



## Male Initiation: Imagining Ritual Necessity

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*Immanent in contemporary constructions of and approaches to masculinity is the pertinence of enculturation, the notion of preliminal male subjectivity, and tropes of maturation. Addressing this multi-faceted pertinence, this paper examines anthropological-political formulations of male initiation in terms of the cultural necessity by which it is routinely characterized. This study requires a cross-disciplinary approach and highlights major interpretative schisms among masculinity scholars. Studying the phenomenon of initiation presents an entry to the complex interplay of social ontology ('men', 'boys') on the one hand, and the (re)imagination of cultural legitimacy on the other. Hence, seeming interpretative necessities refer not just to the phenomenological level, but also to science-sociological, ethical and ethno-linguistic (allegoric) levels of deliberations on masculinity and youth. As a case study, contemporary American ideas about male ritualism are discussed, followed by a short typological suggestion for analyzing necessary masculinity and maleness in ritual.*

"...If we're going to fantasize ritually, then for god's sake--rather, for the sake of the goddesses--let us do so with irony and humor, as Apuleius did."  
(Grimes, 2000, p. 33)

A by now familiar corollary of the "intersectionalist" and deconstructive approach to men seen particularly during the 1990s, masculinity has been studied extensively as a trajectory and accomplishment rather than an immutable category. This has made the subject of enculturation critically pertinent to the social ontology of men (e.g.: *not boys*) as well as to the cultural semantics of "the masculine." Ethnographic studies of *initiation*, for instance, may refer to *thresholds*, *penetration*, or *incorporation* as tropes largely distinctive of the male attitude to or experience of — in familiar anthropological jargon — the life cycle. Boys, in other words, are "about men." Manhood, in turn, is about boyhood.

The pertinence of trajectory in masculinity studies presented itself pressingly during a bibliographic approach to worldwide "male rites of passage" (Janssen, 2006/7). However, in ethnographic communications masculinity may seem to be a structuring device for, by-product of or merely informing a prescribed *dramatis*

*personae* for, ritual eventuality. Unsurprisingly we find that the very operationalization of masculinity, and consequently its *theoretical mobility*, varies with paradigms of interest as is concerned ritual: “sex roles,” “gender identity,” “male envy,” “patriarchy,” “religion,” “invention of tradition” and cultural revitalization, “mythopoesis,” “spirituality,” “performativity,” and so on. These paradigms inform late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropological interest in male initiation, but also pervade contemporaneous public imagining and psychomedical theorizing of the male life course as segmented and “developmental.”

This paper locates these diverse paradigms and asks how ritual has been imagined as crucial for the (re)imagination of the masculine subject. As an anchor for cultural imagination, interpreting initiation refers to a number of anthropological-theological quagmires, among these the *ultimate work*, or *functional necessity*, of ritual. Initiation rites, in the armchair and textbook experience, often instrumentalize academic perspectives on masculine trajectories as schismatic, disruptive and non-linear. The major role of academe has consequently been to theorize the psychocultural necessity of this finding. Psychoanalysts, for instance, have primarily theorized the presence and plot of initiations of boys in terms of universal decompensations, necessary disidentifications and foundational resolutions (e.g. Lidz and Lidz, 1989). Ritual here is seen as a dramatized part of generally dramatic constructions of gender that implicate a double necessity: that of staging, or complementing the staging, of the *cultural plot*, and that of resolving the *psychostructural problem*, of early life feminization. Necessary action is essential (ontologically critical) re-action. In this article I venture that these suggestions (1) hint at the productivity of studying ritual efficacy in societies where and when such efficacy is both absent from mainstream public life *and* subject to wide and sustained interest; and (2) render the study of ritual contingent on a “sociology of science” perspective. I will substantiate these theses by pointing to the contingencies and effects of ontological choices in various (semi-)academic perspectives on initiation; the (concomitant) tension between cultural categories and cultural agenda; inherently, intrusive aspects of analysis and imperativeness of ethical (“gender”) and metaphorical commitments; and lastly, the perhaps necessary analytic delimitation of ideas about ritual efficacy.

I propose a qualitative approach because in the quantitative cross-cultural tradition “presence of [male] initiation” is *defined* by approximate coincidence of age of initiands or application of western biomedical categories (“puberty,” “adolescence”), thereby disregarding the interplay of ritual efficacy and indigenous age grading *and* ethno-phenomenological ramifications of the events. Initiation rituals here are simply *specified* for male sex (not gender); statistical processing of their gendered functions therefore does not and cannot refer to ethnographic observations on ritual efficacy. Specifically, mainstream anthropological definitions seem to disallow the observation that gendered categories are *constituted* and age grading is *accomplished* through ritual, rather than their demographic referentiality being suitable for definition, analytic delimitation and specification (“male adolescent rituals”, “puberty rituals,” “male initiation rites”). For this reason this approach is largely unproductive in addressing the stated conundrum of ritual efficacy.

### *Making men: Mirrors, ontology and metaphor*

According to Lacan an infant embodies an undifferentiated libidinal field without distinction of self/world, bathing in a semiotic flux of prelinguistic images and sounds, until immersion in this Lacanian “real” is disrupted by the child’s recognition of a reflected self-image being complete and apart. Thus is initiated a divorce from the real and passage into the symbolic as signaled by the death of the mother and entry into the masculine world of “différance”: a world of meaning characterized by endless interplay, endless deference. This inaugurates a triple semiotics as anchored by the phallus: the being, having, and lacking of “it.”

