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Liminality and Communitas

Victor Turner

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Victor Turner (1920–83), who taught at the universities of Manchester, Cornell, Chicago, and Virginia, is remembered as both a master ethnographer and one of the most creative minds in the field. He is almost singlehandedly responsible for transforming the anthropology of religion from dry social science into a humanistic field that could bring religious practices to life. He combined a rigorous approach to social process with an appreciation for the open-endedness of imagination. More than anyone else Turner was able to evoke the humanness of religion and the religious creativity of humankind. His work is rooted in a series of wonderful ethnographic studies on the Ndembu of Zambia (1957, 1962, 1967, 1969, 1981 [1968]), followed by essays on Christian pilgrimage (1974, 1979) and ritual as theater (1986). As he progressed, Turner widened his scope until his subject was virtually humanity as a whole. The essay here is both the clearest marker of the transition in his work and Turner at his illuminative best.

Turner builds on van Gennep's early tripartite model of rites of passage (1960 [1908]) and Gluckman's approach to social process to develop a rich account of the ways in which rituals manage transitions for individuals and collectivities. Such transitions are key to the shaping of both temporal and social experience. Turner's work is thus critical for studies of birth, initiation and death rites, calendrical rituals, political installations and secessions, pilgrimage, healing, and all forms of movement in social life. As such rituals work on and by means of the body, Turner can also be credited as one of the first to direct scholarly attention toward embodiment. Turner founded a lively school. Among the best explorations and elaborations of his ideas with respect to religious and ritual phenomena are Myerhoff (1974, 1978), Handelman (1989), Kapferer (1983), and Werbner (1989). Turner's widow, Edith, has a very fine account of Ndembu women's initiation (E. Turner 1992). De Boeck (1991) and Devisch (1993) offer more advanced work on rituals of affliction in the central African region.

Form and Attributes of Rites of Passage

In this Chapter I take up a theme I have discussed briefly elsewhere (Turner, 1967, pp. 93–111), note some of its variations, and consider some of its further implications for the study of culture and society. This theme is in the first place represented by the nature and characteristics of what Arnold van Gennep (1960) has called the "liminal phase" of *rites de passage*. Van Gennep himself defined *rites de passage* as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age." To point up the contrast between "state" and "transition," I employ "state" to include all his other terms. It is a more inclusive concept than "status" or "office," and refers to any type of stable or recurrent condition that is culturally recognized. Van Gennep has shown that all rites of passage or "transition" are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or *limen*, signifying "threshold" in Latin), and aggregation. The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both. During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and "structural" type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.

Liminality

The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such; their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.

Liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, may be represented as possessing nothing. They may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked, to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system – in short, nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands. Their behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint. It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life. Among themselves, neophytes tend to develop an

intense comradeship and egalitarianism. Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized. The condition of the patient and her husband in *Isoma* had some of these attributes – passivity, humility, near-nakedness – in a symbolic milieu that represented both a grave and a womb. In initiations with a long period of seclusion, such as the circumcision rites of many tribal societies or induction into secret societies, there is often a rich proliferation of liminal symbols.

Communitas

What is interesting about liminal phenomena for our present purposes is the blend they offer of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship. We are presented, in such rites, with a "moment in and out of time," and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties. These are the ties organized in terms either of caste, class, or rank hierarchies or of segmentary oppositions in the stateless societies beloved of political anthropologists. It is as though there are here two major "models" for human interrelatedness, juxtaposed and alternating. The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of "more" or "less". The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.

I prefer the Latin term "communitas" to "community," to distinguish this modality of social relationship from an "area of common living." The distinction between structure and communitas is not simply the familiar one between "secular" and "sacred," or that, for example, between politics and religion. Certain fixed offices in tribal societies have *many* sacred attributes; indeed, every social position has *some* sacred characteristics. But this "sacred" component is acquired by the incumbents of positions during the *rites de passage*, through which they changed positions. Something of the sacredness of that transient humility and modelessness goes over, and tempers the pride of the incumbent of a higher position or office. This is not simply, as Fortes (1962, p. 86) has cogently argued, a matter of giving a general stamp of legitimacy to a society's structural positions. It is rather a matter of giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be *no* society. Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low. No doubt something of this thinking, a few years ago, lay behind Prince Philip's decision to send his son, the heir apparent to the British throne, to a bush school in Australia for a time, where he could learn how "to rough it."

Dialectic of the developmental cycle

From all this I infer that, for individuals and groups, social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, communitas and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality. The passage from lower to higher status is through a limbo of statuslessness. In such a process, the opposites, as it were, constitute one another and are mutually indispensable. Furthermore, since any concrete tribal society is made up of multiple personae, groups, and categories, each of which has its own developmental cycle, at a given moment many incumbencies of fixed positions coexist with many passages between positions. In other words, each individual's life experience contains alternating exposure to structure and communitas, and to states and transitions.

