Individuality and liminarity:

some considerations concerning rites of passage and modernity

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Abstract

This article explores a critical link between two concepts which are central to the social sciences: the idea of liminarity, engendered by the anthropological tradition of self-centred and self-referred monographic studies; and the idea of individuality, a key concept within the classical tradition of the socio-historical studies of great civilizations (as well as being the crucial and familiar category of our civil and political universe). The author seeks to show how a bridge can be established between these two concepts, which may at first appear distant, by focusing on certain under-discussed aspects of rites of passage. He argues that the 'liminal' phase of rites of passage is tied to the ambiguity brought about through the isolation and individualization of the initiate. It is thus the experience of being 'outside-the-world' that brings forth and characterises liminal states, not the other way around — in short, it is individuality that engenders liminarity. Rites of passage transform this experience into complementarity, into an immersion within a network of social relationships, which the ordeals, in contrast, establish as a model for the plenitude of social life.
Key words: Rites of passage, individuality, complementarity, liminarity, modernity.

Individualidade e liminaridade:

considerações sobre os ritos de passagem e a modernidade

Resumo

Este artigo explora um elo crítico entre dois conceitos centrais das ciências sociais: a idéia de liminaridade engendrada pela tradição antropológica dos estudos monográficos, autocontidos e auto-referidos, e a idéia de individualidade, noção central da tradição clássica dos estudos sociohistóricos das grandes civilizações (além de categoria crucial e familiar do nosso universo cívico e político). O autor procura indicar como uma passagem pode ser descoberta entre essas duas áreas conceituais aparentemente tão distantes, focalizando certos aspectos ainda não discutidos dos ritos de passagem. Argumenta-se que a liminaridade dos ritos de passagem está ligada à ambigüidade gerada pelo isolamento e pela individualização dos noviços, e que, portanto, a experiência de estar fora-do-mundo é que engendra e marca os estados liminares, e não o oposto. É a individualidade que engendra a liminaridade. Os ritos de passagem transformam essa experiência em complementaridade, em imersão na rede de relações que os ordálios, pelo contraste, estabelecem como um modelo de plenitude para a vida social.
Palavras chave: Ritos de passagem; individualidade, complementaridade, liminaridade, modernidade.

Individuality and liminarity:

some considerations concerning rites of passage and modernity[1]

Roberto DaMatta

I begin with a story told by Karl Popper which – I think – sheds some light on my relations with the Museu Nacional, its Postgraduate Program in Social Anthropology, its current coordinator, my dear friend Otávio Velho, many of you, the new students gathered here as a new academic year starts, and, especially, Professor Luís de Castro Faria, whose name is honoured in this lecture that I have the great pleasure to give. Popper recounted that a science lecturer, asked to speak in a prison, began his talk with the following announcement: "Today I'm going to present the same lecture that I gave here six years ago. So, if anyone has heard it already, they clearly deserve it!"

Let me first express my joy at having received this invitation to pay tribute, in the noble form of a lecture, to an older colleague who was my first professor of anthropology.

In recalling the prison and the very symbolically real fact that everyone present here is a prisoner of the Museu and its ideals of knowing, researching and comprehending our fellow humans by means of social or cultural anthropology, I wish to evoke that sense of common destiny and solidarity shared by inmates. In our case, the complicity of rowing against the tide of power and money, the tacit agreement which makes everyone feel, despite the differences and even occasional animosities, that they share the same ideal. Because in academic life, as in the great passions, we are all imprisoned by the densest forms of reciprocity, those that force us to recognise and laud, from time to time, our debts and doubts vis-à-vis persons, ideas and methods.

It is important, then, to recognise my imprisonment to the Museu Nacional and to this group of anthropologists who (afford me this false modesty) I helped train and constitute, and who for years have been the mainstay of what for me has been a significant intellectual dialogue. As proof, I shall offer you a rough sketch of thoughts that I have put forward over these last twenty years, marking the fact that two decades have passed since I first explored them, in embryonic form, true to say, in my book *Carnavais, Malandros e Heróis*,[2] and in two essays both published in 1979.

I

In this lecture I shall discuss a connection – one I deem to be critical – between two fundamental (and formidable) concepts of the social sciences. I explore the idea of *liminarity*, a concept engendered by the anthropological tradition of detailed studies, in general romantically self-contained and self-referential;[3] and the idea of *individuality*, which comprises a central notion of the classic tradition of sociohistorical studies of the major civilizations, as well as being a core and familiar category of our own civic and political universe.

The notion of *liminarity* draws us into the realm of the rites of passage and the exotic customs of tribal groups, while the idea of *individuality* takes us to the domain of political philosophy, the universe of the market and capitalism, in sum, to our own everyday world, our implicit and unconscious universalism – our habits of the heart. The first term is associated with the name of Arnold Van Gennep and, of course, the work of Victor Turner who – along with Mary Douglas, Max Gluckman and Edmund Leach – was the author most responsible for its recuperation, characterization and popularization in modern anthropological studies. The second term evokes the work of Maine, Morgan, Sabine, Tocqueville (who, as we know, invented the expression *individualism* in 1842) and, naturally, the critical ideas of Max Weber and Louis Dumont. Not to mention the founders of critical thought and modern values: Machiavelli, Adam Smith, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau.