A disruptive confrontation occasions a passage between paradigms of impressions, a formative introduction of symbolism, and a leaving behind of a praeter-symbolic maternal paradigm — a trajectory understood by Lacan as masculinization. Such a total, signifying experience is reminiscent of observations on what structuralist anthropologists call *initiation rituals*. Here, it could be argued, masculinity is less profoundly humanizing and more complexly symbolizing; according to ethnographic argument, however, here too the totalizing elements of death and rebirth are essential to the plot. Man creates man in the line of men. It has been argued that this “perspective” sets apart male from female initiations phenomenologically, where the latter would be puberty-occasioned, ceremonial, celebratory and announcing of a girl having become “nature’s vehicle of life” as Joseph Campbell put it (or elsewhere some attempt to contain or “censor,” as Lacan allows, her natural development), and the former quite the opposite: an intervention enacted if not *against* then *in juxtaposition to* originating associations with the natural sphere, a *ritual proper*, a clean departure. Quite alike being confronted with one’s (or *a*) mirror image, in his initiation the boy is confronted with the enigma, charisma and symbolic necessities of the manhood to which he belongs, operationalized as an entire paradigm of engagement — office, lineage, of observances, alliances, regulations, privileges, traditions — the significance and importance of which exceeds that of a single lifetime. His realization of this paradigm will inform his “masculinity”; before he does, he needs to be disowned of his trust in a prior paradigm; until he does, he will be suspended in a liminal mode of “reflection” (or *reflexivity*, as Victor Turner has it).

We note however that rather than implying symbolic incarnation, such “initiations” may signal a *passing* of essential substance, or a communitarian process, so that the metaphorical salience of death in the events *as a whole* seems diminished. J. W. Fernandez (1980) centralizes the interdependence of individual and collective history in Mbiri-Bwiti initiation when a neophyte stares into a looking glass until the face of an ancestor fuses with one’s own. As Fernandez observes the ritual initiates a persona only in the context of emphasizing genealogical continuity, a function variably conceptualized in native analysis.

Another phenomenological approach to male/female initiations states that female initiation entails continued *enablement* of man’s contact with the sacred, while male initiation refers to continual *establishment* of such contact. Such a ramification however becomes untenable in many rites and religious systems. In New Guinea, for instance, male ritual seems to be anchored symbolically by appropriating by ritual intervention the esteemed natural features, or ward off the

feared destructive properties, of mature female physiology (e.g. Allen, 1998). In the case of syncretic Bwiti initiation, among Mitsogho, who introduced Bwiti to Gabon, the rite is indeed exclusively male (Gollnhofer and Sillans, 1976), however the Fang, who adopted the rite, also allow women as initiands. Compromising a solidly gendered gestalt of "vision," Native American *vision quests*, at least as initiatory devices, were not restricted to males in a number of communities. Furthermore, quite similar interpretations of transformation are offered today for female as for male initiations, specifically in terms of indigenous ambiguities, complexity and contestation of status transitions.

More generally one might argue that the production of a masculine entity pertains to the recodification of a binary, and often, a hierarchical distribution of opposites. Inasmuch indigenous references to the word *male/man* may be used "boastfully" to connote a negation in terms of gender ('not woman', 'not effeminate'; e.g. Iroquoian examples in Hewitt, 1888, p. 324), the same function often relates to life phase as positional status. Argues Deborah Elliston, rather than as instantiating masculinity onto itself,

the ritual teachings and practices of boys' initiations can usefully be analyzed for their deployment of gender as a conceptual scheme for thinking about relations of difference and, thus, as a model of and justification for the age hierarchy among boys and bachelors of various age grades, and the gender hierarchy. (Elliston, 1995, p. 856).

Women indeed are variably implied and in fact centralized and transformed themselves in many male cults, for instance as suggested in a recent collection of papers on New Guinea (Bonnemère, ed., 2004). Furthermore, by virtue of liminal suspension of gender "roles," a neophyte may be thought of as transcending quotidian complementarity, and accomplish holistic embodiment.

Whether "initiations" contribute to some distribution of gender or transcendence of structural confinements is, in honest assessment, ethnographically inconstant. It should furthermore be noted, with Campbell, that the very idea of *opposites* and the concept of *nature* are variably imagined ethically even within societies, and variably as gendered. However, even apart from these caveats, initiation is, as Claude Calame (1999) reminds, situated between the formal and the figurative, and this semantic situation should complicate any generalization about ritual ontology and efficacy. This pertains importantly to the interpretation of ritual efficacy and necessity in "male initiations," as papers by Donald Gardner (1983) and Borut Telban (1997) perceptively analyze. For instance, in Ambonwari initiation, rather than being put through a metaphorical death, boys are "cut off from their parents and 'thrown' abruptly into a state of becoming," an absolute beginning rendering death genuinely *possible*, not a metaphoric necessity (Telban, 1997).

We note, lastly, that what we choose to call maturation may be a deeply impressive experience without necessarily having to foreground gender or some metaphor of transition. To stay with our mirror allegory, in Gus van Sant's *Gerry* (2003) when Gerry seems "rescued" and driven back to the world of the living, face burned, he looks at the small boy next to him on the back seat, who looks out of the window onto the plains, then to his dad driving, dad looking onto the road ahead but

then checking on Gerry in his inside rear mirror, who seems startled for a moment by this return of gaze... Gerry looks outward again, onto the plains where he ended the life of Gerry, his smaller alter. While no role of substance is played by women in this minimalist film, can we say it portrays a male necessity, or *necessarily male* tragedy?<sup>1</sup> "Initiation" may not even be the subject. The mythopoetic claim of the necessary role of fathers or older men seems negated in the film (the plot seems to be "getting lost" on a wilderness trail to "The Thing"). The inevitability of death, murder even (as the story is said to be based on) however is alluded to, but also its sheer tragic eventuality. We must observe, perhaps, that "the past haunts us" as we drive back to civilization the products of its profundity, however different than in ancestor cults, "our" Western mirror being an *inside rear mirror* of necessity, checking on the boys on the back seat as we go on. (Perhaps all we might conclude is that Arvo Pärt's equally minimalist and prismatic *Spiegel im Spiegel* fits well in all this, as Van Sant suggested.)

