

**BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF EUROPEAN STUDIES**

PhD Thesis

**The great rites of passage : birth, marriage and
burial. Judeo Christian religious foundations and
their folk reflexes.**

-summary-

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Key words : myth, rite, ritual, anthropology, culture, birth, marriage, funeral, custom, tradition, ceremonial, baptism, circumcision, sin, forgiveness, divinity, gift, symbolic, language, sacred, magic, faith, sacrifice, atheism, suffering, body, soul, consciousness, nihilism, doubt, freedom.

Synthesis of the main parts :

The whole thematic of the rites of passage is nothing but the filmic expression of life seen as a series of film sequences which convey the same themes and motives from one generation to another. This thematic is loaded with an energetic rhythm, with an extraordinary image, with a prolific imaginary, doubled by a birth-giving imagination of a sentiment of mythical adventure and acute sensitivity.

The experienced of the field have recognized long time ago the visible prints of religion, psychology, sociology and they have tried to give a dystopian future dominated by the foundations of faith, psychic, mind. For a better understanding of the rites of passage one must descend in time towards the basis of an earlier structure with stronger mythical aspects.

The universal and common preoccupations of all social sciences were and always will be the human existence and its transgression through death, the big and inevitable passage. All social sciences have accepted the idea that the man is at the centre of the world, at the centre of his own world, of course, as he himself was about to realize later, and that the difference is not made by him but by the passage of the threshold towards afterlife or towards parallel worlds, towards multiple centers of the *real* feeling of the being.

The world is continuously changing but it seems to maintain in its entire course the cultural archetype of the saving spirit (Christ) and the sense of history (He came into this world gifted, He was misunderstood, He saved the souls of those who believed in him, He was betrayed by one of his own and died through the punishment of a religious authority that He condemned).

The rites of passage offer the opportunity to weigh in detail the nature of the given reality in the lived experience of life, not as a simple narration, but as an interpretation, as a mirror in which one will see our image and the image of our reality giving thus the impression of a more profound and bold foray. This type of inroad allows us to identify and to be aware of the traps of the existence. Some of them, likewise life, cannot be crashed, do not allow any chance of escape ; the best solution that one has is that of re-contextualize. Through knowledge and understanding one gains self-control in relation to the trap. This would be the essential function of philosophy – and that of art equally –, and what highlights – at least – this thematic of the rites of passage is the art contained in themselves and then, anthropology and sociology will claim the impressive collection of narrations about human life, into a convergence of intention, in which the art of the rites and their philosophy collide in the life film of the modern man.

Those who entered into analysis on the rites of passage offered us the immense opportunity to understand how one single rite can echo on multiple levels, reflecting, as a magic crystal, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, making vibrant the sensitive strings of collective memory, linked to the sense of the existence and of the critical interpretations. The success of

the rite or that of any other ceremonial resides precisely in its aspect of exploring, discovering and understanding, in offering new ways of weighing ourselves and the world we are living in. Its dominant idea is that the mankind has an option, not only at the level of the species, but at the level of the individual, and the rite frees the fellow who practises it. In a rite the man obeys in order to become master, mirrors himself and transforms himself socially and culturally.

The rites of passage give the impression of some parables of the initial Judeo Christian vision, that of transgression of captivity in a world in which no other hope of survival or saving can be foreseen, except for the going through these initiatory steps. The rite is the eternal New Testament for a new millennium, it is the continuous passage into the interior of the alternative realities, where it is known as metamorphosis. Symbolically, the characters involved in the rite accomplish the function of receiver of fragments of ancestral wisdom, packed in modern technological analogies. Symbolically again, slavery means damnation, and technical slavery is, as in the biblical vision, a sort of manmade slavery, a product of our own will, a second matrix. The rites function both in the original matrix, in that perfect world, and in the second, in this transformed world.

