

This article has been published in Dutch: *Kwalon: Journal for Qualitative Research*, 2002, vol. 7, No 2, 13-18.

## WANTED!

### Transition Rituals for Young Men's Integration into National Societies

Dirck van Bekkum

*[Dirck van Bekkum is a cultural anthropologist. He has worked in clinical psychiatry for 10 years and has conducted field research about the coming of age of young men from several urban, ethnic and regional groups. He published a number of reports about this issue. In his current bureau of research and consultancy, he trains health care professionals, provides consultancy to municipalities and institutions and supervises projects of transformation in education, youth care and psychiatry. [www.riteofpasage.nl](http://www.riteofpasage.nl)]*

#### Introduction

In the Netherlands, the use of physical violence is under monopoly of the state. Only police and army professionals are allowed to make use of it. According to Elias (1994), in Europe an increasing, long term processes of inhibition of fighting impulses among a growing number of citizens from a traditional *Fremdzwang* (social control) to *Selbstzwang* (selfcontrol) have been going on. Much violence has been 'ritualised' into all kinds of sport and festivals, but 'civilising aggression impulses' in public places and in sports barely diminishes the urge of new generations of young men, like hooligans, to fight. Young men from the 'common people' are thrilled by fighting during fairs, Carnival, New Year's Eve, soccer matches and near discotheques. Every society needs to socialize new generations of young men to manage their sexual and fighting impulses in various family, social and community contexts. If not it will be confronted with an increased incidence, both in number and severity, of emotional, social and violations of gender, sexual and 'law and order' boundaries.

The disappearance of socio-cultural *rite of passage* structures, such as military service, May Pole festivals and harvest feasts, heighten the vulnerability of men coming of age. In addition, female emancipation also hasn't eased developing a male, adult personality for young men. Results of my clinical field research among young men have indicated that they regularly feel abandoned by adults during their transition into adulthood (Van Bekkum, 1995). Unresolved effects of migration make boys and their families extra vulnerable during their coming of age. And both the multiplication of cultural diversity, in cities in particular, and segregating a climate based on ethnicity and skin colour, make their transition heavier (Van Bekkum, 1998a, b).

#### Ritualising behaviour: the socialisation of fighting and sexual impulses

Preventing destructive and lethal behaviour, for example: in defending your territory, your offspring and during competition for the favour of females, is called 'ritualising behaviour' by the ethnologist Konrad Lorenz. Mammals possess a structured behavioural pattern that in most cases prevents a fatal attack from occurring. The cats in our backyards illustrate this behaviour very well. Tomcats freely let go of all constraints (under the provision that they have not been 'fixed') and engage in a furious fight in order to protect their territory, gain access to females; and they often wound each other. But somehow few cases of deaths have occurred among tomcats. The dangerous behaviour is reduced to a minimum by an 'innate chain of conduct'.

In humans, these instinctive programs become disorganised. Culture as a socialising framework, utilises the evolutionary infrastructure to channel the "crude energies" of young men (Campbell, 1959; Lorenz, 1963, 1978; Waal, 2000). In many cultures martial arts are used as a conditioning framework for boys. Specific Asian martial arts disciplines can be regarded in this manner. *Katas* in Aikido, Judo, Kung Fu and the 'form' in Tai Chi are prescribed movement patterns. These are indefatigable being practiced solo. It is only thereafter, that a student is allowed to apply his 'ritualised' aggression in the context of a real combat situation (Van Bekkum, 1983) Critical anthropology continuously coins the question: how do other cultures solve problems we are

struggling with in our society? In our case, the question sounds: How do other cultures and communities, especially the traditional ones, socialise the evolutionarily rooted fighting and sexual impulses of their young men? In anthropology, the solutions that have been developed in response over thousands of years are called rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1908). Rites of passage are supporting socio-cultural structures that guide the transition from one stage of life into another.

**Functioning and effects of rites of passage.**

Rites of passage into the world of adults are highly gender specific . Having a period for the first time often marks the transition into adulthood for girls, and all too often it does not involve a collective ritual (Campbell, 1959; Myerhoff, 1982). Boys mostly participate in the ritual of transition as a group under the supervision of an experienced male adult, and it frequently involves physical and mental trials (Morinis, 1986). A number of cultures regard male initiation as a second birth and this time is a transition from family into the men’s world and society. In summary, a rite of passage is a guiding socio-cultural structure that a) connects individual and collective emotions, and b) structures the liminal vulnerability, which is inherent to transitions in stages of life, and encloses the transition in time. The main objective is to protect the transitioning individual and his family from the uncontrollable, destabilising and destructive effects that a state of liminality inflicts.