In this talk, my aim will be to show how a *passage* can be discovered between these two apparently highly distinct conceptual areas by examining certain still undiscussed aspects of rites of passage.

II

I wish to begin with a brief account of the notion of *individuality*, explaining how I read its ideological and conceptual connections and the tradition of studies from which the idea emerges. Obviously, *individuality* is strongly linked to the classic tradition of political philosophy, a tradition that shaped modern social thought. A way of thinking about society historically founded by and, consequently, primarily concerned with the connections between institutions, social practices and spheres perceived as critical (and universal) – including the 'religious,' the 'political' and the 'economic.' This tradition did not ignore the discussion between religious values and political and economic predispositions, and how these spheres influenced each other. The work of Weber is the best example of this approach.

The central question here, as Dumont made clear and repeatedly emphasized, going beyond the classic essay by Marcel Mauss (1974) on the idea of the 'self,' is the critical differentiation between the individual as an empirical reality and its establishment as an autonomous social entity or a social value – an extremely important and original socio-political phenomenon, primordially associated with the ideology constructed in Western Europe, expanding to the United States and today turned into a mass phenomenon through a global process of acculturation. The basic question within this tradition has been: how should we conceptualize the development of Western Europe in relation to all the other areas of the world? Or, in more concrete terms, how should we understand the presence of capitalism, political equality and its concomitant ethics, the 'liberation' of the individual from what is perceived as a set of ancient repressions, taboos or moral constraints, only in the 'West'? And, by contrast, its relative absence from the so-called 'great civilizations' like those that emerged in the Middle East, Asia and, to cite a topic that I have discussed at length in my own work, in tribal societies and in Brazil?

My view is that this problem relates to a *passage* from *individualization* (and *individuality*) which – if you will allow me the grand narrative – are experiences of the human condition, to *individualism*, which is an ideology (a value or a coercive and conscious social determination) central only in the so-called Western civilization. Hence while *individualization* is a universal experience, destined to be culturally recognised, marked, confronted or taken into account by all human societies, *individualism* is a sophisticated ideological elaboration particular to the West, but that, nevertheless, is projected onto other societies and cultures as a universal given of human experience.

It is precisely this sociological dislocation, in all its multiple oscillations, combinations and variations, that characterizes the modern world. In fact, modernity not only speaks of the new or the actual as some journalists and many political scientists seem to think: it also concerns the institutionalization of the individual as an encompassing value, a value postulated as greater (and more inclusive) than the society to which it belongs.

While many of the world's societies and cultures recognise and have been capable of institutionalizing the experience of *individuality* (the fundamental experience of being outside-the-world and thus free of imperative and routine social obligations) through the historical roles of prophet, messianic leader, mystagog, mystic, curer, shaman, sorcerer, social bandit, saint, warlord, pilgrim, martyr and, to some extent, rogue, it was only in Western society that the experience of the individual isolated from the group became a central and normative institution. Among ourselves, then, the individual is not just an essential part of the world, he/she is also a being endowed with an independence and autonomy unparalleled in any other society.[4]

At this point it is worth emphasizing that while this problematic is a striking feature of the works of the classical sociologists, it is, even today, conspicuously absent from the work of social anthropologists.

III

The idea of liminarity is closely associated with Arnold Van Gennep's book *Les Rites de Passage*, published in 1909. Much can be said about this magisterial work, filled with new ideas and distinguished by an enormous erudition, a text where, for the first time, rites are analysed sociologically, taken as expressions of the social dynamic. In the book, Van Gennep breaks in pioneering fashion from positing the universality of physiology as the defining feature of so-called 'puberty rites,' rescuing rites of passage from the level of individual study and discovering, somewhat surprised, that: "Beneath a multiplicity of forms, either consciously expressed or merely implied, a typical pattern always recurs: the pattern of the rites of passage" (cf. Van Gennep 1978:191). A pattern involving three clearly distinct phases: separation, incorporation and, between these, a liminal phase, borderline, marginal, paradoxical and ambiguous – a *limen* or *threshold* – which, though produced in all the other phases, is highlighted, foregrounded and valorised.

Rites of passage were a recurrent topic of analysis from the 1960s onward, above all by Victor Turner. Two interpretative tendencies typical to this phase can be discerned. The first explores rites of passage as an obligatory adaptive response in which individuals are obliged to change position within a system. From this perspective the rites are secondary social elaborations designed to stem the conflicts generated by the transition from adolescence to maturity, a passage conceived as inevitable, difficult, problematic and conflictual in each and every human society. In this approach, the focus is always on the young people and on what is perceived as a risky and conflict-ridden transition within the society.

Typical of this approach is, for example, the interpretation of the seclusion phase in the rites of passage of the Yawalapiti society in the Upper Xingu developed by Thomas Gregor, where, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1987:36-37) critically points out, he describes a moment in which social imperatives are relaxed and there is a healthy and welcome return to former privacy, what would be the individual's grateful contact with him or herself. A privacy, as it happens, that emerges clearly in the field anecdotes and accounts of

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4 Max Weber showed us how the Protestant ethic was essential to placing religion everywhere and helping transform the 'outside-the-world-individual' into an entity pertaining to this world. The reader is recommended to consult *Essais sur l'individualisme* (1985) by Louis Dumont for an in-depth appreciation of this transition. Inspired by Weber, Dumont attributes this process to the serial autonomization of the political and economic domains from what we call the sphere of 'religion,' which, as Durkheim had already taught, encompassed everything. Charles Taylor, whether aware of the fact or not, closely echoes Dumont via a philosophical and neo-evolutionist route when he argues that in the modern self "Thought and feeling – the psychological – are now confined to minds. This follows our disengagement from the world, its 'disenchantment'" (cf. Taylor 1989:186).