The Liminality of an Installation Rite

One brief example from the Ndembu of Zambia of a *rite de passage* that concerns the highest status in that tribe, that of the senior chief Kanongesha, will be useful here. It will also expand our knowledge of the way the Ndembu utilize and explain their ritual symbols. The position of senior or paramount chief among the Ndembu, as in many other African societies, is a paradoxical one, for he represents both the apex of the structured politico-legal hierarchy and the total community as an unstructured unit. He is, symbolically, also the tribal territory itself and all its resources. Its fertility and freedom from drought, famine, disease, and insect plagues are bound up with his office, and with both his physical and moral condition. Among the Ndembu, the ritual powers of the senior chief were limited by and combined with those held by a senior headman of the autochthonous Mbwela people, who made submission only after long struggle to their Lunda conquerors led by the first Kanongesha. An important right was vested in the headman named Kafwana, of the Humbu, a branch of the Mbwela. This was the right to confer and periodically to medicate the supreme symbol of chiefly status among tribes of Lunda origin, the *lukanu* bracelet, made from human genitalia and sinews and soaked in the sacrificial blood of male and female slaves at each installation. Kafwana's ritual title was Chivwikankanu, "the one who dresses with or puts on the *lukanu*." He also had the title *Mama yaKanongesha*, "mother of Kanongesha," because he gave symbolic birth to each new incumbent of that office. Kafwana was also said to teach each new Kanongesha the medicines of witchcraft, which made him feared by his rivals and subordinates – perhaps one indication of weak political centralization.

The *lukanu*, originally conferred by the head of all the Lunda, the Mwantiyanvwa, who ruled in the Katanga many miles to the north, was ritually treated by Kafwana and hidden by him during interregna. The mystical power of the *lukanu* and hence of the Kanongesha-ship, came jointly from Mwantiyanvwa, the political fountainhead and, Kafwana, the ritual source: its employment for the benefit of the land and the people was in the hands of a succession of individual incumbents of the chieftainship. Its origin in Mwantiyanvwa symbolized the historical unity of the Ndembu *people*, and their political differentiation into subchiefdoms under Kanongesha; its periodic medication by Kafwana symbolized the *land* – of which Kafwana was the original "owner" – and the total community living on it. The daily invocations made to it by Kanongesha, at dawn and sunset, were for the fertility and continued health and strength of the land, of its animal and vegetable resources, and of the people – in short, for the commonweal and public good. But the *lukanu* had a negative aspect; it could be used by Kanongesha to curse. If he touched the earth

with it and uttered a certain formula, it was believed that the person or group cursed would become barren, their land infertile and their game invisible. In the *lukanu*, finally, Lunda and Mbwela were united in the joint concept of Ndembu land and folk.

In the relationship between Lunda and Mbwela, and between Kanongesha and Kafwana, we find a distinction familiar in Africa between the politically or militarily strong and the subdued autochthonous people, who are nevertheless ritually potent. Iowan Lewis (1963) has described such structural inferiors as having "the power or powers of the weak" (p. III). One well-known example from the literature is to be found in Meyer Fortes's account of the Tallensi of northern Ghana, where the incoming Namoos brought chieftainship and a highly developed ancestral cult to the autochthonous Tale, who, for their part, are thought to have important ritual powers in connection with the earth and its caverns. In the great Golib Festival, held annually, the union of chiefly and priestly powers is symbolized by the mystical marriage between chief of Tongo, leader of the Namoos, and the great earth-priest, the Golibdaana, of the Tale, portrayed respectively as "husband" and "wife." Among Ndembu, Kafwana is also considered, as we have seen, symbolically feminine in relation to Kanongesha. I could multiply examples of this type of dichotomy many times from African sources alone, and its range is world-wide. The point I would like to stress here is that there is a certain homology between the "weakness" and "passivity" of liminality in diachronic transitions between states and statuses, and the "structural" or synchronic inferiority of certain personae, groups, and social categories in political, legal, and economic systems. The "liminal" and the "inferior" conditions are often associated with ritual powers and with the total community seen as undifferentiated.

To return to the installation rites of the Kanongesha of the Ndembu; The liminal component of such rites begins with the construction of a small shelter of leaves about a mile away from the capital village. This hut is known as *kafu* or *kafwi*, a term Ndembu derive from *ku-fwa*, "to die," for it is here that the chief-elect dies from his commoner state. Imagery of death abounds in Ndembu liminality. For example, the secret and sacred site where novices are circumcised is known as *ifwilu* or *chifwilu*, a term also derived from *ku-fwa*. The chief-elect, clad in nothing but a ragged waist-cloth, and a ritual wife, who is either his senior wife (*mwadyi*) or a special slave woman, known as *lukanu* (after the royal bracelet) for the occasion, similarly clad, are called by Kafwana to enter the *kafu* shelter just after sundown. The chief himself, incidentally, is also known as *mwadyi* or *lukanu* in these rites. The couple are led there as though they were infirm. There they sit crouched in a posture of shame (*nsonyi*) or modesty, while they are washed with medicines mixed with water brought from Katukang'onyi, the river site where the ancestral chiefs of the southern Lunda diaspora dwelt for a while on their journey from Mwantiyanvwa's capital before separating to carve out realms for themselves. The wood for this fire must not be cut by an ax but found lying on the ground. This means that it is the product of the earth itself and not an artifact. Once more we see the conjunction of ancestral Lundahood and the chthonic powers.