In Latin, ‘limen’ means threshold. A young man in the Netherlands who is on the threshold to adulthood, in getting his first job, in acquiring his driver’s license, of getting married, of becoming a father and losing his own father, faces several shifts in kinship positions, duties and privileges. When a man marries, he will get brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law and other in-laws. If his father dies, he becomes fatherless and if his son has children, he becomes a grandfather. In our modern individualised society, these changes are mostly experienced and reported in an emotional and individual manner. Many men find it difficult to relate to important changes in their lives in social respects and to share them with other men.

Rituals of transition are still conducted in an integral and collective way in some Western and many non-Western cultures. Their wide distribution and ancient existence indicate the important functions they perform. They have significance for the stability, intergenerational continuity and transfer of culture within a community.

According to Van Gennep and Turner, each rite of passage contains three phases:

- Separation: detachment of the individual or group from a defined position within the social structure and / or a set of cultural conditions;
- Liminal period: the state of the ritual subject is ambiguous. He / she proceeds through a cultural construction that has little resemblance to the abandoned or future states.
- Reintegration: the transition has been accomplished. The ritual subject has ended up in a relatively stable position and has been embedded in a new position within the social and / or cultural structure (see Turner 1974: 232).

For boys on the road to adulthood, the rite of passage is depicted below:

***Three phases in the rite of passage of youth into adulthood.***

CHILDHOOD	TRANSITION	ADULTHOOD
ROLES A	role and identity transformation	ROLES B
STATUS A: Member of family (restricted autonomy)	INITIATION (rite of passage)  (period of vulnerability)	STATUS B part of society (new privileges, rights)
SEPARATION	LIMINAL PERIOD	REINTEGRATION

The functions of rites of passage have been researched and documented elaborately in anthropological literature (Eliade, 1958; Campbell, 1959, 1990; Cohen, 1964; Young, 1965; Turner, 1969; Fontaine, 1972; Myerhoff, 1982; Csordas et al., 1998). Rituals of initiation have always had the

deliberate intention to exert a disrupting and destabilising effect on personality (organisation of identity). The effort serves to break the 'crude energies' (sexual and fighting impulses) prior to rearranging and redesigning them.

A 'biological' liminality in boys is caused by a 900% (!! ) explosion of testosterone (Dabbs 2000) and supplemented by a deliberately caused "cultural" liminality. That may imply separation from your mother and safe environment, isolation from the community, travelling far from home, adventure, fear, hunger, thirst, pain, little sleep, being alone in the dark, being in the woods, snow, mountains or on a plain, loneliness and sometimes even physical mutilation. These interventions disconnect links and habits and spell out that childhood is gone forever. The boys haven't the faintest idea of what will come next. Transforming the maternal bond entails an important and heavy reorganisation for boys. Sometimes the deprivations last for a few hours. In other societies they may last a few days or weeks. This causes catharsis and transformations.

In general, the unconditional and intrusive messages of manhood, of love and sex, of paternity, of courage, sacrifice and solidarity to the community, follow. Sometimes it takes the form of open knowledge, but the messages may also contain secrets that are exclusively reserved for men. The message is transferred with little talking and a lot of drama. Dancing, singing, screaming, noise and many undefined sounds are often occurring during the dark. Structuring, stabilising and transforming aspects are present just prior to and within the phase of integration, that convey the messages to the subconscious. Thus are potential negative consequences of the ritual corrected. Reintegration usually takes place under public recognition, and with new respect for the achievements in family and social networks, during a festive celebration and (dance) party with alcohol and/ or other mind expanding substances.

From the boy's perspective, the rite of passage is an unforgettable and unique, profoundly individual experience, yet in a collective context, supervised by adult men. Embedding in a social context is self-evident and irreversible. It is clear now to everyone that the boys leave the world of mothers and women and enter the men's world forever. The boys can hardly grasp what has struck them. The story is related by adults that were present and who fuse them with their personal accounts too. Narratives related to themselves as initiated individuals and relating to an initiation into the community. These new stories contribute something to the stories already existent. Hence, with the arrival of every generation of adults, the existent body of mythology alters a bit. The bond created by experiencing the rite of passage, often creates a bond for life. The shared experience of having a rite of passage together frequently produces close friendships that last for life.

#### **Active ingredients in rituals.**

The experiences in urban life that mark the transition into adulthood are predominantly fragmented, individual and unintentional. These experiences, such as having a first ejaculation, a first crush on someone, the first sexual experience, getting a diploma, a drivers' license, a first job, leaving the parental home, cohabitation, having children, are not really socially marked. Introduction into a student union does occur by a demarcation. Students' initiation rituals exhibit clear features of a rite of passage. However, these rituals can easily go wrong, because organisers aren't conscious anymore of the basic elements that a rite of passage ought to feature.