British and American anthropologists who emphasize how the natives left little room for the enjoyment of their own 'privacy' (an amalgam of voluntary isolation and individuality). As if the fundamental drama of fieldwork as a rite of passage were precisely this forced suspension of individual life and the intense and compulsory participation in a collective mode of existence.[5] Needless to say, of course, this reaction betrays the influence of individualism as a 'habit of the heart,' such as this ideology is translated and manifested in American culture, a system in which the period between 13 and 19 years old – the teen years, the moment of 'initiations' into adult life – is highlighted as a phase of exacerbated subjectivity.

In this context it is worth recalling how the impact of Margaret Mead's book *Coming of Age in Samoa* (published in 1928 in the United States) (Mead, 1961 [1928]) stemmed precisely from her demonstration that there were no conflicts in Samoa during the passage from childhood to adult life. There was no 'teenage culture' in Samoa, which, by contrast, led Americans to discover the Boasian concept of culture at home, as well as the concomitant ideas of symbolic arbitrariness and cultural relativism.

The second interpretative tendency reveals a change in focus from the individual level to the collective. Matched by an impressive and detailed ethnography, the novelty of these works consists precisely of taking the symbolism of the rites of passage as a dramatization of social values, axioms, conflicts and contradictions. Their aim is to show that the displaced viewpoint emphasized in liminarity did not just configure sinful, pathological and criminal situations, processes or roles, it was actually inherent to human society itself. As always, the discovery of the positivity of liminal states and the discussion of their essential importance as an element in the constitution of sociability itself, threw into crisis traditional modes of discussing marginality as a potentially criminal state and deviance as pre-pathological or perverse. Moreover, these works open up the possibility of emphasizing a 'ritual license,' special moments contrary to political-legal prescriptions where society briefly allowed itself to be read upside-down, as it were. Something, without doubt, difficult to discuss in a system that institutionalized mediocrity and developed a full-blown allergy to anything escaping its explicit agendas and routines, as in the case of the United States.

IV

I discovered the possibility of connecting liminarity and individuality when I dedicated myself to the study of Brazil not only as a nation (as the economists, historians and political scientists always do) but also as a social system or society (which is something else). For me, it was more specifically a question of discussing social practices and values that coexist with and sometimes oppose the nation, engendering collectivities typically marked by dissonance, hybridism and a not always cordial dialogue between the national code (civic, bourgeois and capitalist – the nation's 'official reality') and a set of values read as non-modern and even – as in the case of many national States – 'anti-modern.' (So much so that, inspired by Alberto Torres, its quotidian values have been associated with a 'real Brazil'– a more 'concrete' Brazil than the one formally designed by official laws and institutions, conceived as a 'legal Brazil,' but ideal and fake.)[6]

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5   I analysed this Anglo-Saxon or 'western' response to what was perceived as an overwhelming and deplorable collectivization in the marginal and introductory observations of Evans-Pritchard in his book *The Nuer* (1978), Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* (1956), Chagnon among the Yanomamo (1968) and Maybury-Lewis among the Xavante (1967) (DaMatta 1981:169). Viveiros de Castro observes the same point in the work of Thomas Gregor in the Xingu, all of it marked by an implicit and unconscious individualism (see Seeger, DaMatta & Viveiros de Castro 1979).

6   This perspective critically relativizes a recurrent situation in Brazilian studies, going beyond the analyses based on complete and essentialized institutional types – 'democracy,' 'feudalism,' 'underdevelopment,' 'market' and so on – as well as a somewhat infantile evolutionism, quick to claim that "Brazil is a country still in its infancy," hence its difficulties with the modern bourgeois institutional framework constituted in 'older,' 'more advanced' and 'more mature' or 'experienced' countries.

It was in light of this distinction, therefore, that I embarked on a critique of the standard anthropological literature on the concept of liminarity. My interrogation can be divided into two critical blocks.

The first arises from a critical rereading of the interpretations of liminarity presented in the seminal essays of Victor Turner, Mary Douglas and Edmund Leach, to stay with the holy trinity of symbolic studies. What most drew my attention in the work of these scholars is their reading of *liminarity* as something invariably paradoxical, ambiguous and, ultimately, dangerous and negative. A state or process that challenges a classification system legalistically conceived as fixed, indisputable and constructed by isolated categories. In sum, something that – just as occurs with the puritan conception of society and with the bourgeois mindsets to which these authors belong – refuses the more-or-less, indecision, delay and, above all, hybridism, that is, the absence of compartmentalization and indivisibility. For these anthropologists, the ambiguous consists of any object, being or institution simultaneously located in two mutually exclusive semantic fields. It is everything that has multivocal and contradictory properties, like Mary Douglas's pangolin (1966), Leach's domestic animal (1964) and Turner's neophytes (1964): these novices who contradict Hamlet's dilemma and "are and are not at the same time." As the latter author put it in a memorable essay, citing the Victorian poet Robert Browning,[7] the initiates are beings located "betwixt and between."