Next begins the rite of *Kumukindyila*, which means literally "to speak evil or insulting words against him"; we might call this rite "The Reviling of the Chief-Elect." It begins when Kafwana makes a cut on the underside of the chief's left arm – on which the *lukanu* bracelet will be drawn on the morrow – presses medicine into the incision, and presses a mat on the upper side of the arm. The chief and his wife are then forced rather roughly to sit on the mat. The wife must not be pregnant, for the rites that follow are held to destroy fertility. Moreover, the chiefly couple must have refrained from sexual congress for several days before the rites.

Kafwana now breaks into a homily, as follows:

> Be silent! You are a mean and selfish fool, one who is bad-tempered! You do not love your fellows, you are only angry with them! Meanness and theft are all you have! Yet here we have called you and we say that you must succeed to the chieftainship. Put away meanness, put aside anger, give up adulterous intercourse, give them up immediately! We have granted you chieftainship. You must eat with your fellow men, you must live well with them. Do not prepare witchcraft medicines that you may devour your fellows in their huts – that is forbidden! We have desired you and you only for our chief. Let your wife prepare food for the people who come here to the capital village. Do not be selfish, do not keep the chieftainship to yourself! You must laugh with the people, you must abstain from witchcraft, if perhance you have been given it already! You must not be killing people! You must not be ungenerous to people!
>
> But you, Chief Kanongesha, Chifwanakenu ["son who resembles his father"] of Mwantiyanvwa, you have danced for your chieftainship because your predecessor is dead [i.e., because you killed him]. But today you are born as a new chief. You must know the people, O Chifwanakenu. If you were mean, and used to eat your cassava mush alone, or your meat alone, today you are in the chieftainship. You must give up your selfish ways, you must welcome everyone, you are the chief! You must stop being adulterous and quarrelsome. You must not bring partial judgments to bear on any law case involving your people, especially where your own children are involved. You must say: "If someone has slept with my wife, or wronged me, today I must not judge his case unjustly. I must not keep resentment in my heart."

After this harangue, any person who considers that he has been wronged by the chief-elect in the past is entitled to revile him and most fully express his resentment, going into as much detail as he desires. The chief-elect, during all this, has to sit silently with downcast head, "the pattern of all patience" and humility. Kafwana meanwhile splashes the chief with medicine, at intervals striking his buttocks against him (*kumubayisha*) insultingly. Many informants have told me that "a chief is just like a slave (*ndung'u*) on the night before he succeeds." He is prevented from sleeping, partly as an ordeal, partly because it is said that if he dozes off he will have bad dreams about the shades of dead chiefs, "who will say that he is wrong to succeed them, for has he not killed them?" Kafwana, his assistants, and other important men, such as village headmen, manhandle the chief and his wife – who is similarly reviled – and order them to fetch firewood and perform other menial tasks. The chief may not resent any of this or hold it against the perpetrators in times to come.

Attributes of Liminal Entities

The phase of reaggregation in this case comprises the public installation of the Kanongesha with all pomp and ceremony. While this would be of the utmost interest in study of Ndembu chieftainship, and to an important trend in current British social

anthropology, it does not concern us here. Our present focus is upon liminality and the ritual powers of the weak. These are shown under two aspects. First, Kafwana and the other Ndembu commoners are revealed as privileged to exert authority over the supreme authority figure of the tribe. In liminality, the underling comes uppermost. Second, the supreme political authority is portrayed "as a slave," recalling that aspect of the coronation of a pope in western Christendom when he is called upon to be the "*servus servorum Dei*." Part of the rite has, of course, what Monica Wilson (1957, pp. 46–54) has called a "prophylactic function." The chief has to exert self-control in the rites that he may be able to have self-mastery thereafter in face of the temptations of power. But the role of the humbled chief is only an extreme example of a recurrent theme of liminal situations. This theme is the stripping off of preliminal and postliminal attributes.

Let us look at the main ingredients of the *Kumukindyila* rites. The chief and his wife are dressed identically in a ragged waist-cloth and share the same name – *mwadyi*. This term is also applied to boys undergoing initiation and to a man's first wife in chronological order of marriage. It is an index of the anonymous state of "initiand." These attributes of sexlessness and anonymity are highly characteristic of liminality. In many kinds of initiation where the neophytes are of both sexes, males and females are dressed alike and referred to by the same term. This is true, for example, of many baptismal ceremonies in Christian or syncretist sects in Africa: for example, those of the *Bwiti* cult in the Gabon (James Fernandez; personal communication). It is also true of initiation into the Ndembu funerary association of Chiwila. Symbolically, all attributes that distinguish categories and groups in the structured social order are here in abeyance; the neophytes are merely entities in transition, as yet without place or position.

