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Separation in the Sara Female Initiation Ceremony

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Abstract

This paper employs hermeneutics as opposed to a comparative, explanatory, or descriptive method to engage the phenomenon of Sara female initiation as captured by Lori Leonard's ethnography, "Female Circumcision in Southern Chad: Origins, Meaning, and Current Practice." The Sara people of Southern Chad – although predominantly Christian – have their roots in a pre-colonial religion that reveres ancestors. The spirits of Sara ancestors are believed to exist in the bush outside of the village. In the female initiation ceremony, girls are removed from the village and enter the surrounding bush to undergo the ritual transition. This separation is key to understanding how the initiation ritual functions for Sara insiders. During the liminal period where the Sara girls are removed from the village, they undergo a ritual circumcision and learn about the history, customs, and expectations of their society. Separation of initiates from the village functions to create a sacred, unseen order for this contingent life-crisis ritual that serves as a rite of passage into adulthood.

The Sara female initiation ceremony is the phenomenon captured by Lori Leonard's ethnography, "Female Circumcision in Southern Chad: Origins, Meaning, and Current Practice." As described by Leonard, the ceremony can last from a couple of weeks to several months. The female initiates are first removed from their village and reside in a provisional hut under the care of specially selected relatives who act as the 'mothers of initiation.' On the first day of initiation, the Sara females are bathed after their hair and clothing are removed to undergo a ritual circumcision. The clitoris is cut by an outsider to the village who recites a blessing over the wound. The majority of the initiation ritual for a Sara female is the period of healing where her wound is ritually cleaned and she is educated about her customs and ancestry. Upon complete healing of the circumcision wound, the initiate is bathed again and decorated with red oil, jewelry, and a mask. She will be given a new adult name and reenter the village, gradually shedding her decoration until she is cleared to be a full member of the Sara society from which she was removed (Leonard 1996, 258-259). How does the separation of initiates from the village during the ceremony function for Sara females?

Initiation ceremonies for the Sara people have their roots in a pre-colonial religion although a majority of those practicing these rituals identify as Christian (Leonard 1996, 260). One of the foundations of the Sara belief that has since incorporated Christianity is the reverence of ancestors. This appears significant to the removal of initiates from the village when looking at the sacred realms observed by the Sara: "The Sara commonly view the village as the center of life, and the bush surrounding the village – the site of the initiation – as the domain of the ancestors. This space is believed to be inhabited by their spirits" (Leonard 1996, 259). The removal of Sara initiates from the center of life and into the realm of their ancestors forms a sacred separation. Additionally, the Sara believe a person has two souls; a soul or spirit of youth

and an adult soul. The overall ritual of the Sara female initiation ceremony is structured around the desire to remove the child-like soul and both celebrate and educate the adult soul. Separation of initiates from the village functions to create a sacred, unseen order for this contingent life-crisis ritual that serves as a rite of passage into adulthood.

A sacred, unseen order is “a world structured but not seen... generated by insiders out of or through, or as an experience of the sacred, a hierophany, and within which they as insiders, exist” (Smith 2017, 2). For the Sara, one way the world is structured is through the veneration of ancestors. This generates the existence of a structured, unseen world separated into realms of living and dead. Away from the village, the Sara realm of ancestral spirits is a sacred space designated as such through the unseen order. It is this sacred space that is particularly significant to the female initiation ceremony, as it is “useless to discuss the structure of sacred space without showing, by particular examples, how such a space is constructed and why it becomes qualitatively different from the profane space by which it is surrounded” (Eliade 1959, 15). The construction of sacred space – and through it a sacred, unseen order – by the Sara is one example. In terms of Eliade’s analysis of the characteristics of structured sacred space, the Sara construct this sacred space through a clear separation between the living and dead. The spirits of the revered ancestors must not dwell amongst the living in the area of the village. This is the differentiation that Eliade notes. In her ethnography, Leonard notes how the distinction between the living and dead is both ‘maintained and reinforced’ through the female initiation ritual of the Sara (Leonard 1996, 259). It is the sacred, unseen order that structures the sacred space for this ritual to occur. Gary E. Kessler further discusses the structure of separation: “sacred spaces and sacred times draw a boundary between the pure and the impure. People ‘enter’ and ‘exit’ these places and times. Such places are marked off, distinguished, separated from profane places and

times” (Kessler 2008, 113). For the Sara, the boundary has been drawn by the ancestral belief system already in place. Female initiates ‘enter’ the sacred space that is separated from the profane world of the village. The use of this sacred space functions to create a sacred, unseen order for insiders to reside in during the ritual initiation.