My estrangement from this way of treating liminarity surfaced when, using the tools provided by this anthropology, I studied the Brazilian Carnival only to discover the positive side of liminarity. Something, indeed, that I stressed in my book *Universo do Carnaval: Imagens e Reflexões* (1981) where I noted the compulsory joy of the carnival states, characterized precisely by being located betwixt and between, a special moment demarcated by a festival that foregrounded the collective and the individual simultaneously, a ritual situated within and beyond the world. And not, as Victor Turner (1974) argued, some kind of manifestation of an 'anti-structure' or a sentiment negating society, the latter read, as he conceived it, as a set of fixed positions – within that anthropological 'legalism' that so heavily marked the social anthropology of Radcliffe-Brown, Meyer Fortes and Max Gluckman – or as a house, *à la* Van Gennep.

Carnival is a festival that, among other things, stimulates disputes, but it also domesticates, aristocracizes and hierarchizes competitiveness, making winners and losers connect with each other as special groups and entities. A festival, furthermore, that adopts bourgeois technologies of identity creation, but produces an anti-bourgeois and anti-puritan ideological system, such as the glorification of femininity, hedonism, sensuality, open and public eroticism, sex without reproduction (in the exaltation of anality and homosexuality). A festival, in sum, that opens up, in a society obsessed with taking the so-called train of modernity and capitalism, a gap that rejects agendas and controls: Carnival, as Mikhail Bakhtin (1989) showed, is constructed through the temporary suspension of bourgeois sense, a moment akin to madness, loss of control, exaggeration, caricature, the grotesque, disequilibrium and excess. A festival, finally, that enables someone to 'enter' a block, school or parade in order to revitalize old and routine relations and live new identities that enable innovative readings of the world. And this enables the person to acquire – as happens with the traditional sages, hermits, shamans, sorcerers and renouncers – a new and distinct knowledge of society and of themselves.

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7 An idea appearing in the poem *Bishop Blougram's Apology*, published in the book *Man and Woman*, in 1855, where ambiguity is depicted as the most fascinating element of the human condition:
Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things.
The honest thief, the tender murderer,
The superstitious atheist, demirep
That loves and saves her soul in new French books –
We watch while these in equilibrium keep
The giddy line midway.

How, then, could the liminal and the paradoxical be taken as negative in relational systems like Brazil's, a society composed of multiple spaces in which a veritable *institutionalization of the intermediary* as a fundamental and still misunderstood mode of sociability is a commonplace social fact? How can we be horrified by the intermediary and the mixed when critical elements of our sociability are constituted by liminal types such as the *mulato*, the *cafuzo* and the *mameluco* (in our system of racial classification[8]) the *despachante* (facilitator, in the bureaucratic system); the lover (in the romantic system); the saint, Orisha, 'spirit' and purgatory (in the religious system); the prayer, request, song, popular music and serenade (in the system of mediation that permeates the everyday); the veranda, yard, square, churchyard and beach (in the spatial system); the 'finding a way' or *jeitinho*, the 'do you know who you're talking to?' and the *pistolão* (insider, in resolving the conflict caused by the clash of impersonal laws with prestige and personal power); the *feijoada*, *peixada* and *cozido* (bean stew, fish stew, meat and vegetable stew), all rigorously intermediary foods, located between solid and liquid, in the culinary system; the *bolina* (rubbing/groping) and the *sacanagem* (lewd eroticism) in the sexual system. Not to mention the inter, trans, homo or pansexual celebrities who are not the object of horror or abomination among us (unlike in the United States) but the object of desire, curiosity, fascination and admiration. All of this led me to question ambiguity as an axiomatically negative state.

The second critical block relates to the way in which liminarity is characterized, especially in the work of Victor Turner, the scholar who most concerned himself with this phenomenon, turning it into a tool for understanding many social situations through the concept of *communitas* and variants like 'liminoid.' Why, we first need to ask, is the 'liminal' the source of so much mystery, ambiguity and danger in tribal societies? Why is the transition phase the most intriguing and the one presenting the richest symbolism during rites of passage?

For Turner, Leach and Douglas, liminarity is special because it engenders a classificatory ambiguity. Expanding on this idea, Turner, in his classic essay published in 1964, adds other social and symbolic dimensions that emphasize an indelibly typological and relatively frozen vision of the topic.

Consequently, liminal states are characterized by the following factors:

1) by evasion of the quotidian juridical-political structure, the cognitive classifications founded on the logic of this or that, one thing or another – on the Aristotelian principle of the excluded third (Douglas, Turner, Leach);

2) by association with death to the world (among the Ndembu, the place where circumcision takes place is called the 'place where one dies') (Turner);

3) by impurity, since the novices transgress (and transcend) classificatory boundaries (Douglas, Turner);

4) by identification with objects and processes taken as anti-social (faeces) or 'natural' (lactation, birth, weaning and gestation), with the consequent association of novices with embryos and nursing infants (Turner);

5) by use of secret, strange and/or special languages (Van Gennep, Turner);

6) by complete social invisibility with the loss of names, insignias, clothing (Turner);

7) by association with bisexual or transsexual beings, such as androgynes, or with animals at the intersection of two classes and that signal negative or abominal states (Turner, Leach, Douglas); and finally,

8) by ordeals such as circumcision, sub-incision, clitoridectomy, prolonged exposure to cold or impossible physical tests in which failure is ridiculed, as well as answering enigmas, divinations and resistance to physical punishment (Turner).

