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### Andaman Island Puberty Ritual: A Rite of Passage

This paper seeks to show that it is possible to classify the Andaman Islander female puberty ritual as a rite of passage by identifying the stages of segregation, liminality, and reincorporation within the ritual. The Andaman Islands are located between Myanmar and India in the Bay of Bengal. *The Andaman Islanders* by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown provided the ethnological information for the analysis. This ethnology describes the hunter-gatherer culture of the Andaman Islands, as it existed in 1906-1908 (Radcliffe-Brown 5).

Arnold van Gennep was the first to rigorously described rites of passage. He defined them as “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position, and age” (van Gennep 10). Van Gennep also theorized that rites of passage were composed of three stages; segregation, liminality, and re-aggregation (Turner 5). The segregation period is marked by the physical seclusion of the initiate from the community. The liminal period composes the bulk of the time of a rite of passage (Turner 6). It is is marketed by a lack of social identity and classification. In this state initiates no longer have their old status, but have yet to gain new one. Rites of passage are completed in the re-aggregation stage (Turner 5). This occurs when the initiates are allowed to rejoin society and assume their new roles.

In the Andaman Islands, the female puberty initiation ceremony begins when a girl informs her parents she has experienced her first menstruation (Radcliffe-Brown 92). The girl is required to bathe for two hours before returning to her home. She is secluded, with her weeping parents, in a hut where she will remain for three days (Radcliffe-Brown 92-93).

Inside the hut, the girl is stripped of her name, normal clothing, made to sit on Pandanus leaves (Radcliffe-Brown 92). She will only be referred to by the generic names, *Alebe* or *Toto* (Radcliffe-Brown 93). The traditional initiation clothing consists of an outfit of Pandanus leaves.

Over the course of the three-day ceremony, Andaman female initiates must abide by many requirements. They sit very still and only move one limb at a time (Radcliffe-Brown 95). Sleeping and lying down is prohibited. They are restricted from eating the primary foodstuffs of their people and many not touch their food. They can only eat foods in certain a certain order using a wooden utensil to feed themselves. As the three days required in the hut progress, the girl will undergoes ceremonies that lift her dietary restrictions and allow her to resume a traditional diet (Radcliffe-Brown 97-100).

Once three days have passed, the girl has completed her time of isolation and may leave the hut (Radcliffe-Brown 100). She is allowed to rejoin the community and is given a new name. The new name is called a "flower" name and will be used by her until she gives birth to her firstborn child. The ritual is now considered complete. As a result of the ceremony, the initiate is considered an adult and eligible to marry.

Evidence for the segregation stage in the Andaman Islander puberty initiation ritual is very brief but fulfills the requirement of Van Gennep's model for a rite of passage. The girl is segregated from her community as soon as she tells her parents she has begun menstruation and is sent to bathe (Radcliffe-Brown 92). The segregation continues when she returns and must remain in a hut for three days (Radcliffe-Brown 93).

A literature comparison was sought out to validate the identification of an isolated bath and continual confinement in a ritual hut as the segregation stage of the Andaman female puberty initiation ceremony. Peter Carsten identified similar behavior as the segregation of female puberty initiates after their first menses in the Nama people of Southern Africa (Carsten 507). In the Nama, the female initiates are also confined to a small hut at the onset of their menses. Carsten identified this behavior as the segregation stage of the Nama female puberty rite of passage.

A defining aspect of the liminal period of a rite of passage is that initiates lack social classification (Turner 6). This can manifest itself in many ways. For example, the name of an initiate may change or be taken away (Turner 14). The initiate may also be considered impure (Turner 7). Both of these characteristics are displayed in the Andaman Island puberty initiation ceremony.

Over the course of the Andaman female puberty initiation ceremony, the name of the girl will change twice. She begins the ceremony with her childhood name (Radcliffe-Brown 92). This is stripped from her when she enters the ritual hut. Then she is only referred to by the generic names *Toto* or *Alebe*. The

meaning of *Alebe* is unknown but *Toto* is the species of Pandanus leaves that the initiate sits on and wears. This use of a generic name for all initiates is characteristic of liminal periods (Turner 14). After three days but before the girl is allowed to exit the hut she is given a new “flower” name (Radcliffe-Brown 92).

Furthermore, Turner explains that liminal periods of rites of passage usually contain symbolic deaths and rebirths (Turner 11). He argues that while initiates are in the liminal stage they are like a fetus, which is considered neither dead nor alive. Using this logic, the loss of an initiate’s old childhood name can be viewed as a symbolic death. The gift of a new “flower” name to the initiate symbolizes the birthing process. She is reborn into her new role of adulthood and given a new name just as she was named after her true physical birth.

The interpretation of namelessness as a characteristic feature of liminal states in rites of passage is illustrated in the naming ceremony of the Ga culture in southern Ghana. The name giving ceremony transitions the newborn from a biological organism to a human being (Kilson 906). This is interpreted as a transition from death to life in the eyes of the community. Although an infancy rite of passage, the Ga ritual shows that the literature associates the giving of a name with symbolic birth.

Dr. Mary Douglas has theorized that objects and people society cannot classify are considered ritually impure (Douglas 30). She draws upon the dietary restrictions outlined in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus to illustrate her theory (Douglass 32). If an animal does not fit into one of the traditional

animal categories, like crustaceans, than it is prohibited. This theory is can be applied to the liminal state where initiates are transitional (Turner 7). Therefore, if the traditions of the Andaman female initiation ceremony display signs that the initiate is considered impure, then she is most likely a liminal stage.

The ritual bath is evidence for the impurity the initiate in the liminal state. It occurs as soon as the girl has declared the start of her menstruation and has undergone the seclusion process. It is the first thing she does when she is considered neither a girl nor a woman. She is considered dirty and must bathe herself.

Again, the literature assessment of the Nama culture in South Africa is used as a cross-cultural comparison. A ritual bath is also given to Nama female puberty initiates (Carsten 107). This bath is interpreted as necessary because the girl is ritually unclean due to her menstruation and lack of social status. This confirms the interpretation of the Andaman bath as a sign that the initiate is considered impure because she is in a liminal state.

The relationship of the initiate with food in Andaman puberty ritual also suggests that she is considered impure due to her liminal status. The dietary restrictions placed on Andaman female initiates require that she not touch her food. She must feed herself with a utensil (Radcliffe-Brown 95). This implies that she will contaminate the food if she touches it.

A literature example of taboos against initiates touching food in rites of passage could not be found. However, in certain Hindu taboo castes the

members are not allowed to touch the food (Dumont 140). The people believe that they will contaminate the food if they touch it and must therefore be fed by another. This mirrors and supports that the food touching taboo in the Andaman puberty ceremony is the result of the initiate being considered impure.

The evidence of for an aggregation period in the Andaman puberty ritual is simple and brief. After completing her time in the hut, the girl is allowed to return to her community (Radcliffe-Brown 100). She is now eligible to marry and can take on the duties of an unmarried woman.

The female initiation ritual of the Andaman Islanders can be considered a rite of passage. It demonstrates the stages of segregation, liminality, and re-aggregation as defined by van Gennep. The segregation period is marked by the physical isolation of the initiation from her community. The liminal period is evidenced by ritual impurity and imagery of death and rebirth. Finally, the re-aggregation period allows the girl to rejoin her community. Overall, the female puberty ritual practiced by the Andaman Islanders serves as a strong case study for van Gennep's model of a rite of passage.

Works Cited

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