

**INITIATORY RITES OF PASSAGE AS LEVERAGE POINTS:
A COMPARATIVE INVESTIGATION OF SYMBOLIC MEANING IN THE
JAPANESE SCHOOL SYSTEM**

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ABSTRACT

This paper will concern itself with rites of passage, in particular focusing on those embedded in various schooling and educational systems and used to signify initiation. It will investigate how, as educational elements, such rites exist, are practiced, and remain significant in an increasingly anthropocentric world. The paper will begin by discussing a particular case: that of Japan's entrance examination system. It will show how this system once served as an initiatory rite of passage, playing an important role in the mental and emotional health of individuals as well as in the functioning of the society at large. The paper will then move into an investigation of contemporary Japan exploring how, over the last two decades, entrance examinations have fallen ever further into disuse. This trend will then be shown to correlate with the development of overly dependent, asocial, and/or self-destructive behavioral trends among young Japanese. The possible connections between Japan's disappearing rite of passage and its growing troubles with its younger generations will be explored and interpretations based on a framework rooted in anthropology and existential Psychology will be offered. In order to develop a richer and more complex understanding of the trends in question, the paper will then compare Japan to both Korea and the United States applying the same framework to further explore how initiatory rites of passage can act as leverage points in the production of social trends. It will conclude by inquiring as to whether an active approach to the design and implementation of initiatory rites of passage would be an ethical and advisable strategy for reforming education.

Keywords: schooling; educational design; ritual; Japan

INTRODUCTION

Humanity, Myth, and Ritual

Among the defining qualities that distinguish humankind from the other life-forms that inhabit this planet is our ability and need to myth-make. As Joseph Campbell so clearly demonstrated, human beings live no less symbolically than they do physically (1993). We are driven by the need to perceive coherence, assign significance, and develop understanding. But, according to Becker (1970; 1973; 1975), even these motivations rest on something deeper. Humans strive, in the face of their own visible, personalized, and impending deaths, to transcend the limitations of mortality. Becker's work establishes that

rites of passage as leverage points in Japanese schooling

all culture and social institutions are in some way connected to humanity's struggle for immortality (1973). At the core of any culture is a myth that is concerned with what is valuable, with how heroism is defined (Solomon et al., 2003). In this way, mythology is the encapsulation both of a culture's values and of its survival (transcendence) strategies. It is the core of culture and, in this capacity, will continue to be indispensable as long as human beings remain a mortal species yearning for immortal significance.

Rituals are the acting out of myths (Campbell, n.d.). They are how myths are made available and interactive; the means by which the strength of these myths is confirmed and reinforced. Just as myths occupy a central place in all socio-cultural constructs, so can rituals be found underpinning all social institutions. The more specific functions served by rituals include expiating communal sin, creating opportunities for *communitas*, reinforcing extant structures, and easing transitions (Turner, 1995). It is with this final objective that the paper will now concern itself.

Rites of Passage

According to van Gennep (1961), the purpose of transitional rituals, or rites of passage (ROP), is to ease a society through periods of change. These rites provide a formula which, in the best examples, predicts, attends to, and mitigates the disruption caused by the issues that arise during these periods. ROP are typically associated with birth, puberty/entrance into society, marriage, and death. Each of these is associated with the passage from one socially defined state or role to another. Even pre-birth and post-death are stages of being that are variously described by different cultures.

While there are similarities to be found across ROP as practiced throughout the life cycle, this paper is particularly concerned with initiatory ROP. These are practices associated with the transition from childhood to adulthood. They are the coming of age ROP most often practiced when a young person reaches social (as opposed to physical or biological) puberty. Initiatory ROP consist of three phases: separation, marginality, and reaggregation (van Gennep, 1961). During the first of these phases, the participant is removed from his or her previous existence. Distance is required before transformation can begin. It is at this stage that the attachment to the prior role is severed and the participant passes into a liminal existence with regard to the rest of the society.