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8 NT: People assumed on the basis of their appearance to be of mixed European/African, African/indigenous and Indigenous/European ancestry, respectively.

For Turner and other masters of this true 'anthropology of the ambiguous,'[9] this list suggests, among other things, a state of collective 'regression' in which individuals lose consciousness of any boundedness, autonomy and interiority in transforming themselves into a raw material to be shaped in accordance with certain social values. For him, this process, which in the book *The Ritual Process* (1974) leads to the concept of *communitas*, is essentially a strong and singular (not to say anomalous) collectivization, marked by the contact with what Turner, borrowing an expression from Martin Buber, calls the 'essential we,' one of the most important dimensions in the constitution of an 'anti-structural' state, a state devoid of bounded individuality.

Reading liminarity in a substantivist way, Turner fails to realize that this process may vary from system to system, assuming distinct connotations and acquiring different meanings. In the case of Brazil, for example, a society in which hierarchical values are important to everyday life, the production of a carnivalesque liminarity opens up a space within which people can leave the social universe marked by ranking and hierarchy in order to experience individualization through a set of personal choices, as well as through competition. In this sense, Brazilian carnivalesque liminarity can be seen to promote an experience with an 'essential I' rather than with an 'essential we,' as Turner liked to emphasize, without realizing that he was thereby idealizing relations, an absence heavily felt in the liberal and individualist universe to which he himself belonged. A similar but inverse process took place in the New Orleans *Mardi Gras* and in American initiation rites, where what was presented as the experiential epicentre was the collectivization of the novices, simultaneously initiated through renunciation of an individualistically marked ego, followed by obedience to their superiors and initiation masters, forcing them to live the collective in a hierarchical and relational way. American initiations can be seen as marked, then, by an emphasis on the relational and collective dimension of social life, while Brazilian initiations do just the opposite. This formulation is incipient and perhaps overly symmetric, but has the virtue of showing how the contrasting comparison allows us to escape from a naïve functionalism in which meaning is attributed to essences rather than contexts.

It was this typological approach in which liminarity was essentialized that, in my view, prevented Turner from perceiving another fundamental aspect. Here I refer to the discernment of the individualizing (but individualism-less) dimensions contained in liminal processes. Or, in other words, the crucial similarities, prevalent in tribal societies, between liminarity and individuality, recognizing that the most characteristic feature in the transition of novices, observed from Van Gennep to Turner, is their separation from society and situation outside the world. From a functional viewpoint, their position is little different from that of Dumont's Indian renouncers, Weber's prophets of Israel, Evans-Pritchard's sorcerers and witches, Euclides da Cunha's Antônio Conselheiro (cf. DaMatta, 1979b: chapters V and VI) and the civilizing heroes of tribal mythologies.

V

Allow me, then, to finish developing this point, which will enable us to bring together, from one side, processes interpreted as static and anti-historical, machines for retaining and detaining time as Lévi-Strauss would say of rites of passage, and, from the other, historically dynamic institutions – accelerators of time such as our own western bias likes to imagine them. These include renunciation of the world,

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9 'Ambiguity theory,' which – as I realize today – was perhaps the moment when anthropology was closest to a general theory of society, an analogue of the general theory of prices and the market in economics and the ego and unconscious in psychology.

pilgrimages, prophecies and prophets that, in a dialectical process with society, move its structures, nurturing the emergence of parallel and conflicting visions of the world. These phenomena work to challenge existing values and introduce a different consciousness of morality and time, dimensions that form the background to an awareness of social change.

My central argument is as follows: what characterizes the liminal phase in rites of passages is the experience of individuality not as privacy or the relaxing of certain rules (since the neophyte is always subject to innumerable rules) but as an intense period of isolation and autonomy from the group. What we have here, however, is the experience of individualization as a state, not as a central condition of being human. In other words, the individualization of the novices in rites of passage does not involve the establishment of a rupture through an extreme and radical emphasis on an internal space or on a subjectivity parallel to, or independent of, the collectivity. On the contrary, this individualization is entirely complementary to the group. It involves an autonomy that rather than being defined as a radical separation, is perceived as a state of solitude, absence, suffering and isolation that, for this very reason, ends up promoting a renewed encounter with society in the form of a triumphant interdependence when, in the final and most basic phase of the ritual process, the novices return to the village to take on new roles and social responsibilities. It is as though seclusion, individualization and the invisibility of novices in rites of passage were classified as negative states, dangerous and anti-social situations located outside-the-world (with its plethora of mortifications) that thereby approximate the neophytes to sorcerers, shamans, civilizing heroes, prophets and other figures associated with a state of distancing from society.

