

## rites of passage

From Shakespeare's Comic Rites, by Edward Berry (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984).

"The various rites by means of which societies effect transitions in the life of an individual from one social identity to another [include] celebrations of crises in the life cycle" (2-3). "[All types include] an initial stage of **separation**, in which the individual is divorced from his familiar environment; **a transitional stage**, in which his old identity is destroyed and a new one created; and a final stage of **incorporation**, in which he is reintegrated into society in his new role" (2).

### Major Types:

Birth  
Initiation  
Marriage  
Death

### Each has three phases:

1. Separation  
2. Transition  
3. Incorporation

These stages are flexible in application of "systems," as Berry puts it, but are still useful for considering the way rites of passage change the participant's sense of identity.

**SEPARATION:** The first stage in a rite of passage: loss of identity. Usually abrupt or violent in nature, ruptures ties to self, family, community. Often involves alienation or movement across boundaries. May involve one or more of the following:

* punishment	* changing clothes (externals)	* losing old name
* intoxication	* changing hair, etc.	* disguise
* journey	* alienating friends	* abduction

**TRANSITION:** (often called the liminal stage): The second stage in a rite of passage, the "in-between" time in which the participant has lost his old identity, but has not yet been fully re-incorporated into the community with a new identity.

(1) Frequently a period of confusion, testing, education. Berry describes it as "a period of indeterminate identity, full of ambiguity and paradox" (4).

(2) Ritual dislocation of the self may involve one or more of the following:

* dying symbolically	* mutilation of self
* losing name, language	* breaking taboos
* losing normal diet of foods	* disguise
* sex reversal	* behavioral reversals

(3) Frequently involve ordeals of a physical or mental nature:

* beating	*sleep deprivation	*scarification
* fasting	*circumcision	*ordeals and tests

(4) Often educational transition as well, a revelation of religion, custom, skills, knowledge, "truth."

**INCORPORATION:** The final stage of the process, usually moving the participants out of isolation and back into the community with a new identity.

- \*Religious ceremony or communal meal
- \*Often dancing or an exchange of gifts
- \*Whole community participates, centering on new initiate or newly married pair.
- \*Receive emblems of new status, such as jewelry, new clothing, or new names.
- \*Ritual often involves individuals, immediate family, and larger community.

For an example of a modern rite of passage, look at marriage. Marriage in most cultures cannot occur until the pair is prepared to move out of their parent's house (separation). The fiancé and fiancée often go through an extended period called "engagement" after formal vows in which the pair is not supposed to live together. There are even sexually segregated rituals for each gender to undertake separately. For instance, during the bachelor party, the groom may engage in behavioral reversals and break taboos under the influence of intoxicants. In many religious practices, such as that of Catholics, the actual wedding is preceded by a period of religious instruction and counseling (transition). The female partner traditionally loses her old name to gain a new one, and in many cultures wears a disguise (a veil). The actual ceremony takes place between the two undergoing the rite of passage involves a giving each other rings (exchange of gifts). The participants wear ritual clothes (tuxedo and white dress). Following the couple's ceremony, the community shows approval (incorporation) by offering wedding gifts, eating, and dancing.