Following this, he or she undergoes the marginal stage during which a test must be passed or challenges overcome. This portion of the rite is designed, not only to test the participant but, through the process of facing that test, to provide him or her with the knowledge or understanding necessary to successfully occupy the social role that waits. The rites of passage faced by would-be hunters, farmers, and shaman were all particularly suited to both impart and test the knowledge and capacities required by these roles as defined by the operant social context.

Finally, assuming the participant emerges a success, he or she is re-assimilated into society in a manner befitting the newly achieved status or role. As was pointed out in the preceding paragraph, the ritual participant has not merely demonstrated ability, but has gained something of value from the experience. This, then, is brought back by him or her to the society as a badge of honor and as an offering.

rites of passage as leverage points in Japanese schooling

It should be unsurprising that the structure of the essential movements of this process mirror those of the Hero's Journey as delineated by Campbell (2008). Rites of passage are often isomorphic microcosms of the life-death cycle itself. Once again, ritual is the acting out of myth which itself is an attempt to make sense and meaning out of life. Initiatory ROP are the acting out of a universal story—one concerned with the equally universal human experience of childhood ending and adulthood beginning, of stepping outside to find oneself and, in this process, of finding what one has of value to give to the world. These ROP exist to make young people feel like heroic contributors to their society.

rites of passage in the modern world

Japan and the Entrance Examination

Students in Japan tend to face two rounds of entrance examinations. The first occurs at the end of middle school and determines which high school, if any, the student will be able to attend. The second takes place near the end of high school and is the most powerful factor affecting a student's acceptance into university. While some students, particularly those whose parents are highly motivated to secure acceptance into a first-rate university, will often take entrance examinations for selective primary schools and even for pre-schools much earlier in life, the two exam periods just described affect the widest population of students (Smith, 1997; Zeng, 1995).

The pre-high school entrance examination is the most ubiquitous with 94 percent of students reporting having taken it (The Japan Times, 2015). The results of this exam weigh heavily on high school admissions, and entrance into the right high school is the best way to increase one's chances of going on to a prestigious university (van Wolferen, 1989). Fewer students take the university entrance examination and that number is likely to continue to fall. This is primarily due to the fact that, given Japan's shrinking population and currently low level of international students, there is a mounting shortage of potential enrollees. This has produced a situation in which many of Japan's private universities are struggling to maintain financially viable enrollment numbers and, in order to combat this trend, their strategy has been to lower entrance requirements in order to appeal to a wider range of young people (McNeill, 2009). Thus, the university entrance examination is no longer a mandatory trial for those pursuing tertiary education. An increasing number of universities do not require scores from this, or any, examination.

This does not, however, equate to the entrance examination model being defunct. Rather, it continues to cast a very long shadow across the nation's schooling system. Even students who are not planning to take it spend three years in middle school preparing for high school entrance examinations (The Japan Times, 2015). Compared to the freedom and collaboration encouraged in primary school, middle school is reminiscent of the Prussian military education system upon which it was originally based (Kerr, 2001). Much has already been written and said in this regard (van Wolferen, 1989; Smith, 1998; Kerr, 2001) and, at the risk of oversimplifying, this paper will limit its investigation of Japanese middle school to the observation that its primary pedagogical features are largely prescriptive, standardized, and test-oriented. This state of affairs changes a bit during the high school

rites of passage as leverage points in Japanese schooling

years in that, while the practices themselves are nearly identical, the facts provided are no longer test-specific. This is indicative of an important reality. The entrance examination system does more to determine how things are taught than it does what is taught (Kerr, 2001; Takeuchi, 1997). The students must be socialized properly if they are to possess the character attributes and value system necessary to succeed on high-stakes tests such as those they will face (Takeuchi, 1997).

