Ritual, System and Structure

It is perceived that ancient knowledge dates as far back as 35,000 years prior to modern civilization. Tribes around the globe observed similar beliefs, although their customs varied depending on their mythology. This obviously created a variety of behaviors and belief systems, which in turn formed its own structures within communities, groups and organizations.

One of the first anthropologists discussing ritual processes and transitions was Arnold Van Gennep. His studies took him into Africa observing cultural behaviors of ancient tribes. Based on his findings he realized that many tribes followed a specific rhythm to transcend each stage of life - a form of celebration. The timeline constituted of a beginning, a middle passage and an end. He created the term "rites de passage" to describe various phases members experience when passing from one point of life to the next. Or, in other words, rites de passage stands for one custom to die off and give birth to another. This celebration not only reflects a culture but also affects the personal change of members within the tribe.

Victor Turner elaborated further by dividing rituals into state and transition. One must understand the difference between the two points and that state defers to status or office and eludes to any type of stable and recurrent condition that is culturally recognized. Transition on the other hand describes three phases, the process of separation, margin and aggregation. Separations symbolize the point of detachment by the individual or group from the cultural condition, or the social structure, or both. The occurrence of such detachment has a specific point of reference within the subject's timeline. Margin means liminal, limen, or in Latin, it stands for "threshold" which refers to the time spent in an "in-between" zone. While passing through this specific space, the subject has little or no reference to the cultural past or future. One could refer to liminality as space between birth and death, or womb and grave. The time spent during such intense transition compares easily to near-nakedness and utter humility or an altered state of consciousness. The third phase, aggregation, refers to reintegrating into cultural or social structure. In other words, the subject went through the ritual passage and is now in a stable state to reintegrate into the system, once again. The completed transition allows for the individual to regain recognition by social definition and therefore obtain responsibilities and obligations to execute. It is expected of the individual or group to behave in accordance with the customary laws and ethical structures defined by the social system binded by the custom.

To explain the various communitas created either by status or transitions show specific differences. The communitas, or a phase, generated from "rites de passage" implies a human bond between members based on the liminality stage. The behavior proliferates, humility and non-conformity tempers pride of higher position or status. It really implies that liminality can only exist in the presence of both opposites. A high position member must also experience the lesser desirable status, which means that each position associates with an element of sacredness.

Liminality contrasts to a whole environment representing discrimination and status symbolism. Those would refer to the extremes of polarities including totality/partiality, equality/inequality, unselfishness/selfishness, or sacred instruction/technical knowledge. Each entity chooses between an "open" or "closed" society. The closed society embraces structure from the beginning of initiation and brings forth-instant status or position.

On the other hand, the open society refers to the spirit of communitas by basing its belief system on an ideological and altruistic model. Unfortunately, such models offer very little survival powers because the movement usually exhausts itself and resigns to an institution governed by structure. A phenomenon that occurred in Western cultures is the hippie movement. The chronological progression documents the beat generation preceding the hippies and then the teenyboppers. The element missing from these groups is consistent with the fact that neither went through the rites de passage. These entities choose to bypass any structures imposed by cultural or societal consensus. The hippies mostly decided to stress personal relations versus social obligations,

pursued sexual freedom without any social ties, entered casual employment without structured career orientation and displayed a new "folk" musical trend. The behavior notes an immediacy and spontaneity, but also a withdrawal syndrome. Psychologically, one recognizes an erratic or even chaotic connotation to its existence. Liminality demonstrates the "void" within these societies, but lessens the powers of the weak and limits human potentials.

An interesting observation one can notice is the reality that the cultural dimension of the beat, hippie or teeny-popper generations integrates into the transitional status of communitas. The presence of rituals appears in the form of symbolism even though the groups never chose to submit to any process of initiation. Most members aggregated at some point and changed the belief system to a socially accepted one, such as the ecological quest for an environmentally safe world. Its renewed awareness allows for some cultural expression, however well defined within the ranks of a structured, symbolic element called organizations.

The teeny-poppers or the x-generation devotes its energy to alternative lifestyles. Over the last decade, one noticed various stages of rites de passage in the expression of extremes. Herbs became widely known as an alternative medicinal remedy and, today, such naturopathic methods are part of the environment and are structured by law. Raves, anti-religious lyrics or in contrast to it spiritual music dominates the scene. The athletic type finds his exhilaration in extreme sporting events. The excess of all these expressions associates with a ritual behavior, which moves its way into main stream society and changes the cultural view of humanity. Symbols and rituals define these groups, however, the fact for continuing existence remains questionable because long-term survival instinct has not yet solidified.

At this point one needs to mention another important element, which are the communication, information technology and its international publishing rights. The electronic domain spreads so rapidly and forces a brand new infrastructure within the global sphere. It symbolizes a new form of communitas producing computerized rituals on the basis of liminality.

When referring to communitas, then, the question remains: Is the wellbeing of all human beings the first amendment? Does communitas exercise freedom for every man? Is the survival of mind, body and spirit of man met? If yes, than man succeeded at his quest of a truly ideological system that provides for the existential means of humankind exceeding its timeline into the future beyond generations to come.

To conclude the analogy one has to agree that ritual processes appear throughout time and dominate modern societies as well as ancient ones. And, unfortunately, one has to admit that man has a deep-seated desire for structure and communitas. Societies are ultimately successive phases of previously structured tribes and cultures. Futuristic communitas, as the computer communitas and its internet structure, present a welcome for many more rituals and myths in order to survive personal violation. It is projected that computers eventually surpass human intelligence and leaving man with a starving inner psyche to care for. Due to such utopias the birth of rituals may emerge again to harmonize the unconsciousness with its environmental, social and cultural system. In the end, man might recognize the cleansing of the spirit as far more important than he might sense as of now.