Rites cannot be compared with anything else. Rites are a very complex amalgam which must be studied interdisciplinary and its notes of systematic specificity must be taken out of the pedagogical reasons stuck in desuetude and in the immaculate conception directed by religion. Anyway, rites do not raise so many questions, but, through their specific nature they offer answers to fields of complex linguistic, sociologic, anthropologic questionnaires, which evolve continuously. Rites evolve continuously and they suffer mutations from one generation to another, apparently submissive to the rush of the man who'd like to forget as soon as possible the experience of the rites of the predecessors in order to generate and to allocate his own rites and options. Thus, both man and rite are elements subject to double state of fatality of oblivion and repetition. Generally, man has the tendency to ignore almost everything that has been thought before him and, in a way of eternal return, he reinvents questions and answers, and often in a very naïve way. Rites and rituals show, at a closer look, the shortcomings of current histories of thought which serve less to the edification of the collective memory of rites. Where human thinking believes it has made a bridge towards the past it is in fact the big ritual passage, the great fundamental reflection based on faith,

representation and rite, on this immense social phenomena totally charged with symbolic functions. The rite has a formal logic, but also a symbolism often loaded with mystery.

Rites mean distinction, separation, distance, but, accomplished, they become similarity, union, proximity. One finds them in society, at one level or another, diverse, full, out of all existent dichotomies : reality versus representation, individual versus society, sacred versus profane, objective versus significant, normal versus pathologic.

This thesis will take you through new, modern, transformed perspectives which link themselves harmoniously to the past and keep their link to it. Thus, **the first chapter** introduce as essential points the outstanding ideas of Marcel Mauss' perspective (true durkheimian, precursor of structuralism, anthropologist and sociologist of religion, historian and sanscritolog), such as : the total social phenomenon, the theory of total social facts and their symbolic nature, social systems as symbolic systems, or the symbolic through the problems that will be debated upon : fetishism, totemism, sacrifice, religion, magic, *manna*, gift, prayer, language, rite, sacred, total man. The dimension of Marcel Mauss' work, who showed a specific interest in the ritual and in the primitive religions, is sociological, philological, anthropological, ethnological, linguistic, symbolical, as it is the ritual in itself, multidimensional and omnipresent.

Mauss' demarche places entirely under the aegis of coming back to concrete. What is real is perceived as a diversity of the operation of the human spirit, through its significant activity, as a world of the original complexity.

Mauss, as a good empiricist, prefers to join *facts* rather than exclude them and shows his taste for enigma, for rare, insoluble, disturbing, excentric, bizarre facts.

The *modality* is a key notion in Mauss' work. It allowed him to state the unlimited variety of concrete social facts at a certain possible and identity. Modality implies a hidden order, a recurrence that maintains itself and this explains why Mauss announces structuralism even if he doesn't follow the structuralist way.

Mauss reintroduces *language*, this great excluded, this overall assembly of processes of signification in the social studies. Mauss worked in a sociology that built itself on the oblivion of language and replaced it in the centre, in the place that belonged to it. When one speaks about language, one is not limited to a vocal language, to tongue, but to everything that generates sense, and thus rite, gesture, body technique, gift.

Translation is another key notion to Mauss' work. Whoever says translation says transformation into another system ; the next system does not replace the previous one and their identities is not at all possible. It must serve to a deep perception of the complexity of the levels of reality, all of them being significant even if in inequality.

Mauss is preoccupied with *totalisation*, this *aggregation* which is a fact that he states constantly, saying that after one has analyzed, one must recompose. Mauss searches synthesis, the moment one knows that analysis is and will be incomplete. Knowledge is temporary but it is necessary. The main idea is that any social fact is, if not totally, at least globally and, consequently, it must be seen, quite closely, as a totality of a certain kind and which can be composed with others.

Mauss gets to the type of exchange, of communication, of signs and symbols through work of intrication, of enrichment and of reintegration of the excluded, starting from the naturalist and biological model of taxinomie by gender and species, from organicism, from functionalism and from evolutionism.