Rituals and also rites of passage connect collective and individual emotions of persons and groups during critical states and episodes in life. Examples are situations of grief, joy, hunger, illness, exciting transitions of seasons and stages of life. A ritual disconnects, discharges, reorganises and synchronises (re-stabilises) personal emotions by virtue of collective emotions and vice versa. Many rituals actually are rituals of transition, or almost always contain aspects of them, according to the formulations of Van Gennep. In that way, they also reinforce and confirm both the existent solidarity and new ties and positions.

Thomas Scheff (1979), sociologist and gestalt therapist, emphasises the tension reducing effect that rituals exert. From his clinical experience and scientific reflections, he analyses rituals in Western and non-Western countries. He is seeking to answer the question of which role rituals play in more traditional, small-scale societies and which one in more urban, large-scale (Western) societies. He has drawn conclusions about what role traditional rituals in more urban and small-scale (western) societies play. He is of the opinion that in most Western rituals, the original "catharsis, tension reducing effect" is limited, since most Westerners relate to rituals in a distanced, individual and rational manner. Visiting a play or ballet performance in Sidney or visiting Disneyland in Paris, is not the same for members of an urban society, as attending a Ketjak dance or the Tjalon Arang drama is for a Balinese man or woman. Even more different is a Hopi rain dance, where no observers are present, but all take part in the ritual, or if you like, the drama.

The protocol for a successful ritual is the same as for a successful drama, says Scheff: the social form must evoke and discharge collectively experienced 'distress', which remains unsolved in daily life. Scheff states that, unresolved "emotional distress" also leads to various rigid and neurotic behaviours. The catharsis disconnects and transforms these behaviours (1979: 13-14).

According to this culture comparative anthropological approach, rituals and rites of passage have (re)stabilising and healing properties. According to Scheff, a collective release of tension induces the healing effect of (transition) rituals as a result of lamenting, crying, laughing, eating and/ or having sex together.

Both individual and collective key activity, which renders participation more effective, is called 'distancing' by Scheff: "the simultaneous and equal experience of being both participant and observer". It is the human skill to be present in each experience as both a participant and as an observer: constantly switching between experiencing and reflecting. An important part of the event that is labelled the "liminal experience" of the rite of passage by Victor Turner, overlaps with what Scheff calls 'distancing'. Boys in societies with more integral rites of passage in operation, learn to apply distancing in these (and other) rituals. In other words, they learn to take the perspective of others and the collective interest of men, women, children, parents, ancestors and elderly, otherwise of the community as a whole. This all happens without losing your personal point of reference within the core of your personality. They also learn what general or specific contribution each of them may make to the community as an individual, as a man, as a member of a family, etc.

## **Conclusion**

Dutch society harbours (depending on the definition) hundreds of different cultures, including local, regional, religious, migrant and political communities; young foreign (migrant) and old indigenous (regional) ethnic groups. In the four main cities, more than half of the youth under 18 are born in a family with a migration background. Not surprisingly, the migration of large groups of people to the Netherlands for the last 50 years, from cultures and countries where '*Fremdzwang*' sets the norm, has been stirring up tensions. Over a period of one to two generations, boys and girls have to become 'autonomous individuals and calculating citizens', although their (grand) parents had been socialised in strongly controlling communities. These groups bring along a range of new customs, including many rituals. These rituals 'wear out' and change merely by residing in urbanised Netherlands (Dessing, 2001).

Eliade (1958), Scheff (1979) and Turner (1982) are of the opinion that processes of Christianisation, urbanisation and secularisation affected the socialisation of many Western Europeans, producing resistance to give in to a shared, emotional (ritual) experience. A cautious distance is preserved and holds them back. The opposition of many urban and secular Dutchmen against Christian, chauvinistic and national expressions, festivities and traditional rituals fits in with the picture of resistance. The organisation and supervision of a rite of transition of a group of young men with an urge for sex and aggression, requires a lot of group dynamics and 'ritual' experience. Much knowledge of the world of young men and their individual characteristics is also required. Without a solid life experience it would be impossible all together.

The need for new collective expressions and symbolic experience at occasions of birth, marriage and funeral is increasing among 'secular' native Dutchmen (Boissevain, 1992; Meade, 1993; Jager, 2001). From an anthropological respect that isn't a surprise, since people appear unable to do without rituals. Modern versions of youth recreation in disco's, at dance events, house parties and raves seem to generate collective liminal experiences (Van Bakkum, 1999: 60). 'While dancing,' one of my colleagues and mother of a 15 year old boy related: "boys from different ethnic groups 'battle' together to find out who dances in the most sensual way. Her son told me that Turks, Eurasians, Moroccans and Antilleans engage in 'bocken'. They ritualise their fighting impulses and compete by dancing (Lorenz, 1963). Their performances are impressive and of great beauty. However, as attempts to initiate oneself, they are as inadequate as house parties, raves, experimenting with drugs, car racing and backpacking, because of missing fundamental ingredients and coherence of effective transition rituals (Van Bakkum, 1998a, b, c)