Other characteristics are submissiveness and silence. Not only the chief in the rites under discussion, but also neophytes in many *rites de passage* have to submit to an authority that is nothing less than that of the total community. This community is the repository of the whole gamut of the culture's values, norms, attitudes, sentiments, and relationships. Its representatives in the specific rites – and these may vary from ritual to ritual – represent the generic authority of tradition. In tribal societies, too, speech is not merely communication but also power and wisdom. The wisdom (*mana*) that is imparted in sacred liminality is not just an aggregation of words and sentences; it has ontological value, it refashions the very being of the neophyte. That is why, in the *Chisungu* rites of the Bemba, so well described by Audrey Richards (1956), the secluded girl is said to be "grown into a woman" by the female elders – and she is so grown by the verbal and nonverbal instruction she receives in precept and symbol, especially by the revelation to her of tribal *sacra* in the form of pottery images.

The neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status. The ordeals and humiliations, often of a grossly physiological character, to which neophytes are submitted represent partly a destruction of the previous status and partly a tempering of their essence in order to prepare them to cope with their new responsibilities and restrain them in advance from abusing their new privileges. They have to be shown that in themselves they are clay or dust, mere matter, whose form is impressed upon them by society.

Another liminal theme exemplified in the Ndembu installation rites is sexual continence. This is a pervasive theme of Ndembu ritual. Indeed, the resumption of

sexual relations is usually a ceremonial mark of the return to society as a structure of statuses. While this is a feature of certain types of religious behavior in almost all societies, in preindustrial society, with its strong stress on kinship as the basis of many types of group affiliation, sexual continence has additional religious force. For kinship, or relations shaped by the idiom of kinship, is one of the main factors in structural differentiation. The undifferentiated character of liminality is reflected by the discontinuance of sexual relations and the absence of marked sexual polarity.

It is instructive to analyze the homiletic of Kafwana, in seeking to grasp the meaning of liminality. The reader will remember that he chided the chief-elect for his selfishness, meanness, theft, anger, witchcraft, and greed. All these vices represent the desire to possess for oneself what ought to be shared for the common good. An incumbent of high status is peculiarly tempted to use the authority vested in him by society to satisfy these private and privative wishes. But he should regard his privileges as gifts of the whole community, which in the final issue has an overright over all his actions. Structure and the high offices provided by structure are thus seen as instrumentalities of the commonweal, not as means of personal aggrandizement. The chief must not "keep his chieftainship to himself." He "must laugh with the people," and laughter (*ku-seha*) is for the Ndembu a "white" quality, and enters into the definition of "whiteness" or "white things." Whiteness represents the seamless web of connection that ideally ought to include both the living and the dead. It is right relation between people, merely as human beings, and its fruits are health, strength, and all good things. "White" laughter, for example, which is visibly manifested in the flashing of teeth, represents fellowship and good company. It is the reverse of pride (*winyi*), and the secret envies, lusts, and grudges that result behaviorally in witchcraft (*wuloji*), theft (*wukombi*), adultery (*kushimbana*), meanness (*chifwa*), and homicide (*wubanji*). Even when a man has become a chief, he must still be a member of the whole community of persons (*antu*), and show this by "laughing with them," respecting their rights, "welcoming everyone," and sharing food with them. The chastening function of liminality is not confined to this type of initiation but forms a component of many other types in many cultures. A well-known example is the medieval knight's vigil, during the night before he receives the acolade, when he has to pledge himself to serve the weak and the distressed and to meditate on his own unworthiness. His subsequent power is thought partially to spring from this profound immersion in humility.

The pedagogics of liminality, therefore, represent a condemnation of two kinds of separation from the generic bond of communitas. The first kind is to act only in terms of the rights conferred on one by the incumbency of office in the social structure. The second is to follow one's psychobiological urges at the expense of one's fellows. A mystical character is assigned to the sentiment of humankindness in most types of liminality, and in most cultures this stage of transition is brought closely in touch with beliefs in the protective and punitive powers of divine or preterhuman beings or powers. For example, when the Ndembu chief-elect emerges from seclusion, one of his subchiefs – who plays a priestly role at the installation rites – makes a ritual fence around the new chief's dwelling, and prays as follows to the shades of former chiefs, before the people who have assembled to witness the installation:

> Listen, all you people, Kanongesha has come to be born into the chieftainship today. This white clay [*mpemba*], with which the chief, the ancestral shrines, and the officiants will be anointed, is for you, all the Kanongeshas of old gathered together here. [Here the ancient chiefs are mentioned by name.] And, therefore, all you who have died, look upon your friend who has succeeded [to the chiefly stool], that he may be strong. He must continue to pray well to you. He must look after the children, he must care for all the people, both men and women, that they may be strong and that he himself should be hale. Here is your white clay. I have enthroned you, O chief. You O people must give forth sounds of praise. The chieftainship has appeared.

