

Ritual Revival: A Discussion on Coming-of-age ritual and the Clinical Application of Analytical Psychology

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the decline of rituals, particularly coming-of-age ritual, in modern society, alongside their recent revival. It introduces the theoretical framework of rituals within analytical psychology, examining the limitations of contemporary coming-of-age ritual and the reasons for their ineffectiveness. By integrating analytical psychology, this paper analyzes how symbolic practices, cultural symbols, and unconscious processes can overcome these limitations, providing new insights for the revitalization and design of rituals in modern society.

KEYWORDS

Ritual; Coming-of-age ritual; Analytical Psychology; Jungian School

1 Introduction

Rituals have been a defining phenomenon in human cultural history. Across different eras and regions, various ritualistic practices have emerged, which have been extensively studied by disciplines such as history, sociology, and anthropology. Rituals play a crucial role in human social activities and spiritual life, taking forms such as weddings, funerals, sacrifices, and divination. Among these, coming-of-age ritual are particularly significant.

Coming-of-age ritual are found across many civilizations, including African tribal circumcision, Jewish Bar Mitzvahs, and Chinese coming-of-age ritual. Although these rituals differ in form and specific content, their basic structure and symbolic meaning remain consistent. These ceremonies mark the moment when an individual attains adult status, symbolized by a ceremony or ritual conducted by adults (Yan, 2005). In essence, the adult coming-of-age ritual serves as a vital process in the socialization of children and adolescents, playing a pivotal role in the recognition of new societal members. Additionally, such ceremonies facilitate personal identity confirmation and the establishment of new social connections (Scholten, Pisarevskaya, & Levy, 2022). Thus, coming-of-age ritual hold an indispensable position in human history.

However, in contemporary society, rituals, including coming-of-age ritual, have witnessed a significant decline (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). This decline is marked by the disappearance of collective rituals, the detachment of ritual symbols from their social meanings, and a diminished societal value placed on rituals. Factors contributing to this decline include urbanization and industrialization, which have weakened the connection between individuals and the communities that traditionally perform rituals, such as families (Yakhnich, Getahune, & Walsh, 2023). From the perspective of modernity, it has been argued that religion and rituals have been disenchanted, significantly reducing their symbolic impact (Hjelm, 2015). The decline of rituals has led to a series of negative psychological and social effects, such as difficulties in identity confirmation, emotional regulation, social fragmentation, and a growing sense of individual emptiness, all of which foster interpersonal indifference and a loss of meaning (Han, 2020).

Given the potential harm caused by the absence of rituals, many scholars have emphasized the importance of their revival. In fact, signs of a revival in coming-of-age ritual can be seen at cultural and educational levels. For example, in China, modern coming-of-age ritual are often held in schools for 18-year-old students, which include traditional elements such as wearing Hanfu, crowns, and taking oaths, all designed to preserve cultural heritage and reinforce social responsibility. In Japan, Coming of Age Day (Seijin-no-Hi), held on the second Monday of January, is marked by 20-year-olds donning traditional kimonos and participating in local ceremonies, symbolizing their entry into adulthood (Global Citizen, n.d.). Similarly, in the United States, the Sweet 16 celebration marks the coming-of-age of 16-year-olds, emphasizing personal freedom and community support (Parents, n.d.). These examples highlight the modern efforts to revive coming-of-age ritual.

However, such revived forms have been critiqued. For example, Burrow (2023) argues that American coming-of-age ritual often lack the community support necessary for genuine adult identity recognition, transforming instead into self-indulgent celebrations. Some studies also highlight the disconnection between certain coming-of-age ritual and contemporary trends, such as the digital age, leading to low participation rates. Furthermore, some traditional elements

in these rituals may reinforce outdated gender roles or conflict with modern ideals, such as personalized development, resulting in low youth engagement (Smelser & Baltes, 2001). Thus, the question arises: how can the function of coming-of-age ritual be reintegrated into modern society to effectively facilitate their transformative role?

2 Literature Review

Analytical psychology, founded by Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, places particular emphasis on the symbolic aspects of the human psyche. Jung argued that rituals serve as symbols of unconscious processes. In works such as *Psychological Types* (1921) and *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1959), Jung stressed the critical role of coming-of-age ritual in traditional societies in shaping psychological development. He asserted that in primitive cultures, such as the Maasai circumcision or the initiation ceremonies of Australian Aboriginals, coming-of-age ritual reconnect individuals to the collective unconscious through experiences of symbolic "death" and "rebirth," thereby establishing a new social identity.

