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# Initiation and Passage: Multilingual Encyclopedic and Bibliographic Approach

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*An encyclopedic and bibliographic review of “initiation” and life course rituals (Janssen, in preparation) highlights a number of indexing problems that complicate previous efforts to code the cross-cultural distribution of such rituals. Qualitative assessment of this classification issue is extensive and draws from a number of disciplines beside anthropology. Contemporary interest in ritualized organization of status change on the level of metaphor, narrative and discourse and across social sciences and public appropriations (Janssen 2007) foregrounds concerns substantial enough to compromise any comparative approach to the problem. This is, of course, an inevitable corollary of semantically convoluted concepts such as initiation. In this short research note I briefly list available cross-cultural tools and provide short critiques of them.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

An encyclopedic and bibliographic review of “initiation” and life course rituals (Janssen, in preparation) highlights a number of indexing problems that complicate previous efforts to code the cross-cultural distribution of such rituals. Qualitative assessment of this classification issue is extensive and draws from a number of disciplines beside anthropology. Contemporary interest in ritualized organization of status change on the level of metaphor, narrative and discourse and across social sciences and public appropriations (Janssen, 2007) foregrounds concerns substantial enough to compromise any comparative approach to the problem. This is, of course, an inevitable corollary of semantically convoluted concepts such as initiation.

In this short research note I briefly list available cross-cultural tools and provide short critiques of them. I do not claim to engage the full spectrum of problems encountered in comparative research in the century after Van Gennep’s chapter on initiation (1909 [1960:65-115]). One quagmire however seems central: the methodological accomplishment of distinctive, and useful, categories. Choices of definition made in comparative approaches may seem “arbitrary and stultifying” to readers (Southwold 1987:585). Studies have ambitiously proposed to tie initiation to some ultimate *causa finalis* (e.g. reproduction: Schlegel and Barry 1991), but many current anthropologists are uncomfortable with such reductionism. An early commentary argues that “the loose category of events that anthropologists have often included under the heading of puberty rites and initiation rites cannot all [*sic*] be satisfactorily explained by any single set of circumstances” (Norbeck, Walker, and Cohen 1962:482). Most recent comparative endeavor is typically regionalist and historical rather than “worldist.” However, as Strathern (1995:181) points out *initiation* can

be seen as an indispensable “setting within which to pursue particularities.” With this in mind, we may still try and embrace “the world.”

## 2. CROSS-CULTURAL TOOLS

### *“Initiation”*

HRAF OCM 881 organizes data on “puberty and initiation” (also named “adolescent initiations”) ramifying ritualization in terms of “practices associated with first emissio seminis and first menstruation; rites of passage at or near puberty [...] special initiation rites for each gender [...] function and purpose of ceremonial; mystery and seclusion; taboos; ordeals and tests; inculcation of secret lore; special instruction in sex life [...]” Furthermore OCM 575 on *sodalities* covers “initiation into clubs and secret societies,” OCM 561 on *age stratification* covers “generalized information on rites of passage from level to level [...] admission, advancement [in age-grades] [...]” and OCM 622 the “installation of chiefs and kings.” Murdock’s ethnographic atlas examined “male genital mutilations” (SCCS 241) specified for age segments but not for ritual or initiatory status. Whiting, Kluckhohn and Anthony (1958:365) indicated absence and presence of “customs at adolescent initiation ceremonies,” seemingly equated with “initiation rites at puberty” and “transition[s] from boyhood to manhood” in 56 societies. Brown (1963:839) presented data on absence and presence of “female initiation rites” in 75 cultures selected from Murdock’s World Ethnographic Sample, defined as consisting of “one or more prescribed ceremonial events, mandatory for all girls of a given society, and celebrated between their eighth and twentieth years” excluding betrothal or marriage customs. Young (1965) studied initiation “at puberty or in [the] early teens” in selected HRAF societies, distinguishing “boyhood/girlhood ceremonies” from “(fe)male childhood ceremonies.” Young discussed an operational definition of initiation (1965:11-14) which for the purpose of his study (“sex role dramatization”) foregrounded the following aspects: 1) periodicity and formal continuity; 2) adult supervision; 3) ‘adolescent’ timing; 4) total participation; 5) gender exclusivity; 6) restriction to “most elaborate” ritual in case of a protracted ritual trajectory. Whyte studied absence/presence and aspects of “general female/male initiation ceremonies” in half (93 odd-numbered) of SCCS societies (1978a: SCCS 623/ 1978b: SCCS 694). Most recently, Schlegel and Barry III (1979) coded various aspects of “adolescent initiation ceremonies” which they found present in 63 societies (or 36% of the 1969 SCCS) for males and in 85 (46%) for females (SCCS 529-560).