This point provides a strong launching point for a discussion of the entrance examination as a rite of passage. The examination does not test skills or understanding in the way one might think. Under the guise of testing students on the facts they have accumulated, it is actually determining the extent to which they have internalized the socialization efforts to which they were exposed. It is a test of the ability to endure, the willingness to persevere, the acceptance of established expectations, and the subsuming of individual desires in favor of imposed obligations. As with all rites of passage (van Gennep, 1961), entrance examinations are a test of the participant's capacity to function as a member of the society into which he or she hopes to pass. Hunting societies employ ROP based on hunting, agricultural societies ones based on the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, and warfaring societies ones that test courage and tolerance for pain (Campbell, 1997). Japan tests the ability and willingness to sit still at a desk for hours doing a prescribed and, divorced from context, relatively unproductive task as a way of determining an individual's willingness to accept and fulfill obligation; to put duty before him or herself and to endure personal suffering in order to see his or her charge to completion (van Wolferen, 1989; Kerr, 2001).

During the height of its importance, the entrance examination also resembled a ROP in that it provided a social identity to those who passed through it. Due to the fact that most jobs recruited based not on a student's specialized skill set, but according to the prestige level of the university from which he or she graduated (Takeuchi, 1997; van Wolferen, 1989), entrance examination scores directly and strongly influenced the occupation and subsequent life course of many young people. Securing entrance into a top university was perceived as a ticket into the lifetime employment and seniority-based promotional systems of the primary employment sector. A less sterling performance located the student variously among other employment sectors shifting his or her expectations towards lessened security, prestige, and earning power. It was essentially a sorting mechanism that determined who belonged where on the social ladder (Nakane, 1970; van Wolferen, 1989). As with other ROP, the exam helped to establish the social role that the individual would play and, given the importance assigned to such roles in collectivist countries such as Japan (Hofstede et al., 2010), it also determined to a considerable extent the nature of the individual's identity. Despite the waning importance of entrance examinations, for many young people this description of how it functioned remains accurate in modern day Japan.

Particularly from a Western perspective, the approach just described can sound controlling and repressive. Even from a Japanese perspective, it would be hard to argue that it does not have these effects. What is often misunderstood or underestimated, though, is the sense of meaning and fulfillment that can emerge thanks, in large part, to just such an approach. Fromm, Becker, and Yalom all speak about the extent to which freedom cannot be considered a self-justifying good (1994; 1971; 1980). Human beings possess an equal

rites of passage as leverage points in Japanese schooling

capacity to be terrified by freedom as by repression; the fear of life is no less potent than the fear of death. For all of the ways in which the sorting mechanism of entrance examinations controls those who pass through it, it also serves to provide a source of meaning. Having a role, whether one claimed or assigned, means having a clear sense of what constitutes meaningful action. It is like having a well-drawn map of how one can arrive at existential success. The accuracy of the map is less important than that the person relying on it believes in its ability to guide him or her. Having an arbitrarily drawn map may be better than having none at all, particularly when the goal is to arrive, not at a physical location, but at psychological equanimity.

This understanding of the exam helps to shed light on the liminal existence of *ronin*, or students who, having failed to achieve acceptable result on the exams, chose to spend another year preparing to re-take it. The word *ronin* literally translates to masterless *samurai* which, itself, is a word that means ‘to serve’. They are individuals without a way to be of service, in need of a socially and historically rooted path to the discovery of existential meaning, and willing to postpone their emergence into adult life in order, despite having already failed at least once, to locate themselves on such a path.

The Changing Terrain

As previously stated, the entrance examination is losing its relevance as fewer universities require it and fewer students take it. Additionally, to focus on the male experience, the salaryman model of masculinity that provided such clarity and stability until the advent of Japan’s post-Bubble era has lost much of its appeal and potency (Napier, 2011). Men in modern Japan are faced with more complex, less well-defined options for how to construct their gendered role in society. The resulting confusion is compounded by the fact that the education system, particularly with regard to its socializing influence, continues to prepare students for an entrance examination-facilitated passage into society. They are educated specifically and intentionally to complete a well-defined task that will ease them into social existence, only to find that this task is decreasingly well-suited for this purpose if it ends up being a factor at all. To draw on a Heideggerian concept (1962), this is a particular kind of thrownness in which the young person finds him or herself, not only in a world that he or she did not choose, but in one that is radically different from what he or she was trained to deal with and led to expect. Such a jarring experience is not conducive to mental health or, considered on a larger scale, social stability. Rather, it is a reliable way to produce severe anxiety of the existential variety saddling more and more young people with the sense that, though they were prepared to tread a clear and well-defined path, this path is no longer available and they must now carve their own.