Mauss produced a structuralist reduction which represented a real revolution at the age but an undetermined revolution and which definitely disappointed. He was an important predecessor of structuralism. One doesn't have to forget the essential difference between Mauss and structuralism as it touches the core of the problems of the social sciences. Mauss had seen the fact that one day linguistics could offer the perspective of what one called the great passage, the passage that would link the sciences of man to the sciences of nature. Max Müller proclaimed that the science of language was a science of the nature and thus pointed one of the greatest discoveries of his century ; Durkheim proclaimed continuity among the natural sciences and sociology and thus produced a revolution ; Lévi-Strauss believed twice that he had discovered the great passage, first in the taboo of incest and second in the phoneme as a product of unconscious mental activity.

Mauss stressed the fact that the union between nature and culture does not imply ideas but facts. The natural sciences were precisely those which would find the great passage, if it existed. But it seems that there is no great passage and it's rather a still uncounted plurality.

Mauss' originality towards Durkheim and towards Lévi-Strauss resides precisely in his conception about the social. Mauss opens the path to a structural lecture of the social, for instance in the triple obligation in which gift is born. Thus, gift is not reduced to exchange.

There is this obligation to give back, which raises gift to the level of duty. Mauss' gift obliges us to imagine what links, in the shape of two extremities of the same continuous, the total prestation and the agonist gift. Likewise, the social doesn't mean only that kingdom in which man entered once for all raising from the animal world, once, at the beginning of an evolution which follows its course since then ; it doesn't reduce as well to the prescription, always updated because of its metahistorical nature, of having access to the symbolic order of the exchange and of the law, through the interdiction of incest and through all constraints of symbolization. Gift reminds us that from Mauss' perspective society doesn't mean only domination, law or order, but *praxis* as well or history.

The second chapter presents millennialism and its perspective (the theories about the end of the world, the image of evil, millennialism as a form of subversive politics of social mysticism) and the religious experience (the experience of prayer ; the experience as central element of faith ; the theories about experience [the stress on symbol ; God perceived through moral experience ; the state of consciousness of God ; the religious feeling directed towards a religious object ; *mysterium tremendum* ; the manifestation of pathologies and neurosis] ; the religious phenomenon reduced to economy, psychology, sociology ; the subjective experience of the divine ; mysticism ; retrying of the original experience through ritual as mimesis of existence or as experience adopted and constructed in itself ; the modern theory of the sub-altern) through the approach of the theme of violence, of conflict, of ritual (perspectives, symbolic action, reinvention, or the inner dimensions of the religious experience [ascent to Heaven, trip to the other world, ecstasy, getting out of body, mysticism, visionary]) and of society.

The third chapter proposes the image of the afterlife through vision and ecstasy (the afterlife imagined as mirror of the self, the experience of Paul the Apostle, the mystical and apocalyptic Paradise, the ascent to Heaven, the ecstatic trip to Heaven or the inner conflict, the mystical notion of the spiritual body, the image of the celestial man, the inner transformation which leads to salvation, baptism as a central rite, body of flesh – spiritual body), reference to the sacred and the initiation into the sacred (the modified states of consciousness, death limit experiences, out-of-the-body experiences, the forms of the ultimate road, hierophany versus cratophany), magic and magical thinking (magic as science of imaginary based on Eros, the passage from prophet to practitioner of erotic magic to

psychoanalyst, the transformation of the marginal man, old magic versus modern science, the subjective experience of power).

The fourth chapter fancies the the vast phenomenon of faith by reference to doubt. The mystery of faith (the great passage, the eternal return, the strange silence of God, the belief as projection of our desires as referred to the universe, the themes of maximum biblical power [the real contemplation, the fear of judging the others, the world as possession of the divine, the forgiveness and the suffering, the middle way, the redemption of sins, the courage in front of the death, the spirit of the truth], the double dimension of the christian life [faith and good works], the double dimension of the original sin [comes from and returns to the divine], the passage beyond mediated by the spirit, the prayer as mediator between the man and the divine, *mana* offered by divinity in the shape of the spirit embodied into man), the faith and the way to the divine (the intermediate spirit that recovers the work of the divinity), the birth and the tragic nature of man (birth as miracle, the motif of the water), the marriage, the passage beyond (death through fear of unknown, death as great union with the divine being), and the relations of man with the divine in the popular traditions (faith and self-content, wordly laws and spiritual laws) are some of the main ideas of the chapter.