### *Abject ritualism and ritual necessity in America*

Both mythology and comparative work on male initiation have observed the basic gendered plot criticized above for over a century, and although mythology and ritual exegesis have shown variance in their deciphering of cultural necessities, seeing masculinity as a universal plot is perhaps easiest when observing it as "a precarious or artificial state [...] problematic, a critical threshold that boys must pass" (Gilmore, 1990, p. 11). Indeed, this anthropological truism is so demanding that the discourse is reversed in the Western imagination: what is considered as critically informing mature masculinity is called both a *ritualization* and *initiatory* of such status. Or rather, in the West generalized *ideas* of ritualized initiation came to inform a *model*, a motif, for "understanding" the "typifying" phenomena to be ascribed to what in the 20<sup>th</sup> century came to be called adolescence (e.g. Jeffrey, 1995; Foley, 1993; Alves, 1993) and henceforward to any "difficult process," such phenomena thereby emerging as "necessary" and "essential." After Hall and Erikson, the Americanism of *adolescence* itself, rather than *masculinity*, became a concept rendering "necessary" any inaugurating behavior that would have to be called typical, delayed or regressive, depending on its timing. This transferal of the motif of initiation from masculinity to the increasingly rationalized psychomedical notion of "life phases" aided in the cultural and capitalist centralization of "adolescence": the necessary yet perpetual *quest* for identity as tied to products, fashions, self-stylization and "healthy" functioning.

Paradoxically, after the 1970s initiation became both ethically suspect and a central objective in the ethical imagination of American masculinity. "Kind-of" rituals and "sort-of" initiations often proved popular qualifications informing critical perspectives on male "adulthood," interpreting ritualism and ritualization in defiance of demanding anthropological definitions, instead in terms of a failure of culture to deal "properly" not with "thresholds" or "crisis" (Erikson) but neurotic craving for status recognition, identity panic, and "hegemonic" (Connell) or "compensatory" "hyper-"masculinity (e.g. Van der Meer, 2003; Kimmel, 2007). This would produce pathetic, dysfunctional makeshift rituals that would not *produce* maturity but signal its delay or bankruptcy — "bunny bashing to manhood" (Foster, 1996), "jumping in," or "21 for 21." From the 1970s negative appraisal of "adolescent ritualism" spilled

over to what was increasingly considered continuous with it: “male ritualism.” Thus, “blood pinning” in the navy, according to Elizabeth Gleick (1997), demoted from “macho” to “barbaric” because of the military’s “seeming inability to police itself.” The trope of transgressive initiation, then, was tied to the demanding plot of macho culture even where the presence of ritualism in the strict sense is arguable.<sup>2</sup>

How to theorize this contested legitimacy of men doing ritual, and of ritual as masculinizing? The pervasively psycho-analytic *Menschbild* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century West would allow a look at psychological theories of symbolism; and masculinity and ritual both being Anglo-American analytic concepts (for a note on initiation and the German notion of *Männerbundes*, see Brunotte, 2000), it would not be outrageous to start on native soil. That is to say, there is something of an ethnographic legitimacy to analyze masculinity in terms of its ethnotheoretical properties. *Symbolic self-completion theory* postulates that a felt shortcoming in one symbolic dimension of a self-defined goal, for instance status anxiety, may trigger emphasis on some alternative symbolic dimension, thus effecting a compensatory self-symbolizing (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982). Illustratively Mark Carnes (1989, pp. 14, 155) found that the urban middle class phenomenon of secret, elaborate initiations into fraternities, “a distinct product of Victorian American culture and society,” provided “solace and psychological guidance” in a time of manhood acquiring “a wide range of roles and statuses,” and against the background of an increasingly feminized and sentimental religion and a new powerful domestic ideology. Adds Daniel Soyer (1999), American-Jewish lodge rituals provided common experiences, psychological guidance, dignified prosaic activities, and relief from the tensions of social transformation and transition accompanying immigration. We see “initiated” not a fresh masculinity, but masculinity re-emerging from freshly potent symbolic realms.

Historically the “charm,” the “mystique,” of ceremonial fraternalism precedes and fades with the rising charm of “the American boy” as an elusive fixture and nostalgic antipode to the man to be reformulated through *capitalist* and *psychological* alongside *parochial* ideas of “development,” “adulthood” and “maturity” (Janssen, 2007, pp. 58-59). This may well betray the psycho-cultural-historical necessity of either phenomenon (“boyhood” and exclusive “fraternity”): a felt need to *reserve* masculinity: as a literal *fait accompli*, as privileged artifice, exclusive discontinuity, and elusive plot. There is a *poetic necessity* to even secular masculinity, and with it a *cultic* and sociologically *counter-rational* principle: the rite is secret, its work ineffable, its products “beautiful.”<sup>3</sup>

Ceremony facilitated the imagination of an exclusive realm of ascendance, and would provide what a discursive, emotionally invested bifurcation (*boys and men*) of the life course would accomplish at the turn of the century. This at least is what consensus allows. Men, specifically in periods of history considered “critical” (that is, where male authority or male-invested projects come under siege, subject to culture-wide changes or pressured by grandiose ambitions) project masculinity backward (*nostalgia*), inward (the *interior boy*) and outward, either through an exclusionary claim to pedagogical expertise (“*boyology*”) and formation of all-male agogical enclaves operating via hierarchical, idealized commitments (“*pedagogical eros*”), even sacralizations and deifications (“divine boys” are found prominently in medieval Buddhist Japan, Sufi mysticism, Greek mythology — sites that had

elaborate male ceremonialism though no ritualization of masculinity).

These dynamics can be productively analyzed as concurrent in a range of settings, including 19<sup>th</sup> century America, Victorian Britain, Nazi Germany, and albeit in differing ways throughout Far and Near Asian history. In the postindustrial West, men appear to fall back on “the boy” *per se*, that is, a body defying and resisting the (demystifying, feminizing, deconstructive) performances of the egalitarianist welfare state and the concomitant scientific apparatus that makes “minors,” “children” and “subjects” out of boys, and bounded, domestic role-takers out of men. Masculinity is constructive, perhaps best illustrated when it allows itself being pushed into an anti-deconstructive mode. Again, ritualized initiation in (aspiring) gender-egalitarianist societies comprises an *ambivalent romance*, offering “intriguing,” and “cool,” documentary material but inviting journalism mainly in the event of casualties or deficiency of its charisma in the face of rival truth-paradigms, for instance in terms of “human rights,” “child rights” or legal concepts such as “indoctrination,” “sexual” violence, and bodily “integrity” (examples abound for urban gangs, military training, universities, and from contemporary rural South Africa to the Anglo world of elite sports and fraternities).

