

**rites of passage in African traditional religion; it's  
importance in human development**

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**DEDICATION**

This wonderful term paper is specially, dedicated to God (Chukwu-Okike) for His Mercy, Grace and Blessings in my life, most especially for academic success and excellence and lovers of African customs and traditions.

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## **PREFACE**

Rites of passage are special rituals African traditional societies employ to assist their members at key times of biographical change. These life transitions follow a recognizable pattern of behavior in many cultures; for example, babies are given a name and social identity, youths enter adulthood or marry, others retire, gain particular qualifications, or pass from the world of the living to the world of the dead. Changes of status can be related to changes in identity because the term identity embraces social and psychological aspects of life. The term status tends to refer to sociological values without reference to the personal feelings and self-evaluation of individuals. In this entry, the term status emphasizes the social dimension and identity of the psychological aspects of an individual's life.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### 1.1

### INTRODUCTION

The Rites of passage are the transitional rites performed to “remake” an individual, indicating the passage from one phase or stage in life to another and marking turning points in his or her life. In the cycle of life, there are the stages of birth, puberty, marriage, death and regeneration. These life stages represent important turning points in life which involve transition or crossing into a new stage of life. Arnold Van Guep is the first scholar to use the term ‘rites of passage’. He identifies these transitional periods in the individual’s life as “crisis periods”. He is cited by Opoku as saying that at each of these “crisis periods”, there is always a change-social, physiological, and so on, in the individual. These changes are accompanied by social and/or religious rituals which are both to demonstrate the transitions symbolically, to ensure that no breaks might occur between the various stages, and that the transition might be smooth. According to Opoku, Guenep points out that all these crisis periods are characterized by three important sequential rituals: separation, transition, and re-integration. In his book, *African Religions and Philosophy*, John Mbiti remarks that religion precedes a man before he is born into the world, accompanies him throughout the stages of his life, and follows him even after his physical departure from the world. It is this religious

engulfment of life in Africa that best explains the origin, meaning and end of these rites of passage. This point is much more emphasized and clarified by Ray (1976) when he says:

In this phase people are metaphysically and sociologically remade into “new” beings with newsocial roles. Newborn infants are made into human persons, children are made into adults, men and women are made into husband and wife, deceased people are made into revered ancestors .... This remaking of man ... involves the symbolic destruction of the old and the creation of the new .... At this critical period people are neither what they were nor what they will become .... They are momentary anomalies, stripped of their former mode of being, ready to become something new. It is clear that these passages of life are welcome by African peoples with religious ceremonies and rites which indicate that they are great events of life with deep religious implications. It should, however, be pointed out that such religious rites accompanying these transitional periods vary from one ethnic group to another. “A turning point in the life of a people”, according to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979: 172), “may not have the same degree of religious importance in the life of another people. Thus, we cannot hope to find the passages of life given the same significance among all West African Peoples”.

## CHAPTER TWO

### 2.1 RITES OF PASSAGE IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

#### 1. BIRTH RITES:

Practices connected with the actual birth vary considerably throughout Africa. In some African countries, birth generally takes place in the house of the expectant mother or in the house of her parents. In a few cases, it takes place in a special house constructed for the purpose, either inside or outside the village.

In my area, almost any elderly woman can act as a midwife, though this is generally done by native or local specialists. As a rule men and people in a state of impurity such as menstruation are forbidden to be present in the house where delivery is taking place. The reason for this is that the child would be ashamed to be born.

In some parts of South Africa, birth may take place on the grinding stone which is the symbol of a woman's work/ in Udhuk (Ethiopia) when a woman is about to deliver, she goes alone into the bush, to give birth there. She returns home with the child after delivery. When a Gikuyu (Kenya) woman has given birth, she screams five times if the child is boy, and four times if it is a girl



In most African countries if the birth is difficult, it may be ascribed to various causes. Sin on the part of the woman, adultery or theft are common accusation of a delayed birth.

In my area, the ceremony that follows the birth of a child is merriment. Many well-wishers always visit the home of the child's parents to greet them and in most cases present gifts. The woman is treated specially for a period of 3 months. She has to confine herself in her home for these three months. This confinement is necessary to enable the nursing mother to take proper care of the baby. Another reason is that some elderly women forbid seeing new baby until after three months.

The nursing mother is not allowed to cook during the 3 months. She is meant to be served. She is given special food, in most cases pounded food. The food is rich with meat especially bush meat.

## **2. NAMING RITES:**

Nearly all African names have a meaning. The naming of children is therefore an important occasion which is often marked by ceremonies in many societies. Some names mark the occasion of the child's birth. For example if the birth occurs during the rain the child would be given a name which means "Rain" or water; if the mother is on a journey at the time, the child might be called "Traveller", "Road" or "Wanderer". A naming ceremony takes place a few days after the birth. The parents of the child invite friends, relatives and well-wishers to the ceremony. It receives a

personal name which marks its ritual entry into the family. Prayers are offered and libations poured on the ground for the ancestors or Mother

Earth. Visitors and guests bring presents to the parent's child. An elderly person in the family or among the invitees usually announces the name of the child. He carries the child, throws him up and spits little alligator pepper into the child's mouth. The alligator pepper is the symbol of boldness and prevent shameful acts in later life.

