

PhD Anna Lipska*, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1166-0699>

Prof. UKSW, PhD Wanda Zagórska*, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2615-9565>

* *Institute of Psychology*

Faculty of Christian Philosophy

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University

in Warsaw

Crossing the Threshold. Emerging Adulthood as an Elaborate Liminal Phase of the Rite of Passage

Przekraczając próg. Stająca się dorosłość jako rozbudowana faza liminalna rytuału przejścia

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Abstract: The article contains a comparison of emerging adulthood (EA) to the rite of passage by van Gennep and Turner. The authors argue that EA is a far and residual equivalent of the liminal phase of the rite of passage, in its extended form. At first, they present the concept of the rite of passage, the idea of liminality, the phenomenon of extending the psychosocial moratorium and some aspects of the concept of emerging adulthood. Further they analyse the similarities and differences between the liminal phase and EA. They conclude that EA is a liminal period, but such that, on the one hand, is elaborated and extended in time, and on the other hand – degraded in its symbolism and significance (nonsanctified). The EA is associated with the specificity of western culture, such as degradation and disappearance of rites of passage in their traditional forms, orientation towards consumption and hedonism. It seems to have its source in the psychic qualities of young people, among other things, in their lack of readiness to take up the responsibility for others. Finally, the authors state that the results of a lack in initiation are thus beginning to make themselves particularly keenly felt in today's world.

Keywords: emerging adulthood, the rite of passage, liminal phase

Abstrakt: Artykuł zawiera porównanie stającej się dorosłości (EA) do rytuału przejścia w ujęciu van Gennepa i Turnera. Autorki argumentują, że EA jest dalekim i szczątkowym odpowiednikiem fazy liminalnej rytuału przejścia. W pierwszej kolejności przedstawiają koncepcję rytuału przejścia, ideę liminalności, zjawisko przedłużania psychospołecznego moratorium oraz niektóre aspekty koncepcji stającej się dorosłości. Następnie analizują podobieństwa i różnice między fazą liminalną a EA. Dochodzą do wniosku, że EA jest okresem liminalnym, ale takim, który z jednej strony jest rozbudowany i wydłużony w czasie, a z drugiej – zdegradowany w swej symbolice i znaczeniu (nieuświęcony). Stająca się dorosłość jest zjawiskiem charakterystycznym dla kultury zachodniej, w której obserwujemy degradację i zanik obrzędów przejścia w ich tradycyjnych formach oraz nastawienie na konsumpcję i hedonizm. Ponadto wydaje się ona mieć źródło w psychicznych właściwościach młodych ludzi, między innymi w ich braku gotowości do wzięcia odpowiedzialności za innych. Na koniec autorki zwracają uwagę, że skutki braku inicjacji w dorosłość zaczynają być szczególnie odczuwalne w dzisiejszym świecie.

Słowa kluczowe: stająca się dorosłość, rytuał przejścia, faza liminalna

Introduction

Despite cultural differences connected with the process of entering adulthood, changes in identity as well as in the social roles and status have a universal character. However, in modern societies as distinct from traditional, tribal ones, it is increasingly difficult to pinpoint the exact moment of crossing the threshold to adulthood (see: Kurzydło & Zagórska, 2016). Despite the lack of clear criteria of reaching adulthood, it is possible nowadays to observe certain phenomena that, to some extent, resemble rites of passage of their components. Their presence may be a manifestation of an inborn tendency to reenact ritual structures regardless of historical time and dominant cultural patterns (see e.g., Sisson, 2012).

In this paper we attempt to relate Jeffrey J. Arnett's concept of a new developmental period, called *emerging adulthood*, to the liminal (marginal, middle) phase of the rite of passage as described by two eminent scholars: French ethnologist and folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957) and American anthropologist Victor Turner (1920–1983). More specifically, we attempt to demonstrate that the period proposed by Arnett – which is a subject of debate in psychology at present (Bynner, 2005; Côté & Bynner, 2008; Hendry, 2008; Hendry & Kloep, 2007a, 2007b, 2010; Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011; Zagórska, Jelińska, Surma, & Lipska, 2012; Zorotovich & Johnson, 2019) – has the characteristics of the elaborate liminal phase, which is a product of the present day and at the same time, through similarities to that phase, points to the existence of an intrinsic human need for maturity rites.

First, we explain the anthropological terms that will be the objects of our psychological reflection, particularly the *rite of passage*, focusing on its middle phase. In doing so, we draw on van Gennep's and Turner's classic theories. Next, we discuss the theory of emerging adulthood and propose our own comparison of these two approaches to the phenomenon of entering adulthood.

1. The Three-Phase Structure Of The Rite Of Passage According To Arnold Van Gennep

Arnold van Gennep (1909/1981) introduced his own classification of rites as a kind of ceremonial sequences – he distinguished two independent categories describing certain aspects and characteristics of rites. Every single rite can be classified in terms of four categories, with two options offered by each category. It can be positive or negative,

sympathetic or contagious, direct or indirect, animistic or dynamistic¹². Rites of passage occupy a special place in this classification because none of them is a single ritual. Each rite of passage comprises a number of rituals and at the same time constitutes a whole.

According to van Gennep, life consists of successively moving from group to group. Since the rites of passage take place at moments of changing groups, they can be said to concern all those domains of human life in which the change occurs. Rites of passage are rites of breakthroughs in life. "Transitions from group to group and from one social situation to the next - writes van Gennep - are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence, so that a man's life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings: birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialization, and death. For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined" (1909/1981, p. 30).

