



Rites of Passage: a Stepping Stone towards Tolerance in an Educational Context

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Abstract

*The project Rites of Passage was initiated in 2009 by Mix!t - A forum for research, documentation and education in living/together (University College Gent, BE). It wishes to contribute to the creation of tools for social workers in their action for a more harmonious society by bringing attention to the value of both the diversity and similarities between different people and peoples. Through the recognition of the "same" in the otherness of the other, we tend to be more open to this same otherness and the alterity of other cultures. Rites of passage are for a social worker a unique lever to stimulate mutual tolerance between people. Recognition and acknowledgment come into being by referring to the universality of these rites of passage (birth, adolescence, marriage, death) while at the same time offering a possibility to share what is particular to our own culture. This project collects information about rites of passage in various cultures, philosophies and religions. The information is compiled in two books (Vankerckhove & Vens (eds.), 2010, *Overgangsrutuelen*, Standaard Uitgeverij: Gent & Devloo & Vens (eds.), 2012, *Passages*, Academia Press) and is used in educational parcels on tolerance (De Kock & Vankerckhove et.al. 2012, *Overgangsrutuelen: Bouwstenen voor verdraagzaamheid*, Standaard Uitgeverij). In addition we organize exhibitions, lectures and seminars on this theme. All activities of Mix!t have the same central objective of creating more tolerance in our society. In all projects we have chosen an exemplary approach. Other practice oriented research projects concern elderly migrants, integration processes, cascade in educational systems, marital migration etc. In this specific project we work with and about rites of passage in different philosophies and religions namely in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Secular humanism, Hinduism, Buddhism and in some cultures: the aboriginals, the Inuit, the Kuna Indians and the Bétamaribé.*

1. Introduction

The project Rites of Passage contributes to the creation of tools for educators and social workers in their action for a more harmonious society by bringing attention to the value of both the diversity and the similarities between different people and peoples. Rites of passage are a unique lever to stimulate mutual tolerance between people. Recognition and acknowledgment arise by referring to the universality of these rites of passage (birth, adolescence, marriage, death) while at the same time offering a possibility to share what is particular to our own identity.

The information is compiled in a book and is used in educational parcels on tolerance (see *infra*). In addition we organize exhibitions, lectures and seminars on this theme. All projects of Mix!t have the same central objective: creating more tolerance. We choose an exemplary and qualitative approach in addressing the question *Can tolerance be promoted by referring to the universality of the symbolism in human behavior?*

2. Identity, difference and tolerance

As human beings we feel the need to cling to some fixed values both within ourselves as individuals as in our views on society. In the process of making society in our everyday lives we often seem to forget that the making of the self is impossible without the point of reference of the other. How the other appears to us, the way we learn or have learned what we want or don't want in life, what we



want to see or never want to see again, what we want to do, what we wish to achieve in life: it is all related to the other, be it our mother, best friend, next door neighbor or migrant down the street.

Tolerance towards the other and openness towards the unknown is only possible by questioning the core of the own identity. Difference and alterity seem to cause existential questions throughout history and in various forms of human interaction causing us to negotiate the flexibility of our own identity as an individual or a society.

Of course we aren't pointing out an ultimate dependence of others. Within the scope of this paper it is impossible and unnecessary to open up to the specific consequences of interaction with the other, individually and existentially. What we are trying to point out is the fact that (i) the confrontation with the other induces internal negotiation and constant recreation while (ii) there is a human need to vast values and categories. These two facts seem to contradict each other in many contexts and are confronted in society.

This psychological and social need to define ourselves as unities while at the same time needing a forum for the renegotiation of that union, is what we seem to share as human beings. Diani (1999) defines the construction of identity as "a process wherein social actors recognize themselves – and feel recognized by others" whereas Appadurai (1996) focusses at symbolical *spaces of adaption* and *spaces of identification* as intrinsic parts of our constant identity formation. Symbolic or tangible spaces of adaption for Appadurai include not only the ways in which we have to adapt in order to function in societies but also the dreams and hopes we cherish to change ourselves in the future. Habermas (1981) in his turn points at social construction through communication as the intrinsic constitution of reality.

These statements, as easy as they seem, lead us to a bulk of questions at the societal level. To what degree do we accept the other? To what degree do we allow the other to change us for its own wellbeing? What is the common denominator that can help us shape societies?

3. Discourse: reproducing culture

When denominating our cultures and societal actions as multicultural, intercultural or even super diverse or as way of *different cultures living together* and *cultures interacting* we may depart from a to static concept of culture. Going back to the basics of what culture consists of we can pose that it is (i) learned through interaction and (ii) it is constantly reinvented through this same interaction. Consequently, it is indispensable to recognize that education and socialization do not merely cultivate or culture people; but that we as educators should instead move toward focusing on cultivating and culturing this same culture trough communication, and actively enabling learners to produce culture and society.

As educators we should be well aware of the fact that the image of the other and the behavior we pose towards concrete others –for example migrants, is to a large extent inspired by what we have learned to signify in our words. The way we define culture and religion is to a large extent defined by what we learn through discourse. The way we perceive the 'other' is in many ways a projection of what we want this other to be [Said 1979] or the way in which the other may fit in a hegemonic view on society [Hall 1997]. Being able to recognize what we mean by the words we use; be it *Muslim*, *atheist*, *dickhead* or *racist*, is a step towards recognition, understanding and eventually, co-creation of new realities and as such, our own culture.