Social Trends

The same period that saw the decline of the salaryman and the entrance examination upon which this version of Japan was based gave rise to a number of fairly unique social oddities/maladies. This paper will briefly discuss four of these: parasite singles, *hikkikomori*, internet suicide pacts, and asocial violence committed by teenagers.

Parasite singles are unmarried people who continue living with and relying on their parents despite having reached the point where they are physically, legally, and financially capable of becoming independent. Such living arrangements often continue until those in

rites of passage as leverage points in Japanese schooling

question reach their mid-30s (Japan Today, n.d.). The number of parasite singles has risen steadily over the past three decades and in 2012, it was estimated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications that 48.9 percent of single Japanese between the ages of 20 and 34 were still living with their parents (Japan Today, n.d.). The motivations driving such behavior are manifold and obviously include financial considerations. Rent in Japan tends to be high and, since most parasite singles do not pay rent, they are able to live more cheaply. Additionally, such an arrangement allows these young people to continue relying on their parents to take care of many, if not all, of the everyday household concerns. Many parasite singles work non-career track or part-time jobs and the living arrangement they enjoy allows them to spend the money they make on conspicuous consumption and nights out with friends. There is also a portion of this population that is not engaged in any kind of work, education, or training at all (Zielenziger, 2006). At least some of this can be attributed to the failures of the schooling system to prepare its students for success in the modern world and to its tendency to stamp out, rather than nurture, an appreciation of learning (Gatto, 2005; Kerr, 2001).

Though each of these elements doubtless plays a role, it is also undeniable that the parasite single lifestyle is essentially a form of prolonged or arrested adolescence. Whether by design or as a consequence of decisions made in response to salient circumstances, these young people have delayed taking full responsibility for their lives. Though it might be argued that, given the centrality of the family unit in Japanese culture, living with one's parents could, conversely, constitute active acceptance of one's responsibilities, this interpretation fails to take into account that many of these young people are not supporting their families but, instead, being supported by them. As is made evident by the title 'parasite singles,' they are neither fulfilling their traditional responsibility to continue the family line nor contributing meaningfully to its well-being. Rather, they are a detriment and, in this sense, have not only failed to accept and act on their familial responsibilities, but have reversed the direction in which such responsibilities traditionally flowed.

As with all of the behaviors to be discussed, it is not the intention of this paper to argue that the decline of the entrance examination system as a ROP is the sole, or even primary, contributing factor but, rather, to suggest that it is part of the causal web out of which these behaviors have emerged. In the case of parasite singles, it is easy to see how the disappearance of a well-defined ROP in the lives of young people has left them without a sense of proper place in society, without a role to occupy, and without the feeling that they are full-fledged members. The passage from child to adult is precisely that of going from burden to contributor. The child has been taken care of and nurtured for long enough that he or she is now expected to shift the balance and to begin paying back (or forward) their debt. The parasite single lifestyle is at once both hedonistic and liminal. There is a self-indulgent aspect to it, but also a self-sabotaging one. As a recent article in the Japan Times pointed out, this lifestyle does not help young people to develop life skills or personal responsibility, capacities the lack of which will be felt once their parents' transition from being caregivers to care receivers (n.d.).