The powers that shape the neophytes in liminality for the incumbency of new status are felt, in rites all over the world, to be more than human powers, though they are invoked and channeled by the representatives of the community.

Liminality Contrasted with Status System

Let us now, rather in the fashion of Lévi-Strauss, express the difference between the properties of liminality and those of the status system in terms of a series of binary oppositions or discriminations. They can be ordered as follows:

Transition/state
Totality/partiality
Homogeneity/heterogeneity
Communitas/structure
Equality/inequality
Anonymity/systems of nomenclature
Absence of property/property
Absence of status/status
Nakedness or uniform clothing/distinctions of clothing
Sexual continence/sexuality
Minimization of sex distinctions/maximization of sex distinctions
Absence of rank/distinctions of rank
Humility/just pride of position
Disregard for personal appearance/care for personal appearance
No distinctions of wealth/distinctions of wealth
Unselfishness/selfishness
Total obedience/obedience only to superior rank
Sacredness/secularity
Sacred instruction/technical knowledge
Silence/speech
Suspension of kinship rights and obligations/kinship rights and obligations
Continuous reference to mystical powers/intermittent reference to mystical powers
Foolishness/sagacity
Simplicity/complexity
Acceptance of pain and suffering/avoidance of pain and suffering
Heteronomy/degrees of autonomy

This list could be considerably lengthened if we were to widen the span of liminal situations considered. Moreover, the symbols in which these properties are manifested and embodied are manifold and various, and often relate to the physiological processes of death and birth, anabolism and katabolism. The reader will have noticed immediately that many of these properties constitute what we think of as characteristics of the religious life in the Christian tradition. Undoubtedly, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews would number many of them among their religious characteristics, too. What appears to have happened is that with the increasing specialization of society and culture, with progressive complexity in the social division of labor, what was in tribal society principally a set of transitional qualities "betwixt and between" defined states of culture, and society has become itself an institutionalized state. But traces of the *passage* quality of the religious life remain in such formulations as: "The Christian is a stranger to the world, a pilgrim, a traveler, with no place to rest his head." Transition has here become a permanent condition. Nowhere has this institutionalization of liminality been more clearly marked and defined than in the monastic and mendicant states in the great world religions.

For example, the Western Christian Rule of St. Benedict

> provides for the life of men who wish to live in *community* and devote themselves entirely to God's service by *self-discipline*, prayer, and *work*. They are to be essentially *families*, in the care and under the *absolute control* of a father (the abbot); individually they are bound to personal *poverty, abstention from marriage*, and *obedience to their superiors*, and by the vows of stability and conversion of manners [originally a synonym for "*common life*," "monasticity" as distinguished from secular life]; a moderate degree of austerity is imposed by the night office, fasting, abstinence from fleshmeat, and *restraint in conversation*
> (Attwater, 1962, p. 51 – my emphases)

I have stressed features that bear a remarkable similarity to the condition of the chief-elect during his transition to the public installation rites, when he enters his kingdom. The Ndembu circumcision rites (*Mukanda*) present further parallels between the neophytes and the monks of St. Benedict. Erving Goffman (*Asylums*, 1962) discusses what he calls the "characteristics of total institutions." Among these he includes monasteries, and devotes a good deal of attention to "the stripping and leveling processes which ... directly cut across the various social distinctions with which the recruits enter." He then quotes from St. Benedict's advice to the abbot: "Let him make no distinction of persons in the monastery. Let not one be loved more than another, unless he be found to excel in good works or in obedience. Let not one of noble birth be raised above him who was formerly a slave, unless some other reasonable cause intervene" (p. 119).

Here parallels with *Mukanda* are striking. The novices are "stripped" of their secular clothing when they are passed beneath a symbolic gateway; they are "leveled" in that their former names are discarded and all are assigned the common designation *mwadyi*, or "novice," and treated alike. One of the songs sung by circumcisers to the mothers of the novices on the night before circumcision contains the following line: "Even if your child is a chief's son, tomorrow he will be like a slave" – just as a chief-elect is treated like a slave before *his* installation. Moreover, the senior instructor in the seclusion lodge is chosen partly because he is father of several boys undergoing the rites and becomes a father for the whole group, a sort of

"abbot," though his title *Mfumwa tubwiku*, means literally "husband of the novices," to emphasize their passive role.