4. Cultural practice and communication

We've pointed out that culture has two aspects in its definition; the aspect of production and the product itself. We've linked this to respectively the personal and social need for reinvention through communication as well as the need for categories in human thought. This normative side of culture, the agreed-upon utopia of a society may in fact contradict its *productive* part in the sense that it may endorse values that are objectionable from the point of view of other cultures [French 1992] or even to what we may have agreed upon as universal values. This is exemplified by the new rise of identity

politics in many European cultures, mainly focused on new intra-European migrants as well as the former labor migrants and international or regional differences.

Despite the obvious dangers of this 'need for an own identity' part of it is a necessary basis for accepting cultural difference and diversity and for an open and tolerant society. In the current project we assume that we can only appreciate the alterity of the other when we are aware of the value of the own culture and of the fact that a cultural identity is dynamic and not static nor authentic. In this perspective diversity and differential thinking on the one hand and identity thinking on the other are communicating vessels.

Departing from this presupposition people can open up to each other and discuss their shared reality, or in fact reshape this shared reality as it consists of the peoples/learners own discourses and communicative action. By focusing on the universality of the cultural structure of rites of passage and on the universality of communication as a social construct in education, we wish to create acknowledgement and more tolerance towards the other.

5. Rites of Passage in education

Arnold Van Gennep (1909) is one of the first anthropologists that articulated the existent wedge in the anthropology of the 19th and 20th century. The knowledge about other cultures was often reproduced in such an own perspective that it was literally soaked in the own or hegemonic worldviews. How many have learned in school that some African cultures represent how 'we' used to live in prehistoric times? Or how many still presuppose that Muslims do not respect human rights because of the Islamic crusades? In general, early anthropology has tended to understand the behavior of others in terms of what they knew about their own society (Fabian 2002).

The methods of anthropology nonetheless enabled us to get to know different ways of life. Anthropological knowledge has triggered us not only in understanding a different culture, but truly living the other and allowing the self to negotiate societal diversity through a self-reflexive ethnographic method. Van Gennep was a pioneer in defining what he thought to be universal in human behavior whereas his colleagues mainly made attempts in understanding what they thought to be different in human behavior. If he himself fully obtained the self-reflexive ethnographic method is out of the scope of the current article.

Van Gennep notes that human beings constantly go through transformations in life. They are born, they grow older, they join other people's lives and eventually they die. Besides these biological transformations, human beings also adapt to societal transformations and to natural phenomena. Furthermore all human beings ritualize these transformations in one way or another in order to understand, share and support these biological, social or even political or economic transformations. The rituals that humans have invented to accompany these transformations are in their turn a demonstration to wider society of the transformation they as an individual or group are going through, rites reinvent social being. Due to this social character of rites of passage they can, following Van Gennep be subdivided into three phases: a phase of separation (of a group, a natural phenomenon or political sphere), a phase of transformation and one of incorporation (into a new group or live world).

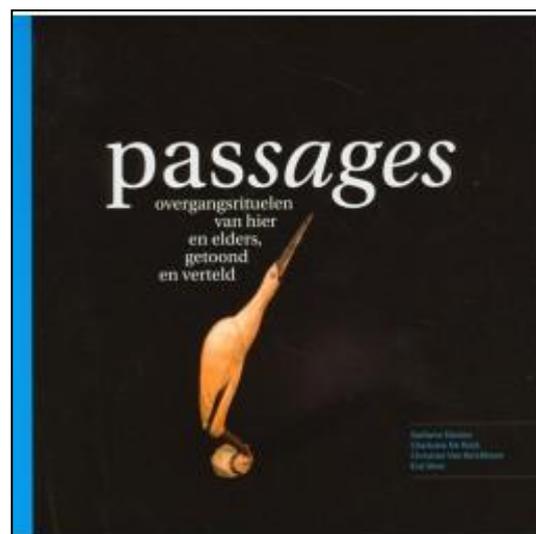
The process of marriage for example is usually accompanied with various rites that fit into Van Gennep's framework. A marriage proposal, bachelor parties, henna-parties, engagement periods and parties, the marital ritual itself and jubilees all have their place in the separation – transformation and incorporation rites of the symbolic new union of two people. University baptisms, Initiation in scouting, secret associations, the army and other groupings are all highly ritualized individual and social transformations.

Within the current project we focus on rites of passage concerning birth, adolescence, marriage and death because they are rituals that are familiar to anyone around the globe. We have documented these in different philosophies and religions namely in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Secular humanism, Hinduism, Buddhism and cultures: the aboriginals, the Inuit, the Kuna Indians and the Bétamaribé. We have done this by (i) visiting other cultures and living through their rituals (ii) documenting the rituals of



people with other cultural, religious or philosophic roots in our own society and (iii) transcribing interviews with spokesmen and practitioners of religions or life philosophies and of certain cultures. We have bundled this information in (i) a theoretic book on rites of passage (Van Kerckhove & Vens et. al. 2010) (ii) a book with the life stories of migrants in our society (Devloo & Vens et. al. 2012) (iii) a dvd with the life stories and images of various rituals (De Kock & Van Kerckhove et.al.) (iv) an interactive syllabus for 10 to 16 year old students (Van Kerckhove & Vens et. al. 2012) .

The use of life stories and knowledge on and communication about rites of passages in education is justified by the fact that 1/ diversity is translated in a human way, aside political correctness 2/ listening to each other's story connects people and induces acknowledgement 3/ the particularity of the life story opens people up for diversity 4/ sharing the own cultural of life philosophical experiences induces empowerment and the co-creation of new cultural practice of tolerance.





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