Another population with a similar set of concerns is the *hikkikomori*, or extreme shut-ins. Again, these are young people who have not left home but, in this case, they also tend to refuse even to leave their own rooms. In some cases, *hikkikomori* will cloister

rites of passage as leverage points in Japanese schooling

themselves away from all face-to-face human contact for years. Such behavior has, in particular, been associated with bullying and academic pressure and tends to begin with a young person refusing to attend school (Borovoy, 2008). In a book dedicated to this issue, Zielenziger develops the theory that Japanese society lacks respect for individuals to the extent that those who cannot conform are crushed and left crippled by social anxiety (2006). Borovoy suggests a compatible interpretation focused on Japan's mainstreaming approach to dealing with mental and emotional illness and abnormality. She argues that Japanese society envisions the causal trajectory as running from behavior to being; if someone can be made to act normal, they will normalize internally as well. She believes that this approach can be quite effective in many cases but, given that 'to mainstream' is by definition to deny other possibilities, some more resistant individuals are inevitably left behind with little recourse but to exist in the dark corners of society (2008).

The ROP interpretation adds a complimentary layer of complexity. Whereas parasite singles are young people who have not yet accepted a social role or for whom that role is not yet clear, *hikkikomori* do not see themselves as a part of the larger society. They are not chaff floating around in the system; they are separate from it living untethered and isolated. This form of social rejection can be interpreted as a denial of positive social potential. *Hikkikomori* do not see society as a locus of opportunity. It threatens them more than it appeals to them. But, at a very deep level, all humans simultaneously long to be both individually special and collectively subsumed (Yalom, 1970). These are our only defenses against, respectively, the fear of death and the fear of life. That the *hikkikomori* have abandoned both indicates that they did not perceive either as functional or appealing. Among the purposes of a ROP is to provide the young people in a society with both a sense of individual identity and accomplishment and with a feeling of belonging and group identification. A well-functioning ROP should combine the individual specialness and ultimate savior defenses (Yalom, 1970) into a potent concoction designed to provide a buffer against existential anxiety. For *hikkikomori* to reject both of these and live as both individually invisible as well as isolated can easily be read as a dual indictment of the existing ROP system. It neither provided them with the support needed to become individuals (as Zielenziger argues) nor with the means to become a part of the mainstream (in the words of Borovoy). The disappearance of the entrance examination system has left students with schools that train them how to be a part of the collective by stamping out individuality while leaving them with no clear sense of how to actually join such a group.

Hikkikomori are an extreme case, but not the most extreme. Internet suicide pacts take place when a group of (usually) young people connect, typically through dedicated suicide-assistance websites and forums, and agree to gather together in order to commit suicide as a group. The number of suicides in Japan overall and particularly among young people jumped precipitously during the late 90's and has remained elevated since (Ozawa-de Silva, 2008). It was during this time period that the internet suicide pact trend emerged.

In her study of this trend, Ozawa-de Silva quotes and references a number of claims that appeared on websites and forums such as those previously mentioned. In reading these, the strongest trend that becomes apparent is a sense of meaninglessness and lack of direction in life felt by those posting. Schein's definition of culture is a set of established strategies for dealing with recurrent challenges (2010). Becker perceives social institutions,

rites of passage as leverage points in Japanese schooling

culture included, as collective attempts to overcome mortality through the creation of symbolically rooted meaning (1973). Given the intersection of these understandings, the role education plays in creating and reinforcing culture, and the scale at which suicides such as those in questions are occurring, this trend is clearly indicative of a combined social, educational, and cultural failing.

People everywhere need mythologies of meaning to support their psychological and emotional health. Providing for this need is the purpose of culture. Young people in particular, as they near adulthood, are looking for a course to follow, a meaning system to which they can subscribe in order to both be of service and be served. In this regard, the purpose of schooling and ROP is to mitigate the disruption and damage resulting from this search by preparing them for, and then easing them into, such a system. The fact that so many young Japanese are suffering from feelings of meaninglessness and loneliness severe enough to drive them towards groups with whom to commit suicide suggests that the schooling system and its focal ROP are, as cultural and symbolic elements, functioning inadequately. The need to commit suicide with others also betrays a desire both for membership, for role and identity, and for meaning. Those who do so desperately want to be a part of something larger. Though it may sound counter-intuitive, they want to serve a purpose—that being helping to give someone else the courage to self kill. They also want to engage in a symbolically meaningful act and, particularly given Japan's historical understandings of suicide (Ozawa-de Silva, 2008), killing themselves appears to be an act replete with meaning. In these ways, the carrying out of a group suicide pact can be understood as an attempt to self-medicate through a proxy ROP. The act of collective suicide is a tragic attempt to salvage what a ROP is meant to provide. It is both tragically ironic and entirely understandable that the collective nature of this act so closely mirrors the group action that is such a recurring pedagogical element of the schooling system.