In the case of Ge-speaking indigenous peoples, for example, myths involving the acquisition of important civilizing elements like fire, agriculture and the art of curing are obtained by figures who voluntarily or involuntarily isolate themselves, have critical experiences and, on returning to the group, re-join it as heroes in a distinct social position. The same occurs with the witches who generally learn their magic outside the group but are socially described everywhere as selfish, desirous of wealth and driven by their own agendas. Whether among the Navajo described by Clyde Kluckholn, or the Apinayé which I myself studied, or in the most diverse African societies, such as the cases collated by John Middleton and Edward Winter (1963) reveal, sorcerers are always characterized as economically successful people, non-conformists or rebels, cosmopolitans who become marginalized after returning to the village, or people interested only in accumulating material wealth, a clear symptom of disdain for the obligations of reciprocity. Sorcerers are beings who prefer to live individualistically and selfishly, refusing to comply with obligations to kin, clan and village. In fact, the description of the personality of the tribal sorcerers closely corresponds to the model of a modern individual or citizen, a person motivated by wealth, awareness of their own value, independent action and, above all, centred on themselves, immersed in their own subjectivity.[10]

It is certainly curious to note that British and American researchers of the subject identified witchcraft as a 'crime' or an 'ill-feeling,' revealing "societies with a rigid structure" when they actually dealing with a manifestation of the individualist ideology in relational and holistic systems. This becomes patent when, for instance, Laura Bohanan (1966) points out that 'a man who knew things' was "the closest translation for scholar [among the Tiv], but unfortunately it also meant witch." This is confirmed in a pertinent observation by Evans-Pritchard, who argued that "Azande generally regard witchcraft as an *individual trait* and it is treated as such in spite of its association with kinship" (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1965:25, my emphasis), which reveals the association of witches with an individualism that emerges here not as a positive value

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10 One of the most popular forms of love in the United States is 'self-love' – the love of and for oneself. A love that is the seed of self-confidence and self-esteem, the mainstays to the construction of subjectivity in so-called modern individualism.

but as a negative and marginal choice. As a force, capable of engendering inverted and anti-complimentary human beings, who do everything the wrong way round, disdaining their kin, eating their fellow villagers and detesting the golden rule of reciprocity. However, unlike the renouncers and prophets, the experiences acquired by the mythic heroes and sorcerers of tribal societies do not lead to a differentiation, or a radical or alternative philosophical or religious renewal. The latter is the case, according to Dumont (1985) and Weber (1971: chapter XIII), of the Indian renouncer, the Christian anchorites, the Greek wanderers of the pre-Socratic period, even the Protestant reformers who put God and religion in all spheres of this world.[11] Much the opposite, this outside-the-world state – and, to use Weber's expression, a 'rejection of the world' – typical of rites of passage and witchcraft leads to a complementarity and an interdependence, including bodily, that is explicitly manifested among various groups. Here what is in play is not constructing a psychological and existentially autonomous being, but shaping subjectivities whose consciousness cannot dispense with their initiation companions and masters, those who mortify them and mark their body, leaving on it the testimony of their connection to the group in the form of a hole, a cut and a scar. The rejection of the world, as Weber stressed, legitimizes a certain "mastery of the world by virtue of the magical powers obtained by abnegation" (1971:375). What is made explicit in initiations is not the triumph of autonomy, inner space and isolation, but the glory of the connection and the exaltation of the return to the village as someone with a renewed awareness of complementarity and their own debt to society. Like the mythic heroes who come back to the village with a new civilizing item, stolen or discovered in an outside-the-world experience in encounters with animals or spirits, the initiates also return to their communities having learnt that the egalitarian bonds with their initiation companions, and the intensity of the emotions and mortifications revealed by the experience of isolation, complement their belonging inescapably to an kinship network that, in a precise sense, corresponds to all the intellectual questions and aims to cure disease, maintain well-being and alleviate suffering. In initiation rites, the neophytes dramatically combine individuality and collectivity since they reaffirm the fact that the collective and individual are constructed simultaneously, without gaps, discontinuities or separations. Without wishing to overdo the point, it could be said that in the rites they understand that the self does not exist without the other, and that at the centre of the initiation rites is the discovery (or rather, the disclosure) of the mystery according to which both the individual dimension and the collective are constructed through the same set of values.

If a common denominator exists between novices, renouncers, magicians, prophets and sorcerers, this is not privacy or the creation of a subjectivity parallel and homogenous to society, free of constraining social ties, but, undoubtedly, the *individualizing* experience that entails a relativizing or carnivalized vision of society in which insider and outsider, kin and affine, strong and weak, poor and noble, men and women, young and old, the living and the dead merge and swap places, creating a perspective in which everyday practices and values are inverted, inhibited or temporarily replaced in order to be soon re-encountered in the relief of a routine, but now renewed and triumphant, complementarity. In this way, the family (hierarchized by obligations founded on a shared substance) is transformed into an age group, the basic component of which is camaraderie and sympathy; the obligations of caste, segment or class give way to an unknown freedom and to the capacity to break normally impassable moral barriers.