Male anxiety in late 20<sup>th</sup> century middle class America would produce a revival “boy-ology,” Kenneth Kidd (2004) and others argue, but also seems to have shifted back and forth between finding “solace” in the boy as the promise of innate (i.e. paradoxically *real* and *mysterious*, *deep* and *mythical*) identity and (hence) *agogical privilege*, and finding it in ritual as a *restorative praxis*. In the American post-Vietnam mythopoetic imagination, absence of ritualization, and ritualized initiation most critically, has been associated with the alleged demise of “mature masculinity” more than with maturity *per se*, a discussion opened up by motivated rereading of Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) and Eliade’s *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (1958) in the 1970s, famously rearticulated in Bly’s 1990 *Iron John* and expanded in his 1996 *The Sibling Society* (for an extensive analysis of the American mythopoetic-Jungian argument see Howard, 1997).

Capitalism in America allowed the consumption of, or a *buying into*, the *idea* that flat consumerism misses out on “something essential.” The spiritual limbo normative for egalitarianist and careerist social strata under capitalism was being likened to the ambivalent limbo in which *uninitiated men* find themselves (consider the striking example of Nuer “bull-boys”: Hutchinson, 1996, pp. 270-298). Conversely critics considered mythopoesis as covert regression, in that “what is to be retrieved is not ‘deep manhood,’ but ‘deep boyhood,’ a playfully innocent and romanticized view of masculinity without adult responsibility of work and family” (Kimmel and Kaufman, 1993, p. 3). Quite the obverse of the poetic envisioning of American masculinity, this diagnostic register seems to want to invalidate its non-productive and counter-domestic ills: to oppose the presumed ethical corollaries of non-“development” into ethical conformity. However the Kimmel/Bly controversy is based on a shared premise, that of historical mutability of ethical orientation, and of a psychological and utilitarian understanding, rather than a transcendental embedding, of ethics. For Kimmel ritual would only cash “patriarchal dividend,” for Bly it would reaffirm the “journey” trope so appealing to a nation characterized (it is argued) by inter-generational schisms and betrayals, yet so full of hope for “healthy,” “productive” maturity and of ambition to “grow.”

Little of this *therapeutic and meritocratic paradigm* is seen in the “ancient” or “tribal” experience that would inspire this American discourse; even in Europe cultural and personal change are differently imagined. Where Grimes wanted to get *Deeply into the Bone* (2000), Foucault wanted “limit experiences,” not a ritual “coming-into-one’s-own.” (Reportedly, however, he got most of these in America.)

Male ritualism, especially initiation, may seem a political necessity to militaristic, territorialist, nationalist, expansionist and revisionist societies, elites and enclaves; as is well known, so is poetic and homoerotic investment in imagining the pedagogical task as epitomized by formation of exclusive “bonds” (Tiger’s notion in his 1969 *Men in Groups*). In fact such an imagining has been considered the very spiritual axis of many such societies (in Western history the Greek παιδεία and Spartan ἀγωγή stand out as examples). Ritual, in the same vein as the poetic image of *the boy*, articulates a “romance,” “cult” or “idealization” by rendering the idea of masculinity contingent on its malleability, its creation *de novo* as staged by its heroic “inauguration,” but precisely as this entails an agogical concept of masculinity. Inauguration “accomplishes” not only manhood but also the condition that it is said to undo (boyhood), or rather, it accomplishes an *idea* of masculinity premised on notions of threshold and transcendence. Ritual, then, may not predominantly function to create *a man out of a boy*, but create a male culture in which *a man is made among men*. Such if anything was envisioned by the mythopoeists: not boys’ introduction to, but a pacifist, therapeutic and communitarian reimagining of, the stakes of masculinity as “mature” (and onward to, in the case of Bly, the stakes of maturity *per se*). A compatible argument was offered by James Hillman (1979) where he proposed to correct prior theorizing in that initiation would not produce a *senex* out of a *puer*, but instead a *puer/senex* whole, a “union of sames” rather than of gendered opposites, thus effecting “an affirmation of the mythical meaning within all reality” (pp. 29, 30ff).

### *Ontological closure*

A basic ontological problem presents itself at this (American) point. If *ceremonial and ritual* origin distinguishes the phenomenology of femaleness and maleness, respectively, we observe that in the modern Occident the notion of *ritual masculinity* is native only to selected anthropological and mythic representations—it typically resides “elsewhere.” More importantly, many American commentators simply equate the function of ritual to that of *markers, milestones, or tests* of status acquisition, or of *bestowal* of privilege. Hence, mythology is a necessary resource of any conceptualization of Western masculinity but it does not invoke a ritual (other than ceremonial) paradigm of engagement. In many societies “initiation rituals” only preface or conclude months or years of instruction and training, not unlike Western schooling which disregards gender by policy. In Africa, boys’ initiation seasons are scheduled in school vacations, while American “wilderness programs” for boys typically take place on weekends. So what do these non-mandatory rituals accomplish if their very schedule obeys the schedule of mandatory agogical institutes that officially de-escalate gender as a personal, or metaphysical, drama?

The phenomenology of “the masculine” as artifice and accomplishment is a myth: it requires mythological referencing. Hence it is not a “phenomenon,” rather it is wide-feeding and eclectic mythography — “culture,” then, but hardly ontological

or psychological necessity. Barry Stephenson (2003) argues that the heroic, mythopoetic basis of neoritual programs hints at a circular relation between myth and praxis that actually denies context and purpose (divorcing ontological necessity from functional necessity), besides raising serious questions of cultural appropriation.

