and disseminate the social and economic knowledge required of an adult during the day. The wisdom and knowledge of the ancestors can be gained as the great mysteries are revealed. This knowledge is communicated via: exhibitions – showing of sacred *Churinga* boards, drums, medicine bundles, masks, figurines, ground paintings; storytelling of the great oral literature, the creations stories; dancing the myths to life in symbolic fashion and in richly adorned costumes and masks; and in direct instruction by the elders and initiated adults.

The neophyte is offered the opportunity to remember what has been forgotten, following the doctrine of anamnesis (Plato). All true knowledge is already established – set, handed down from the creation time by the ancestors and spirits. It is not expanded, to be invented or even discovered. It is. But as humans we forget and lose our way, and must be reminded. Rites of passage allow us to remember what we have forgotten.

While on a lonely butte, a vision and adoption by a spirit guardian can occur. If the gift of oneself is judged worthy and accepted, a vision is rendered. The previous state of two active agents is transcended, becoming as one, in union, with ordinary time and space dissolved. The neophyte communicates with and learns of the spiritual truths. He or she is instructed and guided by an animal spirit as it appears in the vision, an *axxekaate*, a Medicine Father. The vision establishes an adoption relation, a parent-child dyad, as the neophyte is adopted by a spirit guardian. The Buffalo or Eagle is now as a father, a parent to the neophyte. The adoption solidifies a spiritual kinship, a father who is close by to guide throughout one's life. Rules of respect and taboos to honor the spirit guardian are revealed.

A medicine, *baaxpee*, is received. It will continue to guide and direct. It will continue to offer growth and healing. A bundle might be opened when the first lightning of spring is heard, when a child or grandmother needs care and healing, when answer is sought to a family challenge. But one is never vainly considers the medicine owned, possessed. "I'm the hole, the channel through which the medicine comes. If I thought that I was the owner, the hole would close up and I'd die."

Fourth, any rite of passage involves *affirmation and rebirth*. With the knowledge of the ancestors gained or the vision of a spiritual guardian received, the individual returns to the ordinary world, his or her self redefined, with a new status. He or she returns triumphant, overcoming what had been an "orphaned status." The linkage with this new status and knowledge may be overtly symbolized and maintained through the possession of a medicine bundle and medicine songs. Having come down from the mountain top or out of the bush, the wisdom and knowledge of the ancestors is applied, wounds are healed, and the power to fly or cure is affected. From the death and the bones is resurrected a new human being.

In passing through a rite of passage, the various educational, social and spiritual transitions through which an individual moves are thus not only publicly acknowledged, but the transitions themselves are accomplished. The ascendancy to a new status is socially validated. A child becomes an adult, redefined in the eyes of others. The individual is also offered a means to shed one identity and orientation for another, thus acquiring and re-orienting his or her entire world view, socially, economically and spiritually. New knowledge and skills, new responsibilities and obligations, new awareness and sensitivities are effectively imparted and assimilated. Rites of passage transform the very being of an individual, providing a mechanism for life-cycle transitions.

For additional information, see

Mircea Eliade. *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. 1954.

Margaret Mead. *Culture and Commitment*. 1970.

Victor Turner. "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage," in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. 1967.

Arnold van Gennep. *The Rites of Passage*. 1906.