However, the result of the experience is not to produce – as always occurs among us moderns – choices between perspectives but to understand their essential polarity. Undeniably, though, for both the initiates and the renouncers, prophets and sorcerers, the extramundane life relativizes many axioms of social life: genitors and sexuality are desacralized, pleasure and personal well-being are sacrificed in the name of an

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11   On the Greeks, Van Gennep (1978) had already pointed out that an important phase of the initiation of youths, when they were taken to the sea shore, was called *elasis*, meaning removal or banishment.

effulgent stoicism, the axiom of friendship is substituted by very strong individual agendas such as the use of individual emblems, the choice of companions for the ordeal, singular foods and a distinct behaviour, frequently characterized as motivated by an overwhelming ambition. Seclusion engenders a niche in which all everyday connections lose their force, enabling the experience of isolation and solitude to surface, a state which, in the case of tribal societies, is always signalled as dangerous and negative.

It is without doubt this contact with individuality that makes novices everywhere dangerous and hence – just like spirits, some animals and sorcerers – recipients of special treatment. Consequently, I wish to suggest that the distinctive trait of liminarity is the segregation of a person (or a category of persons, treated as a social or mystical corporation) from their imperative social ties, liberating them temporarily from their family, clan or village obligations, which temporarily transforms them into individuals outside-the-world. Into people without social ties that enable their full social classification and thus define their obligations to society. It is precisely the 'declassification' constituted by the rejection of the world that enables the subsequent constitution of an unusual and distinct sociability, creating new experiences founded on a 'freedom' nourished by the experience of individualization.

As occurs with the prophets and renouncers, this experience of being temporarily situated outside-the-world has – and this is one of the chief characteristics of the rites of passage – a countless number of negative traits. But while in the case of the renouncers and prophets the weight of experience can be sublimated and legitimized as a 'mission' or a 'new message,' creating other perspectives within the same religious tradition, in tribal societies the intention seems to be to mark the creative but negative and ultimately destructive potential of the experience of being isolated. For this reason, in many relational systems being alone means being open to dialogue with ghosts and monsters. Isolating oneself is obligatory and legitimate only as a means of seeking contact with powerful and lethal beings – as happens in the vision quest of the Plains Indians studied by Robert Lowie (1954) –or to undergo ordeals, suffer physical pain, have one's ears or lips pierced, be circumcised, fast, remain awake, memorize texts and so on, situations in which society penetrates the body of the novices, marking and effectively dissolving their personhood,[12] their genital organs, head, hair, arms, lips and ears. These lips and ears that, as Anthony Seeger (1980) showed, are – in the case of Ge societies – the instruments of good sociability and a repository of collective values.

All of this is some way from the modern conception of subjectivity since what the rites of passage accentuate is more akin to an interdependent subjectivity, while our own subjectivity is constructed by emphasizing a remarkable interiority – that interiority or *inwardness* which is the central source of the 'self' for Taylor. Among us moderns, this implies a subjectivity that, like Greta Garbo, wants to be left alone, believes hell is other people and, as the case of Robinson Crusoe shows, never ceases to calculate the resources available, not being intimated or made desperate by extreme solitude. In these cases, isolation and solitude open up and highlight an intense inner dialogue, typical of modern individualism. A dialogue glorifying autonomy, privacy, self-development, sociocentrically merged, as Steven Lukes (1973) illustrates, with human dignity, where the capacity to remain *undivided* is a sign of integrity and strength of character.[13]

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12 Two monographs on the notion of 'self' and 'person' in India emphasize this point well since both among the Tamil and in Theravada Buddhism we find, respectively, beings marked by fluid substances and, from the western and modern viewpoint, a contradiction in terms: 'selfless persons' (cf. Daniel 1984 and Collins 1982).

13 As can be observed, it all has to do with an exclusive trait, with a uniquely distinctive mark and with solid integration, a signal that the entity thereby constituted has well-defined boundaries. Now, this is the complete opposite of the idea of personality prevailing in tribal societies where the 'self' is always divided into many parts and/or souls. See Taylor's reaction to the fact that the Buriats of Siberia have three souls (Taylor 1989:113). See too Geertz's following 'Dumontian' admonition: "The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures" (Geertz 1983:59).

This argument can be extended to accentuate a clearly marked opposition between individuality, which experiences and conceptualizes the collective as complementary, and individualism, which experiences separation from the group as a movement marked by interiority and subjectivity. In one case solitude serves to think society better; in the other, it is the only way of thinking. As a result, the first case leads to interdependence, while the second clears the way to an encompassment of society by the bounded individual who needs 'liberty' and 'freedom.' Liberty, which is the feeling of not being subjugated, of doing whatever one wants, but transformed into a value, which in the modern world is transformed into 'freedom': the inalienable motivation of being determined from inside out that constitutes the core of the concept of 'autonomy' and leads to a double opposition between individual and society. First in the trivial conflict of the individual against society when she fights for her rights or for the liberation from customs. Second when the individual, integrated by her self-reliance, boldness, ambitiousness and venturesomeness, produces social well-being through her entrepreneurship.[14]

From within this ideology, it makes sense to vehemently assert:

"I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men's, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer - deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realising them. This is at least part of what I mean when I say that I am rational, and that it is my reason that distinguishes me as a human being from the rest of the world." (Berlin 1969)

Read by any member of the societies that some of us study, this glorification of isolation and individual autonomy could be taken as a 'witchcraft manifesto' – or as a declaration of supreme selfishness. It is, however, a passage written by Isaiah Berlin in one of his celebrated essays on one of the most basic attributes of the individual as a value: the liberty that, for him, can be seen through two concepts and perspectives. At a relativizing and anthropological level, however, Berlin's ideas can be read as an unintentional summary of an attitude in which individuals owe nothing to the collectivity. Precisely the opposite: they should encompass it since they are morally superior.