### *“Passage”*

Informing non-initiatory notions of “passage,” OCM 852 recognizes *ceremonial during infancy and childhood* or “rites of passage prior to puberty; maturation ceremonies (e.g., at first step, at first tooth); rites associated with cutting of hair, ear piercing, and circumcision; ceremonies correlated with achievements (e.g., first animal killed, first cloth woven) [...]” Paige and Paige (1981) studied “menarcheal ceremonies” (SCCS 561) in 44 (as opposed to 44 control) societies under the SCCS heading of “reproductive rituals,” as well as

“circumcision” without specifying its ritual or initiatory status (SCCS 562). Frayser (1985) provided additional coding for “social celebration involved at the onset of the menses” in 20 of 46 societies (SCCS 937). SCCS 1251 subcodes “public ceremony” as “degree of public awareness of menarche” for 21 societies (Anderson, Crawford, and Lindberg 1992). SCCS code 1185 further recognizes “defloration rituals” and “manhood rituals” if or as involving “ceremonial rape,” while SCCS 74 signals prominence of “rites of passage” being “performed for individuals at critical points in their life cycle but normally attended by all or most members of the community [including] puberty initiations [...]” (Murdock and Wilson, 1972:263). Barry III et al. (1977) examined the occurrence of “ceremonies for children [early and late childhood]” (SCCS 457-460) while Barry III and Paxton (1971) studied “ceremonialism surrounding child” referring to “formal, social rituals or communications beyond the nuclear family, centered around the child [including] naming and baptism ceremonies and festivals or public announcements to commemorate developmental stages [...]” (SCCS 35).

### **3. MULTILINGUAL ENCYCLOPEDIA APPROACH**

None of the tools mentioned above indexes the names of the rituals/ceremonies nor do they offer exact bibliographic references. The format of a multilingual and historical theme dictionary currently in preparation has the benefit of identifying analytic and indigenous qualifiers, combined with cross-referencing and page-specific bibliographic referencing. An interim digest (Janssen, in preparation) lists (1) the indigenous name of initiation/passage customs (and any native alternatives and alternate transliterations or transcriptions), (2) the ethno/geographic site(s), (3) a concise to very concise description (which may include interpretation of indigenous names), and (4) partly page-specific references. This effort has not initially been informed by the tools mentioned above, rather has taken an eclectic search engine approach till “saturation” using analytic phrase searches, name searches, proximity searches, and code-guided searches depending on the database<sup>1</sup>. Most entries could be satisfactorily triangulated on the basis of commercial collections of abstracts or digitized full text documents.

Current number of entries is over 700 for male and ambi-sex rituals/customs (some 60 missing linguistic data), and 245 for female rituals/customs (34 missing). The frequent unavailability of indigenous terms often signals ethnographic neglect to mention *whether* a name was found to be in vogue. In a substantial residue of cases no indigenous name was offered by ethnographers although “initiation” would entail a salient event (by definition and/or by ethnographic inference), and though indigenous terms may be offered differentiating the status of initiands (praeter events) from that of initiates (post events), or terms identifying specific customs partial to the event. However, presence of an indigenous expression for events and ethnographic mentioning of it may seem to signal a more sustained positive indigenous appraisal of salience than do alternative definitions. Explicit statements on absence of customs were not considered for indexing. In case of contradictory assessment of presence, reports on presence were included.

## 4 PROBLEMS AND CRITIQUE

The delimitations introduced by the various purposive and non-purposive operationalizations reviewed above hint at an ontological feature of “initiations,” namely their dependency on (spatial) metaphor and analytic containment more than on emic qualification and rationalization. In a range of ethnographic communications, expectedly, analytic terms are applied with caution. “In-itation” assumes either or both of an initiand’s perspective (*ex ante* de-emphasizing or subjugating any alternative functional appellation from *seclusion* and *quest* to *re-emergence* and political *ascent*) and a terminological and metaphorical intervention. Such an intervention constitutes the very premise for comparison. A dictionary approach suggests that indigenous names for “initiation” rituals very rarely translate strictly to an *inward* mobility, or *introductory* intent. Variability of trope could be an interesting observation if comparative approaches envision, which they usually do, that generalizations of social efficacy, necessity or legitimacy can be made beyond the mere effect of stratifying individuals according to, or in deviance of, their demographics (age, sex). Initiation may connote (1) *allegoric* (cf. “rebirth,” “cooking” of novices), 2) *proximate* (cf. “transformation,” “incorporation”) and 3) hypothesized *ultimate* efficacy; however at all levels of analysis functions seem to be variably imagined. Ethnographers’ discussions of these levels seem too easily “resolved” by coding systems.