Jung's framework for coming-of-age ritual consists of three stages: a period of isolation (symbolizing separation from the original social structure, primarily through parental care), a probationary phase (involving challenges or physical sacrifices), and a return to society with a renewed identity. These stages represent the psychological process by which individuals shed their immature identities and adopt new roles in society (Jung, 1959). Traditional coming-of-age ritual thus function as vital external manifestations of the deeper psychological process of "individuation."

Subsequent post-Jungian scholars have expanded on the importance of rituals. Marie-Louise von Franz (1980) argued that the absence of coming-of-age ritual in modern society makes it difficult for adolescents to navigate the psychological transition from dependence on their parents to self-sufficiency, contributing to phenomena such as the "midlife crisis." James Hillman (1975) emphasized that rituals are essential to the "poetic life of the soul" and that their absence leaves individuals disconnected from their inner vitality. Luigi Zoja (2018) discussed how the absence of elder figures and rituals in modern industrial societies creates a "growth crisis" in men, leaving them spiritually immature even as they approach middle age.

Therefore, both Jung and later scholars within the analytical psychology tradition recognized the critical role of coming-of-age ritual in psychological transformation, socialization, and the connection between the personal and collective unconscious. These rituals are integral to the process of individuation, a central goal of psychological development.

3 Analysis

In Jungian psychology, symbols are not merely expressions of unconscious content but also serve as bridges between the conscious mind and the collective unconscious. Jung posited that true psychological growth—especially the transition from youth to adulthood—must occur through symbolic structures (Jung, 1959). Traditional coming-of-age ritual hold a profound impact because they use symbolic actions to facilitate the transformation of an individual's social identity, psychological differentiation, and cultural integration.

However, modern coming-of-age ritual often lack symbolic depth and fail to address the deeper psychological needs of individuals. In response, Jungian therapy reactivates these symbolic mechanisms to offer individuals an "inner adult coming-of-age ritual." For example, symbolic funerals, as part of Jungian therapy, enable individuals to metaphorically say goodbye to their childhood attachments and unresolved roles, creating space for a new self-definition.

Moreover, Jung emphasized the importance of "active imagination," which encourages individuals to transform inner images—such as dreams, fantasies, or memories—into external forms, such as art or ritual behavior. This process facilitates the integration of unconscious content into conscious life, allowing individuals to embody their psychological transformations. In one clinical example, Jung guided a young man to transform symbolic dream sequences, such as "walking through a forest" or "fighting monsters," into tangible expressions through art and role-playing. This helped him navigate his psychological transition into adulthood.

Through symbolic rituals, Jungian therapy transcends the limitations of modern, materialistic coming-of-age ritual, which tend to focus on external achievements like gifts or certificates. In contrast, symbolic rituals engage with the deeper psychological structures of the individual, activating the internal cultural system necessary for profound identity transformation.

Furthermore, symbolic rituals possess flexibility and adaptability, allowing them to transcend specific cultural contexts. As "languages of the collective unconscious," symbols can be reinterpreted in diverse settings. For instance, the symbol of "crossing a threshold" can take many forms, such as a physical journey, a solitary meditation, or a social ritual, allowing Jungian therapy to remain relevant to individuals from varied cultural backgrounds while retaining its psychological

depth.

4 Discussion

Although the revival of coming-of-age ritual through psychotherapy offers significant benefits, it also faces several challenges and limitations. First, constructing personalized coming-of-age ritual remains a challenge. Due to the vast diversity of individual backgrounds in modern society, standardized ritual patterns often fail to meet the unique psychological needs of each participant. Studies suggest that rites must hold personal meaning to activate their symbolic function (Grimes, 2000). Therefore, ritual design should consider the individual's life history and preferences.

Second, cultural heterogeneity presents a risk to the effectiveness of ritual. In a globalized world, cultural identities are increasingly fragmented, and individuals from different backgrounds may have varying understandings of the same ritual. Handelman (1998) argued that cultural diversity can undermine the symbolic integrity of rituals, rendering them psychologically ineffective. To mitigate this risk, ritual designs must integrate universal elements while adapting to contemporary cultural contexts.

Lastly, the rise of virtual spaces has introduced new forms of ritual that may compensate for the shortcomings of traditional coming-of-age ritual. Research indicates that virtual rituals offer significant advantages in terms of visual imagery and accessibility, facilitating participation across social boundaries (van der Beek et al., 2019). In the future, digital rituals may offer novel ways of reimagining rites of passage.

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