The actuality of increasing (real and experienced) insecurity in the Netherlands (and elsewhere) urges us to make a shift in paradigm, or in other words, another view and approach of raising children and socially integrate generations of new (and culturally very diverse) generations. The amount and severity of excessive behaviour will keep on increasing until a better and more effective cooperation is established to channel aggressive (survival) and sexual (reproduction) impulses of boys in particular, with proven and connecting visions and practices. Under these conditions, social integration into the complicated and often conflicting world of adults will occur at its best, including maximal opportunities to realise what they want to 'become' and to provide what society needs (Van Bakkum, 1995)

#### Literature

- Boissevain, Jeremy, (ed.) *Revitalizing European Rituals*, Routledge, London, 1992.
- Campbell, Joseph, *Primitive Mythology*, The Masks of God, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1959/84.
- Campbell, Joseph, i.sm. Bill Moyers, *Mythen en Bewustzijn, De Kracht van de Mythologische Verbeelding*, Utrecht, 1990.
- Cohen, Yehudi A., *Childhood to Adolescence, legal systems, and incest taboos*, Aldine Publishing Company, Chicago, 1964.
- Csordas, Thomas, & Elizabeth Lewton, *Practice, Performance, and Experience in Ritual Healing*, Transcultural Psychiatry, 35 (4), 1998.
- Dabbs, J.M. Jr., & Dabbs, M. G., *Heroes, Rogues, and Lovers: Testosterone and Behavior*. New York:McGraw-Hill (2000).
- Dessing, N.H. *Rituals of Birth, Circumcision, Marriage, and Death among Muslims in the Netherlands*, Leuven, 2001.
- Eliade, M. *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*, Harper, New York, 1958/1977.
- Elias, N., *The Civilizing Process, The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*, Blackwell, Oxford UK, 1994.
- Jager, J. de, *Rituelen in Nederland, nieuwe en oude gebruiken in Nederland*, Spectrum, Utrecht, 2001.
- Fontaine, J.S. la (ed) *The Interpretation of Ritual*, Essays in Honour of A.I. Richards, Tavistock, London, 1972.
- Lorenz, K., *On Aggression*, New York Bantam, 1963/1971.
- Lorenz, K., *The Foundations in Ethology*, Springer Verlag, Wien, 1978.
- Meade, M., *Men and the Water of Life: Initiation and the Tempering of Men*, Harper, San Francisco, 1993.
- Morinis, A., The Ritual Experiences: Pain and the Transformation of Consciousness in Ordeals of initiation, *Ethos*, 14, 1986, p. 150-174.
- Myerhoff, B., *Rites of Passage: Proces and Paradox*, in: V. Turner, Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1982.
- Scheff, Th. J., *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual and Drama*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1979.
- Turner, V., *The Ritual Process*, Aldine, Chicago, 1969.
- Turner, V., *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors, Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Cornell University Press, London, 1974.
- Turner, Victor, *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play*, Performing Arts Journal Publications, New York, 1982.
- Van Bakkum, H.J., *Kendo in Japan, sport as cultural-historical socialisation pattern*, report of a fieldworktrip, KUN, Nijmegen, 1983 (in Dutch).
- Van Bakkum, H.J., The Times, They Are A'Changin': Adolescents Left Alone!, Adolescence, Health and Ethnicity, Lessons from Anthropology, *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*, 8, p. 243-260, 1995.
- Van Bakkum, H.J., *The Transitional World of Male Adolescents, to an Integrative Intercultural Policy*, Handbook for Youthpolicy, Elsevier Bedrijfsinformatie, Den Haag, 1998a (in Dutch).
- Van Bakkum, H.J., *Civilised People don't fight, Young Men: Unacknowledged and Eager to Fight*, National Newspaper, Trouw, 8 februari 1998b (in Dutch).
- Van Bakkum, H.J., *Rites of passage: supporting structures during coming of age*, in: Justitiële Verkenningen, 6, 1998c (in Dutch).
- Van Bakkum, H.J., *Leisure, Play and Work in Urban Settings: Search for Liminal Experiences in Male Adolescents*, in: Leisure, Time and Space: Meanings and Values in people's lives, Sheila Scraton (ed.), Special Issue Leisure Studies Association, nr. 57, 1999.
- Van Gennep, Arnold, *The rites of passage*, Londen, Routledge and Kegan, 1908/1960.
- Waal, F. de, *De aap en de sushimeester*, Contact, Amsterdam, 2001.
- Young, F.W., *Initiation Ceremonies: A Cross-Cultural Study of Status Dramatization*, Bobs-Merril, New York, 1965.