Finally, there are the young people who turn to asocial violence. Japan has witnessed a number of disturbing crimes over the past three decades. These crimes tend to be characterized by their personal and brutal nature (Nathan, 2004; The Independent, 2000). Often, they involve a young person murdering his or her parents or classmates. The connection to school and entrance examinations is often implied and occasionally stated outright by the perpetrator. Such asocial violence also goes the other way, with parents doing the killing. In one case, a mother strangled her friend's 2 year old daughter after finding out that the girl had gained admittance to a more prestigious elementary school than her own child. Newspapers that reported on the killing received hundreds of letters of commiseration from other parents who identified, not with the grieving family, but with the feelings of the killer (Hays, 2013).

Taking both variations into account, at least some aspects of this complex phenomenon can be explained using ROP. As fewer universities require students to take the entrance examination, the number of places that can be filled by students who do will continue to shrink. This creates a dynamic in which young people submit to more than a decade of training and socialization that limits their options down to one—that being a ROP which is decreasingly able to provide real opportunities—and which becomes, year by year, less available to all. Everybody has to learn, at the expense of their individual

rites of passage as leverage points in Japanese schooling

identity, how to be a member but, in the end, membership is both decreasingly meaningful and increasingly limited.

The fact that students whose exam results would have once placed them in a lower ranking university can now gain admittance to the same university without taking the test does not seem to mitigate the anxiety caused by the situation. Placing into a low ranking university is still something earned; it still provides a sense of meritocratic, role-based identity. Entering the same university by default alongside a group of other students who are unproven makes each of them undifferentiated occupiers of the same mass social role. If the value of the young person is based on the prestige of the university they attend, and that prestige is a function of the university's admittance standards, universities that maintain no real standards are essentially operating outside the boundaries of prestige. Attending such an institution may do more to harm than to help a young person's quest for identity and belonging.

Given the extent to which parents are held responsible for the academic performance of their children and trends like the *kyoiku mama* (education mothers), failure can drive both young people and parents to lash out. For young people, the prime targets tend to be those whom they hold as responsible, believe will be most injured by their failure, or perceive as the locus of their shame surrounding the failure. As long as their parents are burdened by the failure, such individuals will be uneasy members of the familial collective. The only way to re-join is to get rid of that which constantly mirrors and reminds them of their shame. For parents, the object of retribution is often those they believe are standing in the way of their child's (and, thereby, their own) success. Targets are most often teachers or other, more successful students. A mother who kills a better performing child in a case of limited opportunity must, in some capacity, perceive her act as being one of self-preservation. More accurately, her child's success is her success and, given that the success in question is derived from the predominant system of symbolic meaning, she may have felt as though she was engaged in a fight for her immortality.

Teenage killers in Japan also, though less often, direct their violence at strangers. This can be understood as a more individualistic act but also, ultimately, as one motivated by a need for belonging. While violence committed by a lone person against strangers is clearly an individualistic act—a strategic grab for power and specialness—when committed by those who have been denied proper membership, it can also be understood as a plea for identity vis-à-vis the group. For those who cannot stand the conspicuousness and fear of life associated with an undefined role, the role of 'murderer' or 'violent criminal' may hold some appeal. It is, at the very least, well-defined with clear expectations and the opportunity to become a part of a larger system able to provide or, in this case, demand adherence to behavioral guidelines. For the man who stabbed and killed 17 people in Akihabara or the high school student who used a kitchen knife to hijack a city bus after failing his entrance examination (Hays, 2013), these extreme acts may be understood as symbolic attempts to carve out a place for themselves in a society that refused to accept them. Their acts demanded attention be given to them individually, but that this attention be then translated into the absorption of their individual existence.