If ethnographic referencing is the crux of masculinity reimagined, as it seems to be in the American experience, can we indeed distill a uniformly productive image? Some elements associated with male rituals do not seem to be effective in symbolization other than qualification (endurance or performance tests), purification of feminine pollutants (New Guinean nose-bleeding) or elimination of feminine redundancies (Jewish *bris milah*). For anthropologists “initiation” may seem too premised on the fate of the persona, and inappropriate to encompass indigenous projections of ritual efficacy, for instance *maintenance* or *continuance* of an order, circle or line of men tied together through a space and locality imbued with transcendental significance or transgenerational objectives. In the contemporary reading initiation often signals a Western and specifically American projection of preoccupations with psychology and gender.

#### *Analytic intrusion and ethical imperatives*

In secular Occidental understanding lacking a *paradigmatic embrace of* and therefore relying on an *analytic approach to the phenomenon* (Eliade was critical here), ritual is ostensibly a more complete, more potent, less negotiable way of articulating ideas of masculinity as trajectory rather than an essence, a trait, a given. However we note that the contemporary analytic notion of “masculinity” is perfused by constructionist, performativist and (pro-)feminist arguments for mutability and contingency; hence, what may be articulated in indigenous practices such as ritualization of life stages is at risk of being reduced, or enhanced, to what is being construed as analytically mobilizing, or even: politically fashionable.

On a more profound level, it has been argued that “male embodiment is deeply sedimented in the sociological imaginary as the very condition of social action and the constituent of social agency” (Witz and Marshall, 2003, p. 339). Masculinity may be as implicated in analytic as in religious performance, the caveat being that the phenomenon may be best observed in *the perception* of the phenomenon. Current research often instrumentalizes an anticonservative and antihegemonic ethos vis-à-vis masculinity, either by signaling hopeful developments or criticizing ominous ones. Such may be a general trend in considering the intersection of masculinity and spirituality as a pedagogical or life course issue. In a recent study Kathleen Engebretson (2006) concludes that a key component of Melbourne 15 to 18-year-old boys’ spirituality is “a growing tendency to challenge the hegemonic ideal of masculinity, and to look towards a future where masculinity is defined in more varied and fulfilling ways” (p. 91).

Masculinity’s *phenomenological* mobility, then, may be crucially implicated in its projected *ethical* mobility. Masculinization and gender specificity are thematic foci so demanding in the post-second wave feminism West that it may effectively monopolize the phenomenology of passage, reducing it to an exploration of (e.g. psycho-)analytic theory or ethical imperative rather than having it emerge from emic (natively articulated) ontologies and rationalizations. This is androcentrism, but at a

more aggressive level than as discussed by Valerie Saiving (1976).

Turner argued that liminality and passage were structural features of many rituals quite divorced from the question of whether they produced a masculine subject, whether they were male-centered, and whether these were, natively or analytically, “initiations” — other than lending themselves for Arnold Van Gennep’s (1909) triptych of *passage*. Such may compromise the surprising element in André Droogers’ (1980) observation while studying Wagenia (Zaire) boys’ initiation, that symbols indicating the temporal marginal position of persons undergoing the ritual were also used in the biographies of male religious innovators. This would support a structural thesis akin to that of Campbell’s *monomyth*, but only at the cost of extreme analytic condensation. Droogers consciously disregards the question of the site of symbolic instantiation, and thus seems simply to *affirm*, rather than *analyze*, the suggested universality of plot elements.

### *‘Initiation’: Allegoric necessity*

For an important part analytic intrusion is metaphoric intrusion. In textbook and pop anthropology metaphors of advancement in male trajectories are used mostly without reflection and commonly seem to allow, contra the anthropological gendering observed earlier in this paper, far-reaching gender neutrality. Expressions specific to diverse literary and media domains within the Euro-American experience include *coming-of-age*, *passage*, *Bildung*, *initiation*, *becoming*, *development*, *approximation*, *arrival* (“reaching” [manhood]), *attainment*, *abandonment*, *giving up* [childish obsessions], *leaving* [childhood] *behind*, [identity] *formation*, *completion*, among others. Whatever these tropes are thought or meant to accomplish, they are not analytically irreducible. What we have here is narration not determination, emplotment not description.

This mobility and agency of words meet resistance given the (radical) situation of qualitative anthropologists, rather than psychologists, being interested in transition as a trope, protocol, or narrative, and hence in its place in wider metaphorical, discursive, and organizational realms.

In native languages names for “initiations” are variably abstract metaphorical assessments of the projected goals, whether or not synecdochic. Commonly they are gendered metaphors. For instance, a Tabiteuan male ritual for boys (Gilbert Islands; Luomala, 1980, pp. 223-6) is named “*te kaunaki* or *te kaun* (the making ‘wild’ or ‘angry’ — aggressive, courageous, high-spirited); *te koreaki* or *te korean atuna* (the being cut or the cutting of the head); and *te bekau* (the working-at)” also named *te kana-ni-m’aane* (the diet of a full-grown man) because for the first time the youth — presumably when the ritual ends — receives a man’s diet.” In apparent contrast, a Xhosa boy’s spirit would have to be “tamed” subduing his animal (“dog,” “bull”) lack of restraint, his being “still partly in the realm of nature” rather than that of society (Mayer and Mayer, 1990, pp. 36-8). Bororó initiation is metaphorically accomplished by cooking, roasting, preparing by heat, thus: hardening (incidentally also among PNG Mianmin). “Cooking is a cultural process, and the boys in the initiation ceremonies are made cultural by being ‘cooked.’ When the decision for an initiation ceremony has been made, the men say, ‘Let us cook the boys’ (pawo ipare ekowu)” (Levak, 1973, p. 195; cf. Fabian, 1992, pp. 36, 221). Frederick Lamp (1978) describes the *rabai* initiation of Temne boys as “an existential transition from a state of flux to

a state of stability symbolized by the slimy frog and the stately prince, a metaphor suggested by a broad body of data” (p. 38). According to Beidelman, a Ngulu expression for circumcision is “to eat”:

thus, the knife blade eats or devours (*chadya*) the boy. The idea of eating and consuming also has some negative associations with killing or subjecting a quarry, a connotation consistent with the usage here [...]. Thus, Ngulu sing: “The cutting of the knife eats (my) father and eats me” (*Kigola mankenya chadya tate name chandya*). (Beidelman, 1965, p. 144)