In tribal societies, though, the point of the ordeals is not to create equivalences or open up new paths, but to use isolation as a means for establishing interdependences between the initiates and the group. At root, and in reverse, the most critical fact of initiation rituals (and perhaps the reason why they are carried out) relates to this at once radical and controlled experience of individuality and separation from society, since through them is engendered a discipline based on a strange dialectic of independence and dependence when the neophytes are shown the possibilities of isolation, individualization and, simultaneously, they are instilled with a profound sense of complementarity. A complementarity that contrasts strongly with individuality and that we Brazilians know well as dependency, loyalty, consideration and *saudade* (longing). These values that oblige us to overlook laws in favour of friends.[15]

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14 I owe these observations in part to Lívia Barbosa who points out, with her usual perspicacity, that entrepreneurship is not a value in Brazil. Much the opposite, many of these positive connotations of the idea of liberty and freedom are taken as negative in many societies. In Brazil they are generally read as 'selfishness.'

15 I cannot resist the temptation to cite a provocative passage from the Mexican essayist Gabriel Zaid: "One time I thought about writing a tragicomedy on corruption in Mexico, through an incorruptible character who, due to his honesty, causes one disgrace after another. His desire to do good causes evil: it tears apart his family, disastrously thwarts those he wanted to help, causes them to lose their jobs, transforms his neighbours into enemies and gives rise to deaths, hatred, hunger, ruin. He ends up rejected by his children, abandoned by his wife, friendless and expelled from his city. In Mexico honesty is tragicomic" (Zaid 1989).

My central point, then, is that the liminarity of the rites of passage is linked to the ambiguity generated by isolation and the individualization of novices. It is the experience of being outside-the-world, therefore, that engenders and marks liminal states, not the opposite. In other words, liminarity and the properties discovered in it by Turner have no power by themselves. Rather it is their approximation to individual states that leads the novices to become marginal. In a word, it is individuality that engenders liminarity. Ultimately, rites of passage involve transforming individuality into complementarity, isolation into interdependence, and autonomy into immersion in the network of relations that the ordeals, by contrast, establish as a model of plenitude for social life.

A final word should be added to this exercise that many may find naïve or even pointless. After all, as we all know, every society hides within itself infinite meanings that always escape these general and ambitious exercises in understanding. I am the first to agree with such an assessment. In my defence, presuming myself to have one, I recall an anecdote told by Marshall Sahlins about a French structuralist. He recounts that, studying equestrian statues of historical figures, a die-hard structuralist discovered that the more important the person, the higher the horses' hooves were raised in the air, as though confirming the actor's social importance in another code. The lecture over, a postmodernist questioned him scornfully: "But nobody rides horses any more..." To which the structuralist replied: "True, but we still erect statues."

Translated by David Rodgers

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*   Roberto DaMatta began his anthropological journey with research on the indigenous peoples of Brazil. *Índios e Castanheiros* (*Indians and the collectors of Brazil nuts*) (Laraia and DaMatta 1967) was written together with Roque Laraia (Laraia and DaMatta 1967), and *O mundo dividido: a estrutura social dos índios Apinajé* (DaMatta 1976). This book was his PhD thesis from Harvard that was later published in the US as *A Divided World: Apinaye Social Structure* (DaMatta 1982). After this, he turned his untiring critical anthropological eye to Brazilian society, polity and culture as a whole. Writing on football, music, food, motor traffic and the numbers game, he was able to propose new understandings of the meanings in Brazilian society, raising questions normally restricted to the bailiwick of the political scientists, such as democracy, citizenship and the rule of law. This second phase of his writing career reached a widespread public with *Carnavais, malandros e heróis. Por uma sociologia do dilema brasileiro (DaMatta 1979)*. Later published in french as *Carnavals, bandits et héros: ambiguités de la société brésilienne* (DaMatta 1983) and in Engish as Carnivals, Rogues, and Heroes: An Interpretation of the Brazilian Dilemma (DaMatta 1991), he cogently argued that a study of culture and its rituals could reveal the deeper currents of contemporary Brazilian society. Since then he has continued to publish prolifically, most recently *Fé em Deus e pé na tábua: ou como e por que o trânsito enlouquece no Brasil* (*Foot on the Accelerator: or how and why Traffic is Maddened (Maddening) in Brazil*) (DaMatta 2010), and *Fila e Democracia* (*Queues and Democracy*) co-authored with Alberto Junqueira. (DaMatta and Junqueira 2016) Not to mention his weekly column in one of Brazil's most important newspapers, O Globo. This essay which appears here for the first time in English was originally published in the journal *Mana* (DaMatta 2000). It consists of a theoretical and critical conversation between equals; three writers who DaMatta himself called the "Holy Trinity" of the anthropological study of ritual: Victor Turner, Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas. It is one of the best examples of the vigour and creativity of DaMatta's thought.

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