The analytic ambition to specify or restrict ritualism as “initiatory” for chronometric age segments, for instance, may override the hypothesis that initiations *accomplish* social stratification by deploying non-metric or non-linear time reckoning. This then could hint at a key anthropological finding, not a challenge to operationalization (as Young and others suggested).

A further related note should be made on the use of Euro-American delimiters. *Adolescence* is a psychomedical concept popularized by Stanley G. Hall and Erik Erikson in 20<sup>th</sup> century developmental psychology, and should be considered an ineligible analytic intrusion if the presence of “thus timed” initiations are studied for their efficacy regarding age stratification. Initiation may be partial to a ritual cycle or system that spans decades and informs indigenous age grading systems (typically, an uninitiated [*man*] is a [*boy*] regardless of any chronometric system of age reckoning). For instance, Ikwuagwu (2005:81) observes that Edda Igbo “initiation” is accomplished by three events taking place for infants, juveniles, and seniors/adults. In a range of societies marriage would equal the attainment of some indigenous equivalent of “adulthood” and hence would have to qualify as an “initiation” into such status proper (“puberty rituals” typically grant nuptial status; initiates are commonly “brides” in native perspectives). Menarche, marriage and female initiation are often not only concurrent but also conceptually coterminous and sporadically simply taken as synonymous. This would reduce the utility of Brown’s criteria.

An allied problem lies in the delimitation of *ritual*, versus *ceremonial* or *customary* or *festive* or *celebratory*, efficacy and necessity. For instance what is the efficacy of inaugural *vision quests* (commonly prepubertal), Amish *rumspringa*, or Jewish *bar mitzvah*? A very large number of customs, sometimes consisting of long term and complex observances, including

many “menarcheal rites,” seem to be neither essentially ritualizations nor even ceremonializations though there might be either an indigenous or analytic notion of correspondence to rituals proper for male participants.

However, uncritical or lenient use of qualifications in the definitions may compromise comparative and analytic power. Ethnographers commonly point out that the salience, organizing potential and level of rationalization of “initiatory” events is either variable among sub-communities, or low in some historical perspective, or contingent on the status/class of the initiator’s sponsor. These findings heavily inform coding or indexing events as *substantially* ritual or ceremonial. An illustrative example is the “giving of *pangi*” (*gi pangi*) for women and “giving of loincloth” (*gi kamissa*) for men among the Ndyuka as reported by Lenoir (*The Paramacca Maroons*, pp. 152-3):

The transition from childhood to adulthood is symbolized by a ceremony of presenting clothing to the individual. [...] The ceremony is a raucous and, for the 14-to 16-year olds who face it, a dreaded affair. By the time of the formal change of status, most teenagers have long before started wearing clothing. The formal giving of clothing, however, involves the public removal of children’s clothing before the presentation of new and appropriate adult garb. It is this aspect of the ceremony which usually draws great attention from villagers and prompts attempted escapes by the subject of the ceremony (to which it could be added that Hurault in *The Boni Refugee Blacks of French Guiana*, explicitly denies the presence of anything resembling “initiation”).

I disagree with Brown when she states that elite and exclusive initiations can not be informative for a society “as a whole,” certainly because this would imply initiations proper should indeed typically “inform” entire communities to the exclusion of informing smaller entities such as age sets, fraternities (e.g., Hopi), cult societies, classes (e.g., hunters), clans, clubs, gangs, or institutionalized cohorts. Interestingly, cross-cultural research has always defined initiations in terms of the demographic properties of their participants, whereas such rituals commonly stress not the a-linear becoming of a persona but genealogical, cosmic and/or religious continuity.

“Initiation” furthermore notoriously allows many ontological anchors, which in textbook anthropology are known to oscillate between (wo)manhood, reproductive adulthood, psychosocial adulthood, maturity, maturation, the body, the community, the lineage, the spiritual realm, offices of skill, offices of honor, offices of devotion, offices of rule, and so on depending on what is selected or taken to be ethnographic and linguistic substrate. To code “initiations” irrespective of any possible anchorage may very well suggest an assumption or requirement that anchoring allows comparability *because* universally the same and unambiguous, or worse, that any complex anchoring has the same semantic implications in respective indigenous ontologies. Young observed that what he would call initiation not typically delivers or recognizes “adult” status in any substantial sense; indeed, ritualized occasioning in terms of *initiation* often seems to more recognizably encompass a *conclusion* of a formal learning trajectory than an inauguration of a taxonomically compelling “life period” (cf. Van Gennep’s “incorporation”).