Mystical Danger and the Powers of the Weak

One may well ask why it is that liminal situations and roles are almost everywhere attributed with magico-religious properties, or why these should so often be regarded as dangerous, inauspicious, or polluting to persons, objects, events, and relationships that have not been ritually incorporated into the liminal context. My view is briefly that from the perspectival viewpoint of those concerned with the maintenance of "structure," all sustained manifestations of communitas must appear as dangerous and anarchical, and have to be hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions. And, as Mary Douglas (1966) has recently argued, that which cannot be clearly classified in terms of traditional criteria of classification, or falls between classificatory boundaries, is almost everywhere regarded as "polluting" and "dangerous" (passim).

To repeat what I said earlier, liminality is not the only cultural manifestation of communitas. In most societies, there are other areas of manifestation to be readily recognized by the symbols that cluster around them and the beliefs that attach to them, such as "the powers of the weak," or, in other words, the permanently or transiently sacred attributes of low status or position. Within stable structural systems, there are many dimensions of organization. We have already noted that mystical and moral powers are wielded by subjugated autochthones over the total welfare of societies whose political frame is constituted by the lineage or territorial organization of incoming conquerors. In other societies – the Ndembu and Lamba of Zambia, for example – we can point to the cult associations whose members have gained entry through common misfortune and debilitating circumstances to therapeutic powers with regard to such common goods of mankind as health, fertility, and climate. These associations transect such important components of the secular political system as lineages, villages, subchiefdoms, and chiefdoms. We could also mention the role of structurally small and politically insignificant nations within systems of nations as upholders of religious and moral values, such as the Hebrews in the ancien Near East, the Irish in early medieval Christendom, and the Swiss in modern Europe.

Many writers have drawn attention to the role of the court jester. Max Gluckman (1965), for example, writes: "The court jester operated as a privileged arbiter of morals, given license to gibe at king and courtiers, or lord of the manor." Jesters were

> usually men of low class – sometimes on the Continent of Europe they were priests – who clearly moved out of their usual estate.... In a system where it was difficult for others to rebuke the head of a political unit, we might have here an institutionalized joker, operating at the highest point of the unit... a joker able to express feelings of outraged morality.

He further mentions how jesters attached to many African monarchs were "frequently dwarfs and other oddities." Similar in function to these were the drummers in the Barotse royal barge in which the king and his court moved from a capital in

the Zambezi Flood Plain to one of its margins during the annual floods. They were privileged to throw into the water any of the great nobles "who had offended them and their sense of justice during the past year" (pp. 102–4). These figures, representing the poor and the deformed, appear to symbolize the moral values of communitas as against the coercive power of supreme political rulers.

Folk literature abounds in symbolic figures, such as "holy beggars," "third sons," "little tailors," and "simpletons," who strip off the pretensions of holders of high rank and office and reduce them to the level of common humanity and mortality. Again, in the traditional "Western," we have all read of the homeless and mysterious "stranger" without wealth or name who restores ethical and legal equilibrium to a local set of political power relations by eliminating the unjust secular "bosses" who are oppressing the smallholders. Members of despised or outlawed ethnic and cultural groups play major roles in myths and popular tales as representatives or expressions of universal-human values. Famous among these are the good Samaritan, the Jewish fiddler Rothschild in Chekhov's tale "Rothschild's Fiddle," Mark Twain's fugitive Negro slave Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*, and Dostoevsky's Sonya, the prostitute who redeems the would-be Nietzschean "superman" Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*.

All these mythic types are structurally inferior or "marginal," yet represent what Henri Bergson would have called "open" as against "closed morality," the latter being essentially the normative system of bounded, structured, particularistic groups. Bergson speaks of how an in-group preserves its identity against members of out-groups, protects itself against threats to its way of life, and renews the will to maintain the norms on which the routine behavior necessary for its social life depends. In closed or structured societies, it is the marginal or "inferior" person or the "outsider" who often comes to symbolize what David Hume has called "the sentiment for humanity," which in its turn relates to the model we have termed "communitas."

Millenarian Movements

Among the more striking manifestations of communitas are to be found the so-called millenarian religious movements, which arise among what Norman Cohn (1961) has called "uprooted and desperate masses in town and countryside... living on the margin of society" (pp. 31–2) (i.e., structured society), or where formerly tribal societies are brought under the alien overlordship of complex, industrial societies. The attributes of such movements will be well known to most of my readers. Here I would merely recall some of the properties of liminality in tribal rituals that I mentioned earlier. Many of these correspond pretty closely with those of millenarian movements: homogeneity, equality, anonymity, absence of property (many movements actually enjoin on their members the destruction of what property they possess to bring nearer the coming of the perfect state of unison and communion they desire, for property rights are linked with structural distinctions both vertical and horizontal), reduction of all to the same status level, the wearing of uniform apparel (sometimes for both sexes), sexual continence (or its antithesis, sexual community, both continence and sexual community liquidate marriage and the family, which legitimate structural status), minimization of sex distinctions (all are

"equal in the sight of God" or the ancestors), abolition of rank, humility, disregard for personal appearance, unselfishness, total obedience to the prophet or leader, sacred instruction, the maximization of religious, as opposed to secular, attitudes and behavior, suspension of kinship rights and obligations (all are siblings or comrades of one another regardless of previous secular ties), simplicity of speech and manners, sacred folly, acceptance of pain and suffering (even to the point of undergoing martyrdom), and so forth.