The Sara initiation ritual is centered on removing the child-like soul from a female and enhancing her adult soul. Generally beginning at the time of adolescence, initiation rituals for the Sara are paramount to the culture. Anthropologist Victor Turner described this type of ritual as “contingent, held in response to an individual or collective crisis... to demarcate the passage from one phase to another in the individual’s life cycle” (Turner 1973, 1100). The Sara female initiation ceremony is a contingent life-crisis ritual because it exists in response to the crisis of puberty and emphasizes the transition from childhood into adulthood. Working as a ritual, further insight can be drawn about the separation of female initiates by looking at the definition of ritual itself. Turner explains ritual to be “a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designated to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors’ goals and interests” (Turner 1973, 1100). In the case of the Sara female initiation ceremony, the activities from cutting the clitoris to educating the initiate about Sara culture are meant to invoke the adult soul and influence the child-like soul to vacate the body. Significant to the function of separation, however, is Turner’s recognition that these activities are being carried out in a ‘sequestered place.’ This sacred space in the presence of ancestral spirits is where Sara females will have their child-like soul cast out to gain status as a full member of Sara society.

By further examination, this type of life-crisis ritual that has the ability to move an individual from one social location to another is characteristic of a rite of passage. From Arnold Van Gennep's book on the aforementioned:

I have tried to assemble here all the ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another. Because of the importance of these transitions, I think it legitimate to single out *rites of passage* as a special category, which under further analysis may be subdivided into *rites of separation*, *transition rites*, and *rites of incorporation*. (Gennep 1960, 10-11)

In addition to providing a clear definition for rites of passage, what is stressed in this excerpt is both the importance of transitional rites and the methodology by which to approach them. As mentioned later in *Rites of Passage*, some rituals may have emphasis on one subdivided category more than the others (Gennep 1960, 11). In the Sara female initiation ceremony, the separation occurs when the girls are removed from the village and center of life, and reincorporation occurs upon their return. This separation and return, however, reveals the most emphasized part of the ceremony: the transition. As a ritual primarily focused on shifting an individual from one social location to the next, the Sara female initiation ceremony exists largely in the liminal transition phase.

The concept of liminality as an in-between state was proposed by Arnold Van Gennep and further analyzed by Victor Turner. Here, Turner describes the term: "The structural 'invisibility' of liminal *personae* has a twofold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified. In so far as they are no longer classified, the symbols that represent them are, in many societies, drawn from the biology of death" (Turner 2009, 168). The Sara female initiates are no longer classified as children but not yet classified as adults during the period of

their initiation. The vast majority of the rite occurs under the liminal phase. Turner also mentions the existence of death symbolism throughout the liminal phase, which is especially pertinent to understanding the function of separation for the Sara initiation ceremony. By entering the realm of the spirits, the rite's liminal phase takes place among the dead. During the ritual, the child-like spirit of a Sara girl is cast out. Symbolically dying, the young soul of a female initiate is removed alongside the spirits of her deceased ancestors. The initiates die a social death as children, but have not yet been socially born again as adults. For the majority of the ritual, the initiate is without identity; she is liminal. It is during this liminality that the transformation into adulthood takes place. Ross Aden's analysis of rite of passage accounts for the liminal phase's signification of a transformed initiate: "Once stripped of their former identities and social status in the situation of 'anti-structure,' the initiates are open and vulnerable to the authority of the gods and elders. They can receive without question the secret wisdom of the tribe and the folklore of the clan" (Aden 2013, 167). The Sara are stripped of their child-like souls through circumcision and spend the healing period learning about their customs and responsibilities as a full member of society. The elders educate the girls during their liminal state that became possible through the removal of initiates from the center of life in the village.

The separation of initiates from the village in the case of the Sara female initiation ritual functions to form a sacred, unseen order for this rite of passage to take place. The Sara construct a sacred space outside of the village through their belief system surrounding the reverence of ancestors. This ceremony is a ritual in response to the arrival of adolescence for Sara girls. Categorized as a contingent, life-crisis ritual, the initiation rite serves to remove the child-like soul and prepare the adult soul of a Sara insider. Separation of the rite of passage from the village lends to the lengthy liminal phase, heightened by death symbolism in order to educate the

Sara females about their future roles in the community. It is only through this sequence of ritual passage that a Sara individual can gain full status as a member of society.

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