In Comparison

rites of passage as leverage points in Japanese schooling

Korea is one of Japan's closest neighbors and a country with both an equivalent entrance examination system and suicide rate. Despite the initial appearance of similarity, these two countries embody deep differences in both culture and practice. As far as this paper is concerned, one major difference is the role that the entrance examination plays. While both countries rely on high-stakes testing to determine university entrance, in Japan these tests are themselves the finish line (Takeuchi, 1997). By comparison, in Korea, the universities into which successful students pass are the main event of the rite of passage. While the undergraduate years in Japan are perceived by many as a break following the hard push needed to get into university, in Korea the pressure and demands continue to mount (McDonald, n.d.). This helps to explain the discrepancies between suicides as they occur in each of these countries. While the rates at which suicides occur are quite similar, in Korea the peak age is a few years later than in Japan (Lee et al., 2013). This is consistent with the observation that, among young Koreans, burnout and breaking under pressure are the most common reasons for youth suicide (Prezi, n.d.). In Japan, the trend seems to be for suicides and, in particular, suicide pacts to be motivated by perceived meaninglessness and lack of direction (Ozawa-de Silva, 2008). For Korean students, the real test is university and the resulting pressure often builds up until it is overwhelming. The threat of failure becomes more terrifying than the option to die. For Japanese students, there may be no test at all. This leaves them groundless and uncertain, experiencing only perpetual thrownness without even the partial reassurance of feeling they have landed, if not in a world of their choosing, at least in one that is discernible. It is the difference between facing a nearly impossible, but clearly defined challenge and finding it impossible to know which way to face at all.

Additional and notable differences between the two countries are the sense of nationalism that is present in South Korea and, concomitantly, the required military service to which its young men submit. While Japan has its own brand of nationalism, it does not and cannot penetrate as deeply as the nationalism of South Korea, a nation that lives next door to a sworn enemy and whose identity is, in many ways, determined in contrast to its neighbor to the north. And, whereas South Korea maintains a strong fighting force at all times through conscription laws, Japan is not even constitutionally allowed to have a standing army. This point is important as, in the case of South Korea, it is an illustration of a society providing an accessible route to meaning. Even those who do not pass through the Korean entrance examination and university system will be involved in a socially constructed and defined struggle of good against evil. They will undergo hardships in the form of boot camp and emerge as recognized, contributing members of a strong group with a clearly delineated identity. The desire for such an initiatory experience is precisely what drives some Japanese students who do not succeed on the entrance examination to join the JSDF (Früstück, 2011), but the military option is nowhere near as widely recognized as in most other countries.

The military is also a popular option in the United States though, compared to a few decades ago, college is increasingly viewed as being an indispensable part of the typical cultural-educational route. Though the US does not rely on the kind of high stakes entrance examination system employed by Japan and Korea, its increasingly dominant rite of passage is no less tied up with tertiary education. Compared to Japan, the college

rites of passage as leverage points in Japanese schooling

experience in the US is perceived as being both more demanding and more transformative (McVeigh, 2002). It is much more common in the US for students to live on campus, often hours from where their parents live. Though colleges tend to have extensive support systems in place, they are also designed to push students towards self-reliance as they go from living in dormitories to living in houses, from eating in the cafeteria to cooking for themselves. Though economic concerns have eroded the tradition, there was long a sense that one of the major goals to be achieved in college was finding oneself. It is clear how the American reliance on individualism contributed to this particular formulation of initiation through a ROP. Likewise, the kinds of maladaptive behaviors that emerge from this system have uniquely American characteristics.

School shootings are most often perpetrated by boys or young men (Preti, 2008). These shooters are in the process of defining themselves as members of society and, one can only imagine, the process is not going well. In the US, where capitalistic consumption and power-based individualism are well-tread routes to symbolic significance and immortality, the feeling of lacking control or power is intrinsically threatening. For those who see their immortality project going poorly, a power grab may make a great deal of sense. It is only fitting that such a grab resemble a twisted interpretation of the culturally iconographic and often media-glorified gun fights waged by action heroes and romanticized outlaws. These people are heroes and the story is often portrayed such that their actions are the reason they achieved such status. Their tragic real life counterparts want the same thing and, thus, act in what they see as a comparable way.