Ritual, to summarize, can be seen as the *occasioning of narrative*, hence requiring an ethnolinguistic approach. Considering my introductory notes above, I find that there are many problems in the mere appellation of the phenomenon under examination. Both directional metaphors, the etymological roots *trans-ire* and *in-ire* inform general anthropological descriptors for social customs that may or may not indigenously be understood in terms of these metaphors. In other words, *in-going* and *through-* or *over-going* may or may not be the preferred or most salient *emic* ramifications of customary observances classifiable as “initiations” or “transitions” by anthropological routine. *In-ire* proposes the notion of a space or realm containing presence and mobility, rather than alternative appellations such as “commencement” of role, observance or duty. *In-ire* seems more agentic than *inducere*; *initiation* seems to imply an *act* of ingression, while *introduction* seems to imply an *experience* of being resituated. *Passage* implies thresholds or obstacles. *Transition* seems more profound, more dramatic, than *initiation*. *Transformation* rather than *transition* or *transcendence*, seems to reference *forma* rather than space, locus or substance: a different ontology is referenced.

Anthropologists, then, could focus on “how [‘initiation’] rites are *transformational*, and not merely *transitional*” (Heald, 1982, p. 16) while being sensitive to indigenous ramifications. It should be obvious that the status of, for instance, peripubescent circumcision as a culturally salient operator on “the boy,” “the male body” and/or masculinity cannot be explicated simply by looking at its politico-jural implications nor by seeing how social roles and relationships are transfigured in the ritual. Also, absence of *ritual* may be thought of as producing “hyper”masculine performances by turning a clash of filial and generational interests into a *political* battle (Murphy, 1983).

Elsewhere (Janssen, 2007) I argue that attention to specific uses of qualifiers like *boy* aid in a deconstruction of masculinity as a life style, a ludic moment; or conversely of its essentialization, in terms of some developmentalist proposition of masculinity as a critical accomplishment. Contemporary Western discourses of male life stages shed a light on gender as a project, style or mode of positioning, and thus inform a constructionist, consumer or performance plot of its development. The process of ritualized un-boy-ing usually entails aspects of defeminization and masculinization, but more generally it advances guiding tropes by which trajectories become meaningful. These tropes are variable cross-culturally, as they articulate the local interplay of all three social *categories* (“the boy”—man—the feminine) that inform the *vector* boy. A ritualization of these categories relaxes a politicization of

filial (and one may venture, Oedipal) interests, but this would obviously only work in an environment where ritual has charismatic monopoly.

Whether this becomes apparent at all in ethnographic studies obviously depends on the degree of analytic sensitivity to which “the boy” is subjected. Genres of anthropological writing, taking their cue mainly from psychoanalysis and cultural psychology, are known to have introduced a range of metaphors where they could have been sensitive to native forms of allegorization.

### *Necessary and exclusive masculinity/maleness in ritual*

Only a portion of “male cults” proper and only a portion of rituals exclusively observed by men are analytically “initiation cults” proper. It should be noted that what might be called *male initiation* is often a small “inaugural” (another metaphor) part of long ritual cycles (examples include the *hevehe* of the Elema, the *ais am* of the Bimin Kuskusmin, and the *kugo* of the Rukuba). Elsewhere “initiation” can be most fruitfully analyzed only as a part of <<birth complex—“initiator” complex—marital complex—death complex(—rebirth)>> trajectories theoretically spanning the full life course (and often beyond), however subject to historical resignifications. In that sense ritual could make Campbellian “nature’s vehicles” of all participants, even if males’ logistic role is crucial; this is indeed confirmed in a subset of rituals.

There remains the question of how ritual is masculinizing, and how this is culturally considered a necessity. One might think of analytically distinguishing four categories of ritual in which masculinity is articulated: (1) rituals referring to or on behalf of young males (e.g. observances enacted in their physical absence, prior to their conception, or during states of mental or social incompetence, thereby promoting or promulgating male status); (2) rituals or observances in which males participate but that do not operate on or foreground their sex or gender based status other than requiring such as status (e.g. as “young males” or as “boys” *per se*); (3) age-stratified “rituals of boyhood” or “rituals of manhood” (foregrounding participation roles as restricted to gender-specific age strata but not modifying gendered status other than affirming, acknowledging or signifying it as such); and (4) “transition rituals” proper (substantially modifying or ending status associated with a gender-specific age stratum usually by effecting, testing, measuring, legally granting or formalizing an indigenous status akin to that of “man”). We should further ask political and ontological questions, for instance whether “relative status” may be too individualizing, and how eventual ritual centrality may be imagined in relation to, for instance, the symbolic or magical masculinization/defeminization of the body seen in many rituals.

An example of the first class is the Orthodox and Conservative Jewish custom of *pidyon haben* “Redemption of the Son,” the ritual in which parents redeem their first-born son and “buy him back” for five *sela'im* of silver or its equivalent from a Kohen (priest) in accordance to Exodus 13:1. Although this symbolic negotiation requires the child to be male, it does not specifically foreground his maleness and outside of his usual presence does not require any form of participation (according to custom the child is 31 days of age). Other examples include the prepartal Hindu rite *Pumsavana* observed to promote male birth, the Swiss and Jewish custom to

plant a gender-specific species of tree for newborns (apple-trees and cedars for boys, respectively), among others.