The question of efficacy pertains for instance to the study of gender differences, and well as ritual efficacy concerning the very idea of gender. In coding efforts the rituals characteristically are specified for sex, which disregards structural features such as liminal cross-gender identification of novices, masculinization and defeminization, and “third gender” initiations. To recall, gender and *sexuality* have been paradigmatic registers in which initiation has been examined, primarily informing mythological (notably Joseph Campbell), psychoanalytic (e.g., Gilbert Herdt with Robert J. Stoller) and feminist concerns. These orientations of inquiry are analytically tuned to gender other than sex, while being ignored by sex-based coding, which compromises ethnopschoanalytic uses of such coding.

A dictionary approach may allow comparative ethnolinguistic observations that are lost to coding efforts. For instance, phenomenologically and ethnolinguistically initiations may imply “first times,” which sidetracks the idea of a necessarily ritual efficacy. In English demographic jargon and popular lore, “sexual activity” specifically allows the idea of inauguration, a critical “first time,” informing the Euro-American conceptualization of sexual expertise, and specifically “substantial” sexual experience, as accomplishing in-group membership. Pornography in America is illustratively called “adult” material. However “sexual initiation” is indeed appropriate language only in a large range of societies where first coitus is a formal or semi-formal event for boys<sup>2</sup>, which for instance among the Kogi would allow qualification as “ceremonial coitus” and as “rite of initiation” (hibagayáma, hibaxsukéchi, mámaskéchi) by Reichel-Dolmatoff (*The Kogi*, II, pp. 235-6).

It should furthermore be noted that for non-native Americans (who, studies concur, lack ritualized initiations outside contexts of world religion) there is a large “mythopoetic” market for “initiation” events and writings particularly for men and boys (the key work is Bly’s 1990 *Iron John*), and mass interest in the phenomenon, “archetypal nature” and *idea* of initiation. Initiation is of anthropological interest perhaps especially where there exists a discursive ritual “deprivation” and cottage marketing, continued academic interest, and mass “buying into” the idea of ritual necessity and eventuality. A body of literature on ritual demise, revitalization and such typically American phenomena as 19<sup>th</sup> century fraternities suggests as much (Janssen 2007). It needs to be noted that coding based research using historically pinpointing cannot engage in these theoretically compelling issues. A coding of “absence of initiation events” leaves unanswered any historicization: whether such rituals may have been or are being “surpassed,” “replaced,” vigorously debated, abandoned, revitalized, appropriated, or propagated out of mere formal or even commercial concerns. If functional or structural questions are mobilizing agenda, which is broadly agreed among anthropologists, not being able to cater to these historical hypotheses seems to create an unfortunate if not critical hiatus.

## 5. CONCLUSION

A number of cross-cultural tools have been offered to index so-called “initiation rituals” and cognate analytic categories worldwide. A thematic, historic, multilingual dictionary and bibliographic approach to the notion of “initiation” is being maintained as an additional

research aid, solving some of the qualitative nags of coding systems however perpetuating other ones, and introducing new ones.

## 6. NOTES

1. Eligible search engines and databases include among others: eHRAF, Religious & Theological Abstracts, Proquest Fulltext Dissertations, Proquest Periodicals Archive Online, Google search (including use of email “Alerts”), Google Scholar, Google Book search, Anthrosource, JSTOR, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCO, Springerlink, Netlibrary, Project MUSE, Pubmed.

2. In a selected number of cases boys are “initiated” into coitus by elder women, commonly widowed (Batak, Tswana, Mangaia, Kogi, Cagaba, Ica, Ibo, Korea, Santal, Ambrim), pregnant (Nigeria: Rukuba, Irigwe), “barren” (Kikuyu), divorced (Kanuri, Zuni, Santal) and prostituting women (Asaba Ibo, Lugbara, Burma, Iran, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Argentina, Nicaragua, Ecuador, India, Peru, Thailand, Morocco, Italy), or some related or unrelated “older” women (ancient Japan, Ra’Ivavae, Cashinahua, Tupinamba, Xokleng, Basongye, Tiv, Siriono, Kaingáns, Canela, G/wi, Lepcha, western Tonga, Marquesans, Tongareva Island, Hawai’i). The custom would once have been prevalent in France and Germany as well. Referenced in a previous cross-cultural study (web-available: Janssen, 2003).

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