### **3. PUBERTY RITES:**

The rites of birth and childhood introduce the child to the corporate community, but this is only the introduction. The child is passive and has still a long way to go. He must grow out of childhood and enter into adulthood both physically, socially and religiously. This is also a change from passive to active membership in the community. Most African peoples have rites and ceremonies to mark this great change, but a few do not observe initiation and puberty rites.

The initiation rites also prepare young people in matters of sexual life, marriage, and procreation and family responsibilities. In Akamba (Kenya) initiation rites, children go through the first stage of initiation rites when they are about 4 to 7 years of age. Specialist men circumcise the boys and specialist women perform the operation on the girls; and a special knife is used in each case. During the ceremony, men gather round to watch the boys and women to watch the girls. The

operation is painful, but the children are encouraged to endure it without crying or shouting, and those who managed to go through it bravely are highly praised by the community. Afterwards, there is public rejoicing with dancing, singing, eating and drinking and making libation and food offerings to the living-dead.

This circumcision rite symbolizes separation from childhood. The dancing and rejoicing strengthen community solidarity. It is after this initiation that young people are allowed to join in public dances.

People from Isoko (Nigeria) and some parts of Urhobo (Nigeria) do not circumcise their girls until they have reached puberty. This is usually done during the first pregnancy.

#### **4. MARRIAGE RITES:**

Marriage is a complex affair. For African people, marriage is the focus of existence. Marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society. Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person has rejected society and society rejects him in return. Marriage and procreation in African communities are a unity; without procreation, marriage is incomplete. Biologically both husband and wife are reproduced in their children, thus perpetuating the chain of humanity. In many African societies it is believed that the living-dead are reincarnated in part so that aspects of their personalities or physical characteristics are reborn in their descendants. Everybody therefore must get married and bear children; that is

the greatest hope and expectation of the individual for himself and of the community for the individual. An unmarried person is regarded as an irresponsible man in the society. Marriage in Africa is a social affair. It involves the families of the bride and bridegroom. There must be understanding between the two families. Different customs are observed in the matter of finding partners for marriage. In some societies the choice is made by the parents. A fairly widespread practice is the one in which the parents and relatives of a young man approach the parents of a particular girl and start marriage negotiations. If either the girl or the young man very strongly and firmly rejects the prospective marriage partner, then the negotiations are broken down; although there are cases where force or pressure is applied to get the reluctant young person marry the partner chosen by the parents or relatives.

Among the Ethiopians, courtship and marriage take place at an early age. When a boy decides to marry a particular girl, he goes to meet her on the path and openly declares his intentions. The girl pretends to get a shock and chase the man away. When the girl reaches home, she puts her bed against the back wall of the house. At night the boy visits the home when people have gone to sleep and puts his hand through openings in the wall until he reaches her. She feels the hands and identifies him by the ornaments round his hands. If she still rejects him, she cries aloud and the parents awake. The young man then runs away and probably never returns to persuade her further.

The girl keep quiet if she accepts the offer for marriage and the two carry on a conversation inwhispers. The boy repeats the visit after few days or weeks to consolidate relationship. When therelationship is strong, the girl begins to wear beads which immediately makes her parents enquirewho the suitor is. If the parent approve, then the boy and the girl are allowed to meet publicly andthis leads to marriage.

The parents arrange the marriages among the Senegalese and the Gambians. The same procedure isadopted in most parts of Nigeria. When a young man meets a girl who he intends to marry he tellshis father about the matter, his parents send an intermediary to the girl's parents to enquire if the suggestion for such a marriage is favourable in their sight.

If it is favourable the boy's parents send kola nuts to the girl's father together with formal requestfor marriage. The girl's father then consults his wife and daughter if they agree, he also gives hisconsent and shares the kola-nuts among the household and family, neighbours and friends. Theyoung people now begin a formal courtship, and every time the boy visits the girl he must takekola-nuts to the family and bring her new dresses for the festivals of the year.

In traditional societies marriage is not allowed between close relatives. Since the range of kinshipextends vary widely, the degree of these prohibitions is also very extensive. Taboos exist tostrengthen marriage prohibitions. For example, it is

feared that children of close relatives will die and that the living-dead are displeased with such marriages and would therefore bring misfortune to those concerned.

Bride price differs from one country to another, and even within the same country it differs from tribe to tribe, bride price is never the same in Nigeria. In Ibo culture high bride price is demanded from the boy's family. This of course varies from the type of girls.