It is noteworthy that many of these movements cut right across tribal and national divisions during their intial momentum. Communitas, or the "open society," differs in this from structure, or the "closed society," in that it is potentially or ideally extensible to the limits of humanity. In practice, of course, the impetus soon becomes exhausted, and the "movement" becomes itself an institution among other institutions – often one more fanatical and militant than the rest, for the reason that it feels itself to be the unique bearer of universal-human truths. Mostly, such movements occur during phases of history that are in many respects "homologous" to the liminal periods of important rituals in stable and repetitive societies, when major groups or social categories in those societies are passing from one cultural state to another. They are essentially phenomena of transition. This is perhaps why in so many of these movements much of their mythology and symbolism is borrowed from those of traditional *rites de passage*, either in the cultures in which they originate or in the cultures with which they are in dramatic contact.

Hippies, Communitas, and the Powers of the Weak

In modern Western society, the values of communitas are strikingly present in the literature and behavior of what came to be known as the "beat generation," who were succeeded by the "hippies," who, in turn, have a junior division known as the "teeny-boppers." These are the "cool" members of the adolescent and young-adult categories – which do not have the advantages of national *rites de passage* – who "opt out" of the status-bound social order and acquire the stigmata of the lowly, dressing like "bums," itinerant in their habits, "folk" in their musical tastes, and menial in the casual employment they undertake. They stress personal relationships rather than social obligations, and regard sexuality as a polymorphic instrument of immediate communitas rather than as the basis for an enduring structured social tie. The poet Allen Ginsberg is particularly eloquent about the function of sexual freedom. The "sacred" properties often assigned to communitas are not lacking here, either: this can be seen in their frequent use of religious terms, such as "saint" and "angel," to describe their congeners and in their interest in Zen Buddhism. The Zen formulation "all is one, one is none, none is all" well expresses the global, unstructured character earlier applied to communitas. The hippie emphasis on spontaneity, immediacy, and "existence" throws into relief one of the senses in which communitas contrasts with structure. Communitas is of the now; structure is rooted in the past and extends into the future through language, law, and custom. While our focus here is on traditional preindustrial societies it becomes clear that the collective dimensions, communitas and structure, are to be found at all stages and levels of culture and society.

[. . .]

Liminality, Low Status, and Communitas

The time has now come to make a careful review of a hypothesis that seeks to account for the attributes of such seemingly diverse phenomena as neophytes in the liminal phase of ritual, subjugated autochthones, small nations, court jesters, holy mendicants, good Samaritans, millenarian movements, "dharma bums," matrilaterality in patrilineal systems, patrilaterality in matrilineal systems, and monastic orders. Surely an ill-assorted bunch of social phenomena! Yet all have this common characteristic: they are persons or principles that (1) fall in the interstices of social structure, (2) are on its margins, or (3) occupy its lowest rungs. This leads us back to the problem of the definitions of social structure. One authoritative source of definitions is *A Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (Gould and Kolb, 1964), in which A. W. Eister reviews some major formulations of this conception. Spencer and many modern sociologists regard social structure as "a more or less distinctive arrangement (of which there may be more than one type) of specialized and mutually dependent *institutions* [Eister's emphasis] and the institutional organizations of positions and/or of actors which they imply, all evolved in the natural course of events, as groups of human beings, with given needs and capacities, have interacted with each other (in various types or modes of interaction) and sought to cope with their environment" (pp. 668–9). Raymond Firth's (1951) more analytical conception runs as follows:

> In the types of societies ordinarily studied by anthropologists, the social structure may include critical or basic relationships arising similarly from a class system based on relations with the soil. Other aspects of social structure arise through membership in other kinds of persistent groups, such as clans, castes, age-sets, or secret societies. Other basic relations again are due to position in a kinship system. (p. 32)

Most definitions contain the notion of an arrangement of positions or statuses. Most involve the institutionalization and perdurance of groups and relationships. Classical mechanics, the morphology and physiology of animals and plants, and, more recently, with Lévi-Strauss, structural linguistics have been ransacked for concepts, models, and homologous forms by social scientists. All share in common the notion of a superorganic arrangement of parts or positions that continues, with modifications more or less gradual, through time. The concept of "conflict" has come to be connected with the concept of "social structure," since the differentiation of parts becomes opposition between parts, and scarce status becomes the object of struggles between persons and groups who lay claim to it.

