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IDENTITY WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNION THROUGH THE LENS OF RITES OF PASSAGE

Introduction

The dilemma arising nowadays within the framework of integration into the European Union is to what extent the national cultures within the European community accommodate the idea of a European identity while allowing individuals to preserve self-defining boundaries. Thus, this paper aims at investigating the topic of identity in contemporary society, and especially within the European Union from the perspective of the concept of rites of passage. The method employed while carrying out this analysis involves taking a comparative look at the significance of the aforementioned concept for traditional and contemporary communities when dealing with and solving the differences arising from the encounter betweeen various national/comunity cultures.

The starting point for this investigation is provided by a contradiction arising from the very idea of a community of communites as the European one is striving to become. Thus, on one hand, as part of this trend, there is the development of "shared schemata" such as European values, citizenship and their inherent artifacts, symbols, as well as European standards providing for common welfare (e.g. employment regulations within and for the European community, policies regulating access to resources, rights, goods and services), that seem to offer a general background facilitating not only intercultural relationships, but also human bonding and, seemingly, integration into the European community. On the other hand, there is the number of people (oficially acknowledged as immigrants, unoficially labelled as foreigners or just cheap workforce) who for various reasons have to abandon the communities or groups to which they belong and become a functional part of other communities or groups.

The question elicited by this two-sided reality is if in between there is a place for the identity of these displaced, uprooted individuals, if they really succeed in making their culture and identity known to the foster community, or if they are simply judged and treated by stereotypes and clichés? Moreover, another question reenforced by what Noica [1977,23] identified as *part of the modern tragedy, namely" the chaotic freedom of boundaries"* is what boundaries are already inculcated into an individual through the national/ community culture, on one hand and what boundaries the same individual needs or is asked to cross in order to become a European citizen. In the end, the overarching question is what prevents individuals from being assimilated in the mainstream culture or what keeps them from preserving their national/cultural identity, contributing to their networking beyond work relationships and leading to their assimilation into the dominant culture.

Thus, as already underlined, this paper is an attempt towards providing a paradigm of interpretation for what identity is within the European Union by resorting to a novel perspective on the issue, namely identity through the lens of rites of passage. In the end, the questions addressed above will hopefully remain open for debate and discussion, since the perspective proposed by this article is worth indepth research and investigation while the current undertaking is but a lead-in into the matter. Consequently, the paper will focus on the following aspects: the meanings of rites, and more specifically of rites of passage, the significance of rites for traditional communities, the relationship between identity and rites of passage, the identification of some of the means by which contemporary society resorts to rites in general and to rites of passage, in particular, in order to preserve identity and last but not least an overview of some of

European Union's policies related to identity correlated with some member states's action plans towards ethnic or minority identities integration into mainstream culture and how all this can be viewed through the lens of rites of passage.

Rites and rites of passage: etimology, definition, stages and importance

It is relevant for the purpose of this investigation to overview the etimology of the word 'rite', since an understanding of its inherent meanings contributes a lot to the understanding of its usage in traditional societies and of its reverberations into contemporary society. Thus, both *'rite'* and *'order'* have a common indo-european root *'rta'*, standing for the cosmic order, namely for the relationships between gods and humans on one hand, and order among human beings, on the other hand [Monique Segre:2000, 79]. Moreover, as Benveniste [1969] observed, the latin word for rite is *'ritus'* and its meaning refers to what is regulated, what needs to be done, while in Greek the counterparts for the same word are *'artus'* (meaning 'establishing'), *ararisko* (meaning 'to match','to adapt'), *arthmos* (meaning 'connection'). As far as the definition of rites is concerned, it is worth noting that regardless of the type of society we speak about, theoreticians [Monique Segre:2000, 79] agree that rites have to be viewed as either individual behaviour (exhibited through, for example, make-up) or collective behaviour (such as having dinner with the whole family; taking part in football matches, etc) codified to a certain extent, more or less repetitive, highly significant to those enacting or participating to them, based on an acceptance (most often unconscious, empirical) of social values viewed as important .

Referring to the value of rites for society as a whole, Mary Douglas [1967] makes the following remarks: *If a ritual is banned, the latter will emerge even more powerfully provided that there is a very intense social interaction. ...Social rituals create a reality that would not exist outside them. There is no exaggeration in saying that rites are more important to society than words are for thinking.Thus, while we may have knowledge of something though we may be able to express it in words later than our awareness of what we know, we cannot establish social relationships without symbolic gestures.*

However, the above findings on what rites are do not shed light on their relevance for the topic suggested by this article. Consequently, it is more than necessary to understand in greater depth what rites are from the perspective of rites of passage. Thus, as Van Gennep [1998, 16] underlines when referring to traditional societies: *The very act of living requires successive transitions from a special society to another, from a certain social status to another. An individual's life is a set of such transitions with their own beginnings and endings such as birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, class welfare, professional specialization, death. Each of these stages is marked by ceremonies whose sole purpose is to mark the transition from a well-defined status to another well-defined status.*

The same theoretician describes three successive stages involved by these rites of passage, namely the isolation of the individual from the world he was familiar with and the loss of his status within the community, his marginalization by being considered very close to an outcast, when he is part of no group and loses his name and past, and in the end his integration by his accession to a superior status within the community.

Taking Gennep's theory further, B. Myerhoff [1982,109] observed that despite the fact that the rites of passage are means of asserting individuality and identity, they are also reminders of individuals' intrinsic belonging to a certain group outside which existence is not possible.

Contemporary society, nevertheless, is far from ensuring this equilibrium between an individual's position within it and its expectations from the same individual. First and foremost, this kind of society is no longer subject to the belief that change may lead to chaos and violence since daily life is no longer governed by the sacred, but by economic and political forces. Thus, nowadays organizations and institutions teach employees that change is the key driver of development. Consequently, the only way is to welcome it and even look for it. The result of such a turnaround in mentality is what Gellner calls the "modular" individual. Such a person is characterized by a high flexibility, by the capacity to change positions within society without any fear of trespassing boundaries, without being held accountable for adopting different beliefs or

for expressing personal views on various issues, and also by the ability to carry out an incredible number of tasks. It is actually the individual that is replaceable and that fits an evolving and diverse society. Unlike traditional communities he is not viewed as similar with the other members, but as unique. In this respect, the paradox of globalization, and inherently of the attempt to join identities under one umbrella such as the European Union, appears: an individual seen as unique and yet replaceable.

Thus, if the mechanism of contemporary society works smoothly by always having the 'spare' parts handy, one cannot claim the same thing concerning the mechanism of preserving one's identity in an ever evolving and more and more demanding reality.

Traditional societies had rites to restore order and, even though, change affected the individual, the whole community took part in the original rebirth of differences. Contemporary society has institutions focused on economic benefits. There may be rites by which organizations make sure that modular individuals network and communicate, but there are no rites to compensate for their replaceability. Once your task is over, you either prove your ability to switch to a different task or you are dispensed with. It is true that there is cultural order just like in traditional societies, but we speak now of organizational cultural order and not communal cultural order.

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