## **5. DEATH RITES:**

The rituals surrounding death is complex and varies from place to place. After death the corpse is washed and then dressed in the best clothes. However some religious sets do not dress the corpse.

Usually a befitting coffin is bought especially for persons who are either advanced in age or wealthy. If a small child dies, no coffin is bought and there is little or no ceremony. A proper funeral is organized for the departed so that his spirit may be contented in the world beyond and will not return as a satisfied ghost to plague his family. There are two types of burial in most African societies. The first burial applies to any person who dies irrespective of age but the second burial is restricted to persons who are old. In the first burial as soon as the person dies the relatives after washing and dressing the corpse a grave is dug. Before the interment, it is customary for some areas in Ika (Ibo) to find out what was responsible for the death.

How this is done is not understood to the ordinary mind. At the interment various objects are put in the grave especially money. These are meant for the use of the deceased on his journey to the world beyond.

When the body is placed in the grave, prayers may be made asking the deceased's spirit to give blessings to the family. The dead will be wished so many good things. For example if he was a poor man before his death, he will be instructed to bring riches when it reincarnates. On the other hand if the deceased was killed by witches or wizards, it will be instructed by the relatives to revenge.

The second burial is merely ceremonies and involves a lot of expenses on the part of the family. The second burial varies from a few weeks to a year or more. As there is much expense involved the rite may be delayed, but if the ghost of the dead man is believed to be troublesome, and to appear in dreams, then the complete rite is hastened.

If a married man dies, his widow will be in mourning mood for some months. In some parts of Ibo (Nigeria) especially in my area, she will continue to wear only the dress she had on when her husband died until he was buried and to also sleep on the floor or on a tattered mat as well as to eat from cracked plate. If a woman died, the former husband is meant to eat with a separate utensil and sleep on the floor. He is not supposed to bath for a specific period.

## CHAPTER THREE

### 3.1 IMPORTANCE OF RITE OF PASSAGE TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Rites of passage play a central role in African socialization, demarking the different stages in an individual's development (gender and otherwise), as well as that person's relationship and role to the broader community.

One of the importance of these rites is that, they are intended to remould the moral, mental and spiritual orientation of the initiates towards their world and their roles in it. The knowledge imparted to initiates is designed to create the awareness that henceforth the individual does not live for himself alone. The community and divinities have a stake in his life, since his actions affect the very bond that binds the human and spiritual communities. Thus the individual is taught that the structures of the community are divinely given and that the maintenance of the expected social role and relationship is a religious duty.

Secondary, Rites of passage are for this reason critical in nation building and identity formation.

Thirdly, Sexual identity and the roles of gender identity are enshrined through rites of passage: The males are prepared for their responsibilities in the community as men, and the women prepared for their responsibilities in the nation as women with no confusion.

The special circumstances surrounding a rite of passage raise an individual to a



transitory [sacred] state and enable him and society to cope with the transition.

Once incorporated into the new circumstances (mature status, marriage, warrior, motherhood), the public recognition of the change assists the individual on his to return to a mundane state and supports him in integrating the previously un-encountered archetypal processes into his psyche.

Primitive culture divides life into a series of well-defined positions with a definite rite of passage from one position to the next. The incidence and belief in the efficacy of such rites decreases with loss in belief in magic and with increasing secularization of society. It has been postulated that the absence of rites of passage in modern Western society and the decline in ceremony and ritual make it more difficult for the individual to overcome regressive and immature attitudes, leading to psychological problems, aggressiveness and immature behaviour.

Finally, rite of passage is nevertheless one of the various processes of transmitting societal cultures and traditions from one generation to another.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **4.1**

### **CONCLUSION**

Rites of passage entails a lot of ceremonies accompanied with sacrifices, for any child to accept the African traditional religion he/she must undergo all the various stages mentioned in this book. But great changes have taken place in Africa in the last century. These changes have inevitably altered the religious picture. Not only had social changes conceived, in new forms of government, but new religion has appeared on the scene. Christianity and Islam have come as missionary religions and have had considerable success in displacing much of the old faith. Their success has been much greater than it would have been in past countries, because of the unsettlement of African society in our days.

### **4.2**

### **RECOMMENDATION**

Despite the influence of globalization that contributes rapid diminishing of our traditional and cultural practices, this paper makes the following suggestions which would hopefully correct the observed anomaly. There must be a driving imperative to wake up and come back to ourselves, to nature and to the community. This is to be done by taking the responsibility for what we are, not by loadable projects but by simply taking a single step, each of us in our own way, place and time, within our own immediate environment, to revive our orientations and initiations.

There is an urgent need to ask ourselves what one has to do for the survival of our rich cultural heritage. This may be possible through the reorientation of our lives to the cycles of our natural rites of passage that holds enough potential for the retrieval of our cultural and community consciousness and the killing of the sense of self. The paper concludes that through these suggestions, we may get back to wholeness which our fore parents once enjoyed.

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