

Written Artefacts in Initiation Rites

An Introduction to the Proceedings

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Rituals in general and those of initiation in particular have been intensively and extensively investigated by scholars from the cultural sciences. For this reason, the available literature from the fields of ancient and cultural studies and social sciences is extremely extensive, both with regard to the theoretical implications of these practices and to individual phenomena.¹ Against this extremely differentiated background, the following broad definition of rituals can be established: A ritual is a compilation of different rites, whereby '[a] formal rite entails a sequence or sequences of actions rendered special within a community or tradition by virtue of her elevation and stylization, generally named and set off from ordinary behavior by virtue of their being localized in special places and performed at special times.'² Rites of passage in particular represent special forms of rituals. They include 'ceremonies that accompany and dramatize such major events as birth, coming-of-age initiations for boys and girls, marriage, and death' and which 'culturally mark a person's transition from one stage of social life to another'³ These practices are also commonly interpreted as initiation rituals, for which the religious historian Mircea Eliade proposed the following definition:

The term initiation in the most general sense denotes a body of rites and oral teachings whose purpose is to produce a decisive alteration in the religious and social status of the person to be initiated. In philosophical terms, initiation is equivalent to a basic change in existential condition; the novice emerges from his ordeal endowed with a totally different being from that which he possessed before his initiation; he has become *another*.⁴

Therefore, it is about status changes that are accompanied by predetermined actions, which can symbolically interpret, comment on or create the new social standing, class

1 See on various theories and research on rituals Bell 1997, 1–89; Brosius, Michaels and Schrode 2013.

2 Stephenson 2015, 75.

3 Bell 1997, 94.

4 Eliade 1958, X (emphasis in the original).

or position of the initiate. It is already clear here that the focus on religious and sacred acts, which was the dominant focus for a long time, has been criticised and extended in recent research on initiation rituals to include profane acts and activities that are part of everyday routine.⁵

Nevertheless, rituals are not only the subject of academic debate, but are firmly anchored in the religious life of members of the world's religions as well as in everyday profane life in civil and ritually organised processes. In his study *Les rites de passage*, published in 1909, Arnold van Gennep came to the conclusion that rituals exist in very different cultures and religions and that there are often analogies between the various steps and processes that take place in them. In particular, he focused on initiation rites, in the course of which members of a tribe, as well as the members of a religion or even a society, are accepted into the respective community in various steps through fixed actions performed by authorised persons.

In this context, van Gennep concluded that the general 'ritual grammar' ('Ritual-grammatik')⁶ was certainly comparable on an abstract level, even if different characteristics could be identified with regard to the duration of the usually multi-stage process and the specific acts as well as the religious or social status achieved through the ritual:

D'où la ressemblance générale des cérémonies de la naissance, de l'enfance, de la puberté sociale, des fiançailles, du mariage, de la grossesse, de la paternité, de l'initiation aux sociétés religieuses et des funérailles.⁷

Thus we encounter a wide degree of general similarity among ceremonies of birth, childhood, social puberty, betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, fatherhood, initiation into religious societies, and funerals.⁸

Although van Gennep treated the ritual practices from the perspective of an ethnologist, he also occasionally spoke about the artefacts used in the context of these performances that are endowed with a symbolic meaning and often play a constitutive role or even guarantee the efficacy of the ritual.⁹ A first, cursory overview of the various rituals and the artefacts used in their context revealed the surprising observation that many of these rituals operate with objects that are related to writing or inscriptions and sometimes even with an act of writing. The artefacts that are related to text in general include, on the one hand, books and other manuscripts that codify the texts to be recited during the initiation ritual, such as prayers or declarations in the sense of

5 Stephenson 2015, 72.

6 See on the term 'ritual grammar' Hellwig and Michaels 2013.

7 Van Gennep 1981, 13.

8 Van Gennep 1960, 3.

9 See, for example, the description of the various ritually used objects that were used in connection with the Roman Catholic rite of the consecration of virgins in van Gennep 1981, 98–100.

performative speech acts. In this context, it should be noted that the exact wording of the texts to be spoken is often of constitutive importance for the agency of the ritual, and a mistake can completely undermine or nullify the entire intended efficacy of the performance. This is not a phenomenon from the past, as the doctrinal note *Gestis Verbisque* released on 2 February 2024 by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Roman Catholic Church shows: In this declaration it is expressed with regret that