Examples of the second category abound in world religions. In Thailand temple boys (เด็กวัด, *dek wat*) live in monasteries and assist the monks and *samaneras* “novices.” The temple boys carry the alms bowls of the monks during the morning alms collection, and subsequently prepare the monks’ food before eating the leftovers themselves. Although the boys’ participation seems merely facilitating, they are required to follow the ten precepts for monastic life, receive religious and moral instruction, and some eventually are ordained as monks. The status of temple boys in ritualism may be compared to that of novices proper. In Burma/Myanmar boys undergo *shinpyu* “novitiation” to become a *koyin* “novice.” This ordination requires a candidate to be male but does not reference (let alone foreground, test or cultivate) their masculinity or maleness, and proposes no absolute requirement for age. Burmese Buddhist women are not qualified candidates for entering Nirvana, and to be a woman is considered “a result of bad karma in the past life” (Ling, 2005, p. 52). However, every Buddhist boy should become a novice monk for at least a week (formerly, 3 *wa*) before age 20, the eligible age of ordination as a *bhikkhu* “monk,” after which the candidate will be called *navaka* “new one.” It is said that if a boy is old enough to “drive away a bird that comes to pick the food from one’s meal, or scare birds away from the farm,” he can become a novice. *Shinpyu*, then, introduces a male into a male-defined institute and a masculinist projection of sacred space, and it does effect a transition, but does not seem to operate on “masculinity” *per se*. According to John Brohm (1963, pp. 161, 164), while a candidate is “re-born a man” *shinpyu* would be “not so much a means for the young boy to gain Buddhist knowledge through token participation in the monastic life as it is a mystical means of crossing a social and spiritual threshold that separates one phase of life from another.” We are left, then, with individual anthropologists’ insistence on “life phase,” which often remains an unanchored notion analytically.

Examples of customs that centralize but do not operate on the status of “boys” are numerous. In Japan *Tango no Sekku* (Feast of Flags/Banners, Boys’ Festival) celebrated the health of boys as part of the *Gosekku* “Five Festival” annual cycle. By means of the 1948 *Public Holiday Law*, the government decreed this day, renamed *Kodomo no hi* “Children’s Day,” to be a national holiday to celebrate the happiness of all children and to express gratitude towards mothers. Originally however the event was called *Shobu no Sekku* after the Japanese iris plant (*shobu*) whose name is a homonym for the phrase “win or lose.” The *shobu* has sword-shaped leaves with medicinal properties. *Shobu* are placed under the eaves to fend off evil, and *shobu* leaf baths are taken to protect boys’ health and render them fearless. The event spread among the samurai caste of the Kamakura period, then May 5th was officially settled as an important date by the feudal government of the Edo period, celebrating the birth of a son in a samurai family with decorative flags and streamers put up in front of the main gate on that day. The custom gradually spread across social strata and tied to the putting up of carp streamers (*koi-nobori*), and fabrication of paper feudal helmets (*kabuto*) and dolls. According to John Finnemore, referencing two great old rival clans of the feudal days,

Toys provided for their [parents'] sons at the Feast of Flags were helmets, flags, swords, bows and arrows, coats of mail, spears, and the like. The Feast of Flags itself is held on the day sacred to Hachima [*Bishamon-ten?*], the Japanese God of War, and the favorite game on that day is a mimic battle. (Finnemore, 1913, unpaginated)

The ritual was said to scare off Oni, an evil-disposed god coming down from the heavens to devour boys. Historically, then, the festival, which had its equivalent Sekku for girls in *Hina matsuri* "Dolls' Festival," refers explicitly to male-born offspring (and male birth), perpetuating their wellbeing and grooming their ability in male pursuits (to do battle), but it does not operate on boys as a social category or stratum. A distinction should be noted here with the originally Confucian capping ceremonies, announcing legal male maturity, called *kakan no gi* or *Genpuku* (元服 Japan), *Guan li* (冠禮 China) and *Gwallye* (관례 Korea) for which female pendants existed with clearly differentiating functions. However, the requirement for capping was reportedly chronometric age (though modulating with class) and capping primarily constituted the legal *acknowledgement* of maturity, not its fabrication *per se*.

Other instances of ritualization can be said to operate on male/masculine life trajectories *as such* but as *shinpyu* they often primarily reference superordinate, abstract, or structural objectives, often projected in terms of gender, that *rely on these trajectories* for their continuance, stability and momentum: the metaphysical realm (e.g. Dreamtime), the patriline, social order, political status quo, religious institutes, "ethos," "custom." In cases, the creation of manhood may be an explicit yet partial objective nestled within a much more pervasive sacred or cyclical system that, though rooted in staged membership, is thought to transcend all contemporaneous life courses. Indigenous notions of mature maleness or masculinity, then, may be a relative or partial objective and/or a partial effect of ritual.

### *Delimiting and historicizing ritual efficacy*

Central has been the question of how one is to conceptualize *the work* of ritual, how it operates on reality. Droogers (2004) uses the example of Wagenia boys' initiation to argue that ritual can be productively seen as an "enjoyable form of playing with realities. More than a solemn occasion, useful because of its social and cultural functions [...] a festive enactment of a counterreality" (p. 138). If we look how "the sacred" is accomplished in rituals mostly exclusive to males, we immediately require analytic delimitation of our subject, an example being "rites of terror" (Whitehouse, 1996). We can look into the cultural necessity of terror although, unfortunately, terror is not specific to ritual, nor to initiation, nor to male initiation. Theories then do not apply to violence in ritual, or in initiation rituals, *per se*. In general, initiations that do entail terrorization generally begin with a violent assault upon the bodies of novices, symbolizing the overwhelming power and transcendence of the social/sacred realm over earthly vitality only to bring us back into "this world" somehow invigorated by the powers we have absorbed (Bloch, 1992 cited in

Whitehouse, 1996). According to Pascal Boyer (2001), the main purpose of ritual terror lies in its testing the loyalty of members of endangered coalitions in circumstances where the costs of failure are not too damaging to the group. Yet loyalty connotes the choice of non-participation and voluntariness, and often this is compromised in initiation. Whitehouse instead offers the idea that where rituals lack normal cues for reading intentionality in its actors (called “theory of mind,” TOM), as in the case of arousal coupled with shocks of a cognitive nature, a search for ritual exegesis is triggered. Terror connotes the creation of so-called “episodic” memories which, when relived, are liable to become a focus for conscious rumination, often over many years or even a lifetime, eventually resulting in highly motivating religious ideologies, typically idiosyncratic and hard to convey in words but nevertheless deeply implicated in the formation of attitudes and beliefs.