It is interesting to note the regularity with which shooters in the US kill themselves or use hostile action as a means to accomplish suicide (Preti, 2008). This is, paradoxically, how they preserve their immortality. By contrast, asocial violence in Japan much more often ends with the one responsible giving up and confessing. As previously discussed, such cases are tragic pleas for belonging and, thus, they end with the individual willingly being subsumed. Given the cultural mythology of the US, were the shooter to become just another inmate, it would represent a defeat of his or her immortality project. Rather, such individuals often write suicide notes before launching their attacks indicating their desire to be individually immortalized for their actions.

Another point of comparison is how asocial violence of the type being discussed tends, in the US, to be directed at collectives and communities while in Japan it much more often targets close relations. This can be attributed to the difference between how identity is formed in the US and Japan. Young people in the US are much more likely to define themselves according to how they stand out and what makes them special (Hofstede, 2010). To direct asocial violence at the collective is to assert individual dominance in the face of a communally defined identity. The violence of the role being played sets the actor apart and attributes to him or her specialness though, albeit, of a dubious kind.

In Japan, asocial violence is no less an act tied to identity, though it is less one of creation than of pruning. The young Japanese person who kills his or her parents is not trying to stand out, but to sink in. The act is an attempt to destroy a part of him or herself that is uncomfortable or conspicuous. The parents know about the child's failures, they carry shame as a result of them and, thus, their very existence is a constant reminder to the child of his or her shortcomings. Asocial violence in the US is more often an attempt to

rites of passage as leverage points in Japanese schooling

expiate the sin of being unremarkable. Conversely, in Japan it tends to be driven by the need to conceal or destroy precisely that which is remarkable and, therefore, undesirable about oneself.

A LARGER VIEW

ROP as they exist in societies around the world are never, and can never be, perfect for they cater to imperfect populations. There will always be excesses. But these excesses are precisely that. ROP exist to ease transitions and, in this function, they will continue to be necessary aspects of any cultural-educational system. It is, however, important to recognize that, due to the adaptive nature of such systems, ROP carry an importance over and above this easing capacity. Given that the nature of a ROP also determines the kind of training required to overcome it, much of the way young people are trained by society will be affected by the kind of ROP they are expected to face. The system will adapt to produce success based on how that success is measured. This makes ROP a distinct and powerful leverage point. They are the goals towards which a society and system of schooling points its young—measures of their adherence to the native cultural system. Changing the ROP employed by a society would reorient the immortality projects being pursued by its younger generations. And this, more than any amount of money or ethical consideration, will change how they live and, thus, the evolution of the society in which they find themselves.

High-stakes testing, academic pressure, and the pursuit of becoming individually oneself are all imbalanced rituals that fail to take into account the context and interdependence of the individual. If we hope to create ethical, sustainable societies, we must nurture the development of ethical and sustainable identity-facets in the people comprising those societies. Careful consideration should be given to how we evaluate and define would-be members. Initiatory ROP do not exist because they were designed into an educational system. They are emergent behaviors made necessary by the human condition. They predate any system of organized schooling and, in many ways, such systems grew out of the institutionalization of ROP preparation. Modern school system design in an anthropocentric world must take into account those things made necessary by the human condition. ROP number among these things. If consciously embraced, they will provide an avenue for positive change. If ignored, they may serve to accelerate the development of maladaptive social elements.

The initiatory ROP is a leverage point with the power to redefine the goal of education and, in doing so, to move entire systems of schooling and the societies they reinforce towards ethicality and sustainability. Such rituals need only be redesigned and implemented in such a way that they measure and reward the development of capacities that will support the progress of societies towards such ideals.

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rites of passage as leverage points in Japanese schooling

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