[t]he grave modifications that were made to the matter or form of the Sacraments, which nullified those celebrations, led to the need to track down those who were involved and repeat the Rite of Baptism or Confirmation, and a significant number of the faithful rightly expressed their distress.¹⁰

Accordingly, unauthorised changes to the gestures and words that are to be performed in the context of a sacrament are not permitted, whereby it is also described in the further course that errors and mistakes also lead to the invalidity of the sacramental act. This emphasises all the more the role of the corresponding rituals, which must be strictly adhered to and which must themselves be authorised and correct.¹¹ On the other hand, further objects associated with initiation rituals and containing script or bearing inscriptions do not serve to read or recite certain texts of these acts, but rather to comment on, explain or even semantically expand their meaning and their aims, sometimes even to be understood as an affirmation or perpetuation of the intended effect. For example, clamps and blades used for Jewish circumcision can be subsumed under this category, as they bear inscriptions that quote Psalm words or blessings, but which are not themselves constitutive of the covenant made between the initiate and God through the procedure.¹² In addition to already existing manuscripts and bearers of inscriptions, *Written Artefacts* can also be created within the ceremony as part of initiation rituals, which are either ephemeral – such as the Latin and Greek alphabets written by the bishop with his crosier on a cross made of ashes during a church consecration¹³ – or, on the contrary, are designed to be permanent and document or codify the new state of the initiate. This fascinating spectrum of objects within such ritual performances is explored in more detail in the contributions to this volume, which goes back to a symposium hosted by the Cluster of Excellence *Understanding Written Artefacts / Centre for the Studies of Manuscript Cultures* (CSMC) at University of Hamburg from 19–21 January 2023. As at the conference, the focus of the published papers is not primarily on a religious and social science analysis of the profane or sacred ritual

10 Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2024.

11 See on the Carolingian understanding of ritual and sacraments and the role of correct liturgical textbooks Angenendt 2004.

12 See on Jewish circumcision blades and clamps with inscriptions Heimann-Jelinek and Kugelmann 2014, 39–40.

13 See on the alphabet rite in the medieval liturgy of church dedication Schreiner 2006.

itself, but on material culture in the broadest sense. This method reflects the scientific orientation of the CSMC and the holistic approach to inscription bearers and manuscripts, which had already been shaped in the Sonderforschungsbereich *Manuscript Cultures in Asia, Africa and Europe* (2011–2020) at the University of Hamburg. On the basis of the corresponding artefacts, which in turn can be traced back to occasionally ritualised acts of writing, the potential interaction of the objects with the action will be examined, whereby the actors involved in the performance will also be considered. In accordance with the rather broad definition of rites and rituals, a wide variety of artefacts and practices is also discussed, for example religious textbooks, inscriptions from a military context, objects perpetuating and affirming the effect of the performance, and even documents oscillating between an administrative act and a change of status. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, not all of the presentations given during the conference could be included here, but it was possible to publish further essays, some of which are extremely relevant to contemporary history and explore other facets not previously covered.

The author would like to thank the participants for their intensive occupation with the various written artefacts within the initiation rituals during the conference, for the intensive discussions and for the corresponding publication of the conference proceedings, and also, significantly, the additional contributors for their great commitment. In addition, many thanks are expressed to the peer reviewers who helped to clarify the arguments in the articles. The fact that the conference could take place was made possible thanks to the Cluster of Excellence *Understanding Written Artefacts / Centre for the Studies of Manuscript Cultures* (CSMC) at University of Hamburg, which provided funding for the interdisciplinary workshop as well as for the printing of the conference proceedings. In this context, special thanks are owed to various colleagues within the CSMC: Birgit Koscielny for her careful assistance and organisation of the conference, the members of the research field *Inscribing Spaces* for their support of the project and the fruitful discussions, Karin Becker for her great commitment in reviewing the texts to ensure formal uniformity of the contributions. The author would also like to thank the editors of *Hamburger Studien zu Gesellschaften und Kulturen der Vormoderne* for their willing acceptance of the conference proceedings into their series and for supporting the publication. Finally, thanks are due to Steiner Verlag in Stuttgart for the careful supervision of the printing of the conference proceedings, which makes the various objects accessible in a meaningful form and the respective arguments illustrative.

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