“Indigenous Traditions”

Rites of Passage

Rituals perform the same functions in Indigenous cultures that they do in every culture. They identify and remind us of what is important in life—or more precisely, what the culture we live in understands to be important. In religious terms, their explicit purpose is to communicate in some way with gods, ancestors, or spirits. At the same time, rituals also remain rooted in very human needs and relationships.

Around the world, followers of virtually every religious tradition affirm their faith through the performance of daily domestic rituals. Many of these rituals involve food—one of the most common and vital elements of life. Thus Jews and Muslims observe kosher and halal regulations; many Buddhists set a portion of each meal aside in a shrine for their ancestors; and the Anishinaubae traditionally put a small amount of food in a dish for the spirits. Australian Aborigines practice rites aimed at maintaining the balance and abundance of the animal species they rely on for food; these ceremonies are often very simple, and may involve nothing more than singing the song of the ancestor while rubbing a pile of stones.

Other rituals are more complex and much less frequent, marking critical moments in the life of individuals (birth, marriage, death), the community (departure of a powerful leader, liberation from slavery, completion of a great project), or the natural world (annual cycles, great disasters, rich harvests). Sometimes these rituals mark transformations, and sometimes they help to bring transformation about.

In either case, when we look closely at the rituals of any culture, what we find is a system of formal yet creative activities through which the members of the community relate to the world and to one another. In this sense, we can see ritual as an indicator both of the human need for meaning and structure in a world that is often random and frightening, and of the human capacity to create such meaning and structure.

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The Journey

Many cultures around the world regard life as a journey or quest. Rituals highlight points along the way, but they also constitute journeys on their own. This understanding is most clearly evident in rites of passage, rituals that explicitly mark a change of state and that may involve literal journeys.

Typically, such rituals take participants away from their community—the site of social order and familiarity—to a new place with unfamiliar rules, where some sort of transformation occurs. For males this place of is often outside, in the forest or the bush or the desert, whereas for many female rites of passage it is a domestic space of some sort. Once the ritual is complete the participant returns home, often with a physical change, such as a tattoo, scar, or missing body part to symbolize their new mode of being. While away, he or she exists in a kind of in-between or “liminal” state, after the death of the old self but before the birth of the new, neither the person they once were nor the person they will become.

In South Africa, for example, young Pondos\(^2\) are moved into a special, separate hut during their long initiation to become sangomas, or sacred healers (see photo on the right). If they go into town before the ritual is completed, their faces and bodies must be covered in white—the colour of transformation throughout most of Africa—to indicate that they are in the midst of a journey between the realms of the living and the ancestors. This initiation is most often undertaken by women, and is complete only when the initiates receive a dream of a particular animal, the incarnation of the ancestor who will authorize them to become a sangoma.

\(^2\) The Pondo are a South African Indigenous group who speak the Xhosa language and live along the southeastern coast of Cape Province.
Many Anishinaubae\(^3\) undertake a similar initiation, known as a vision quest. After years of guidance and preparation for this ritual, a young man on the verge of adulthood travels far from home to a designated site in the wilderness where the spirits dwell. Typically, this is the first time he has ever been completely alone in his life.

The boy has no food, only water. He endures cold and hunger, as well as fear of the wilderness and of harmful unseen forces. With luck, the spirits will give him dreams or visions that reveal his true self and the role he is to play in his community. After several days, an adult male will arrive with food and take the initiate home. If the religious leader determines that true spirit visions were indeed experienced during the quest, the ritual is complete and the boy is accepted into the group as an adult man.

**Behind the Curtain**

The rite of passage for Wiradjuri\(^4\) males in eastern Australia also involves a literal journey, along with fear and pain. At the appointed time, the women and children of the village are covered with branches and blankets. A roaring sound is heard, identified as the voice of the spirit being Daramulun, and burning brands are thrown about. Daramulun takes the boys away to the bush, where he will devour them and regurgitate them back as men. The boys are led away looking only at the ground, with the roaring all about them. While they are covered with blankets, each one has an incisor tooth knocked out. Then fires appear again and the boys are told that Daramulun is coming to burn them.

At the height of their terror, however, the boys receive a shock. Their blankets are removed and the men of the village reveal that they have been acting as Daramulun all along. It was the men who took the boys’ teeth, who set the fires, and who made the voice of the spirit being using bull-roarers. It is much like Toto pulling aside the curtain to show Dorothy that the Great and Powerful Oz is simply an old man, except in this case the deceivers reveal themselves.

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\(^3\) ‘Anishinaubae’ is the term (roughly translating as ‘the people’) traditionally used by the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Algonkin peoples to refer to themselves. The Anishinaubae are located mainly around the Great Lakes area in Canada and the United States.

\(^4\) The Wiradjuri are the largest Indigenous group in New South Wales, Australia, who have lived in the central region of the state for more than 40,000 years. Evidence indicates that no native speakers of the Wiradjuri language remain.
When the boys return to the village, therefore, they are truly transformed. They have been initiated into a secret (male) knowledge about the spirit world. They have also formed a bond with one another through their shared experiences of fear and revelation. When they return to the village they do so as men, are given new adult names, and take up residence outside their parents’ homes.

In revealing that the initiates have been tricked, doesn’t this ritual expose the community’s religious beliefs as false? Not necessarily. Sam Gill argues that its point is to demonstrate that what is genuinely meaningful lies beyond the surface of reality, beyond what we can see, hear, feel, taste, and touch. By exposing their trickery, the men produce ‘a disenchantment with a naive view of reality, that is, with the view that things are what they appear to be.’\(^5\) In this way, the boys experience a true death of their old selves: their youthful view of the world is no more.

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