The other dimension of "society" with which I have been concerned is less easy to define. G. A. Hillery (1955) reviewed 94 definitions of the term "community" and reached the conclusion that "beyond the concept that people are involved in community, there is no complete agreement as to the nature of community" (p. 119). The field would, therefore, seem to be still open for new attempts! I have tried to eschew the notion that communitas has a specific territorial locus, often limited in character, which pervades many definitions. For me, communitas emerges where social structure is not. Perhaps the best way of putting this difficult concept into words is

Martin Buber's – though I feel that perhaps he should be regarded as a gifted native informant rather than as a social scientist! Buber (1961) uses the term "community" for "communitas": "Community is the being no longer side by side (and, one might add, above and below) but *with* one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from *I* to *Thou*. Community is where community happens" (p. 51).

Buber lays his finger on the spontaneous, immediate, concrete nature of communitas, as opposed to the norm-governed, institutionalized, abstract nature of social structure. Yet, communitas is made evident or accessible, so to speak, only through its juxtaposition to, or hybridization with, aspects of social structure. Just as in *Gestalt* pyschology, figure and ground are mutually determinative, or, as some rare elements are never found in nature in their purity but only as components of chemical compounds, so communitas can be grasped only in some relation to structure. Just because the communitas component is elusive, hard to pin down, it is not unimportant. Here the story of Lao-tse's chariot wheel may be apposite. The spokes of the wheel and the nave (i.e., the central block of the wheel holding the axle and spokes) to which they are attached would be useless, he said, but for the hole, the gap, the emptiness at the center. Communitas, with its unstructured character, representing the "quick" of human interrelatedness, what Buber has called *das Zwischenmenschliche*, might well be represented by the "emptiness at the center," which is nevertheless indispensable to the functioning of the structure of the wheel.

It is neither by chance nor by lack of scientific precision that, along with others who have considered the conception of communitas, I find myself forced to have recourse to metaphor and analogy. For communitas has an existential quality; it involves the whole man in his relation to other whole men. Structure, on the other hand, has cognitive quality; as Lévi-Strauss has perceived, it is essentially a set of classifications, a model for thinking about culture and nature and ordering one's public life. Communitas has also an aspect of potentiality; it is often in the subjunctive mood. Relations between total beings are generative of symbols and metaphors and comparisons; art and religion are their products rather than legal and political structures. Bergson saw in the words and writings of prophets and great artists the creation of an "open morality," which was itself an expression of what he called the *élan vital*, or evolutionary "life-force." Prophets and artists tend to be liminal and marginal people, "edgemen," who strive with a passionate sincerity to rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and role-playing and to enter into vital relations with other men in fact or imagination. In their productions we may catch glimpses of that unused evolutionary potential in mankind which has not yet been externalized and fixed in structure.

Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or "holy," possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency. The processes of "leveling" and "stripping," to which Goffman has drawn our attention, often appear to flood their subjects with affect. Instinctual energies are surely liberated by these processes, but I am now inclined to think that communitas is not solely the product of biologically inherited drives released from cultural constraints. Rather is it the

product of peculiarly human faculties, which include rationality, volition, and memory, and which develop with experience of life in society....

The notion that there is a generic bond between men, and its related sentiment of "humankindness," are not epiphenomena of some kind of herd instinct but are products of "men in their wholeness wholly attending." Liminality, marginality, and structural inferiority are conditions in which are frequently generated myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art. These cultural forms provide men with a set of templates or models which are, at one level, periodical reclassifications of reality and man's relationship to society, nature, and culture. But they are more than classifications, since they incite men to action as well as to thought. Each of these productions has a multivocal character, having many meanings, and each is capable of moving people at many psychobiological levels simultaneously.

There is a dialectic here, for the immediacy of communitas gives way to the mediacy of structure, while, in *rites de passage*, men are released from structure into communitas only to return to structure revitalized by their experience of communitas. What is certain is that no society can function adequately without this dialectic. Exaggeration of structure may well lead to pathological manifestations of communitas outside or against "the law." Exaggeration of communitas, in certain religious or political movements of the leveling type, may be speedily followed by despotism, overbureaucratization, or other modes of structural rigidification. For, like the neophytes in the African circumcision lodge, or the Benedictine monks, or the members of a millenarian movement, those living in community seem to require, sooner or later, an absolute authority, whether this be a religious commandment, a divinely inspired leader, or a dictator. Communitas cannot stand alone if the material and organizational needs of human beings are to be adequately met. Maximization of communitas provokes maximixation of structure, which in its turn produces revolutionary strivings for renewed communitas. The history of any great society provides evidence at the political level for this oscillation.
[...]

But together they constitute the "human condition," as regards man's relations with his fellow man.

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Religion and Personal Experience

Introduction

The essays in this section address religious experience from multiple perspectives, but they are all notable for not objectifying it. They avoid reducing it to either a specific psychological property or to the sense of awe and fear that successive Christian writers (e.g., Otto 1923 [1917]) have posited as lying at the root of religion. Experience is culturally shaped or in dialectical relation to culture, society, and power, not something that exists prior to them.