The fifth chapter shows faith by reference to freedom. Beliefs and rituals (the topic of the intellect, the theories of the social, creator and creation, divine liberty and human liberty, the participation of the divine or the existence in itself, prayer and personal reflexion, ceremonial), reinvention of rites and rituals (public rituals, collective memory, the paradox of the ritual, [breaks to unite], the ex-nihilo creation), sacrifice in the theological vision and in the cultural anthropology (the binding of suffering, the resistance to the proof of the existence of God, the betrayal of the divinity, the theory of the fallen angels, the divine origin of the sin), atheism or the experience of mistrust (the manipulation of the crowd through rituals, the action of the unconsciousness, the crowd psychology, the access to the divine through sacrifice, prayer, ritual, faith).

The sixth chapter makes a summary of the myths and of the rites from mythological and ritualistic perspectives on religion (religion as cultural system, the aim of symbols and of rites, the relation between the real and the ideal, reality and art, projective illusions), the myth as basis of the manifestation of the rite (allegorical or euphemistic perspectives on myth, sociological and psychological perspectives), the ritual (magical act with folk implications,

perspectives and dimensions in the ritual, the ritual of sacrifice, the pure and innocent nature of the victim, self-sacrifice [martyrdom or witness], repentance which leads to the forgiveness of sins).

The seventh chapter configures, in a cultural anthropology and in a ritology in evolution, the important themes of body, soul, consciousness. Afterwards, baptism (initiatory rite more than preparatory rite) in christian cultures and in judaism, eucharist or circumcision lead us to the same sharing with the divine spirit. Sin (in the human consciousness and sin as bodily act, sin as inhibition of the divine consciousness, original and inevitable sin) and forgiveness (by reference to punishment), baptism of penitence or sacrifice of the sinner are, as well, of a major interest in the research of the rituals, in the passage towards creationism and evolution in the perspective of the traditional ritology (the three major conflicts between religion and science, the interpretation of the natural phenomena, the issue of genesis).

The eighth chapter prefigures the rites of passage (Arnold Van Gennep and his theory), birth (rites of preservation, of separation and of aggregation of the child, bath, denomination, haircut), circumcision (judean religious act, confession of faith), baptism (purification and separation from the previous world), marriage (sequence of rites of separation and of limit, protection, fertilization), death and rituals of the great passage (mourning, the world beyond, voyage of the dead, communion table, resurrection rituals and reincarnation rituals).

The ninth chapter stresses the philosophic nihilism and ritology in time. Thus, theories of nothing overtake through their large perspectives (nature through divinity, to be or not to be, end through implicit), imagining nothingness as something (the univocal of the being, the indifference of the being by reference to divinity), nothingness versus everything (see Ioan Petru Culianu, the ritual net, the unconditioned self-affirmation of the individual, the issue of power which keeps together the forces), or even the alternative worlds (fascination of the postmodern man, experiences reduced to chaos).

The tenth chapter makes a case study in the context of the folk passage rites in the area of Gorj, Romania. The folk creations and traditions have their own life, some of them having a very long existence while others, as a consequence of the changes that take place in the man's disposition and feeling, have a shorter existence, others step back in the passive background, and others change their semantics. The folk passage rites such as : birth, baptism,

marriage and funeral, due to their conservatism, keep a series of archaic elements of the folk thinking. Being linked to the major events in the human's life all of these survived up to nowadays with all the transformations and changes which our modern civilisation brought into the life of our Romanian villages.

The research that aims to the rites is generous, the interest in it is worldwide. This modern research does not aim to an only, solitary and one dimensional religious approach but to one by reference to culture with large echoes in science and in technique. In the fields that deconstruct the rite and show it to us naked, devoid of its inner power and without a close relationship of cause to the divine through a visual art so dear to the modern world.

The research must be pushed forward as the rites of passage represent a field far from being extinguished. My opinion is that the rites involved extensive debate on the symbol, its language and signification.

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