This theory requires an interpretational deprivation on the part of novices, and ultimately applies to a small set of communities. The assessment of generalized functionalist claims (e.g. Schlegel and Barry, 1991) furthermore begs for historical analyses, especially a contextual focus on eventual demise or revitalization of rituals. A cultural sense of ritual necessity of course should be strongly informed by arguments for ritual continuity. Ritual demise may be experienced as a loss, triggering or articulating a “poetics of ritual”:

Although the ranks of the *gurna* [traditional socialization society] had thinned, youth initiation had been banned for three decades, and wrestling has diminished, male Tupuri [Cameroon] youth still located the core of Tupuri socialisation, and thus manhood, in these cultural practices. Even though lycée students have not had the chance to experience these rites of passage—or maybe *because* they haven’t—they expressed a sense of loss. (Ignatowski, 2004, p. 427)

While one could argue that a range of factors could explain secularization or revitalization, one must say this analysis critically informs indigenous discourses of ritual necessity. Peter Carstens (1982, pp. 518, 521) for instance locates the continuity of Xhosa male ritual in the continuity of male dominance in household subsistence from animal husbandry and agriculture to institutionalized migrant labor. He also hints at another scenario: among the Tswana male initiation was *superseded in form* by labor migration. Furthermore Nama male initiation seemed to have lapsed when males ceased to make a notable contribution to subsistence activities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, yet it was not reinvented when they became involved in the migrant labor system. Zolani Ngwane (2001) adds that through cash from migrant labor, South African rural household heads exercised power over the domestic economies. Ideologically this power translated into the symbolic articulation of two institutions of social reproduction, the school and initiation rite, such that the educated and potentially alienated subjects yielded by the former were to be resocialized through the latter into local subjects of the chief and sons of their fathers. However, with rising unemployment rates since the 1980s, the older men lost the material base for their monopoly over this symbolic structure.

These examples (for comparable analyses of ritual discontinuity see Freeman, 2002 and Knauft, 2003) may suggest rituals reference complex historical

developments that seem to resist easy archetypes for sheer lack of continuity in symbolic capital even in seemingly uncontested interludes of ritualization.

Further themes obviously include historical instances of sex-exclusivity of ritual, or of eventual suspension of such exclusivity; the situation of ritual allowing both boy and girl novices; sex-specific rituals with opposite-sex pendant rituals. Not just the content of rituals but specifically their (often indigenously debated) myths of origin will illuminate imaginations of necessary continuity. At the very least mythopoeists could realize that ritual efficacy cannot be theorized on the basis of a mere acknowledgement of “universality” *per se* (as argued, articulations of ritual *deprivation* seem more pertinent anthropologically to discourses of cultural efficacy). Claims for ritual necessity, moreover, can never be substantiated by appropriation, or “recognition,” of some cross-culturally common denominator. Curricular appropriation of the very concept of ritualization, in any case, may necessarily imply a problematic (albeit effective or “hegemonic”) ontology of masculinity, this problem being its *inherently imagined* mobility.

### Conclusion

In the West one notes an intense but ambivalent interest in ritual in the ostensible absence of a ritual paradigm in non-elite male trajectories. Its work lies in the discursive mobility and mutability of *constructions*, rather than the *political ordering and continuity*, of masculine performance, and indeed, of performances *as masculine*. Both analytic and poetic ambition, however, have opted for extreme abstractions that *assume*, rather than distil from observations, the *idea* of initiation as a male necessity and masculine *Gestalt*. However, in the West this idea has been premised on ontological closure informed by (developmental) psychology and ethical commitments to gender, and thus it risks disregarding the manifold ways and paradigms in which masculinity may be imagined or cultivated or implicated in ritual: necessarily or otherwise.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See McKinney (2003) for further notes.

<sup>2</sup> Alves' discussion of transgressive backyard rampages held occasionally among urban Portuguese 9 to 10-year-old boys, were reportedly considered subjectively as enhancing status and knowledge, thus as "practice for adulthood." Their being considered "initiation rites," however, could only be accomplished by Alves' structuralist interpretation and ethnological ramification of its features. And although the transgression in question would be considered "compulsory if a boy wanted to increase his power and status within the peer group" (p. 898), nowhere can it be inferred that the transgressions or their post hoc narration actually accomplished, or even referenced, the observed official (i.e. scholastic and gender-neutral) "stages of maturation" (p. 897) which here would entail not the advent of manhood but a schism between *emic* "late childhood" and "adolescence." The fin-de-siècle notion of *adolescence*, however, is strongly tied in with normative assumptions of "personal," "individual" and "psychosocial" growth and stabilization. This period is observed in a commonly ungendered and ontologically delimited plot of transition—"going through a phase." The cross-cultural and historical variance in these assumptions and formulations remains unstudied by cross-culturalists who rely on numeric data. If anything this method's premise of commensurability relies to a significant degree on historical immutability, consensus, conceptual constancy and ethnographic accuracy. Hence it risks erasing the salience of eventual native controversy, historical dynamism, semantic ambiguity, and context.

<sup>3</sup> As I write, a South African TV drama depicting Xhosa circumcision rites is being taken off air after causing a furor among traditional leaders, who say the program

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“infringes on a sacred tradition” by disclosing too much, especially to women. (SABC pulls contentious drama on circumcision. *Pretoria News*, April 2 2007, p. 3).

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