Van Gennep distinguished three stages in the sequence of a rite of passage: The first stage is separation, or exclusion. The participants in the rite are removed from the group they have belonged to and deprived of attributes testifying to their belonging to that group. The second one is the transitional stage (also called marginal or liminal), when participants are "aside" (on the margin). Their situation is ambivalent: they are no longer in the previous state but have not yet reached the new one. Their status is suspended. The third stage is integration, or inclusion - the participants are accepted into the new group, with the rights and duties that this involves. Van Gennep analyzed and then presented the rites of passage he studied in terms of this three-phase pattern. Turner, reporting his field work and having in mind the French folklorist's three-phase model, stated that "one has to try very hard not to find any trace of the three-phase pattern in tribal or agricultural rites" (2005a, p. 38).

The best examples of the pattern described above seem to be the rites connected with the passage from childhood to adulthood - puberty initiations. It is precisely these rites of passage that are the most important ones, since they lead a person towards full initiation, into the living myth - the holy, living, and symbolically reenacted history, the archaic counterpart of the sacred. In archaic communities the living myth is believed to be true because it constitutes the "statute" of the tribe, the foundation of the world that could never exist without the myth. The truth of a myth thus understood is an absolute truth as

¹ Rites: positive - volitions; negative - "taboo," an imperative of "inaction," negative volitions; sympathetic - based on the belief in a mutual influence of the similar on the similar, the opposite on the opposite, a part on the whole, etc.; contagious - based on the belief that inborn or acquired traits have a material character and can be transmitted through physical contact or over a distance; direct - bringing immediate results, with no need to invoke external forces; indirect - a kind of impulse, the beginning of a chain reaction that triggers some autonomous or personified force; animistic - invoking the soul/spirit; dynamistic - impersonal. For example, a sailor who has miraculously escaped danger makes a votive offering to the Virgin Mary in the form of a small ship is a case of an animistic, sympathetic, indirect, and positive rite (as cited in: van Gennep, 1981).

a manifestation of human beliefs and convictions (see: Eliade, 1959a, 1963; Dajczer, 1977; Zagórska, 2004).

In mythical cultures, initiation into adulthood is the entry into an adult life whose essence amounts to “being born again.” It is a real existential transformation of the candidate, a transition to a new way of existence, since, as Eliade writes, “at the completion of the rites and teachings the neophyte lives a life different from before: he has become *someone else*” (1959b, p. 8). This transition is thus treated as radical change, as attested by its dramatic symbolism of death and rebirth (Dajczer, 1984). The individual being initiated experiences a double transition: from a child's life to the community of men and from a profane to a sacred life. In fact, however, there is no passage from the profane to sacred life at all, since “the human condition either partakes in the sacred or does not exist. There is only one true passage from the status of a child to maturity, and the act of acquiring maturity is inseparable from the act of sacralization” (Dajczer, 1979, p. 162). Initiation trials are not merely tests of courage and endurance but have a religious value. Their purpose is to stress the fact that human nature partakes in the transcendental, sacred archetype.

It is worth at this point to refer to van Gennep's (1909/1981) example of puberty initiation. This rite may proceed as follows:

Young boys are excluded from what has been their environment so far – they are separated from their mothers by a brutal or symbolically brutal act. The mothers cry because for them that means separation from their sons, who will never be little boys again. The dramatic separation is supposed to highlight breaking with the world of childhood: with the motherly, safe, and carefree world. This is the separation phase.

What follows is the isolation of novices within a previously prepared sacred area. They are instructed about the tribal code and learn the sacred history of their tribe. What occurs at this stage is the revelation of sacred secret knowledge and an explanation of adults' duties to the neophytes (see Eliade, 1959b). Beside that, they are subjected to numerous trials, aimed at weakening them physically and mentally in order to erase all that is childlike from their memory and to confer the status of adults on them. For instance circumcision or other kinds of wounding are a prelude to introducing the novice into the world of adults. A scar makes him resemble a man and distinguish him from the boys. Isolation, instruction, and trials constitute the liminal phase – novices remain separated from the rest of the tribe and do not belong to any of age groups. They have to obey numerous orders and prohibitions and they are treated in a special way.

This stage is followed by integration. The novices are reintegrated into the tribe's community, but their status is entirely different now. They return to the village in a joyful procession, proudly presenting their scars or first hunting trophies. They are now proud adult men, since an essential element of the initiation rite is the confirmation and recognition of the new role and identity by the community. The reintegration of the

initiated into the community – on new conditions – is an important moment in the life of the whole tribe.

2. Liminality According to Victor Turner

Inspired by van Gennep's theory, Turner focused in his reflections on the middle phase of the rite of passage – the liminal phase (Latin: *limen* = threshold). What was important in creating this name was the association of passing through different situations with a physical passage, such as the entering into the village or house, when one was no longer outside but not yet inside. The threshold was the symbol of this phase.

Turner defined the liminal phase as “the time and space between two different contexts defined by the framework of meanings and actions” (1982, p. 188). Van Gennep (1981/1909) stressed that all the three phases of the ritual pattern he proposed differed in length, significance, and the degree of elaboration depending on the passage they concerned (the moment in the lives of the rite's participants). For instance, separation rites are the most important in funeral ceremonies, inclusion rites – when entering into marriage, and liminal phase rites – during the period of pregnancy, but above all during initiation.

When describing the liminal stage and liminality as such, Turner (1982, 1969/1995) very often relates them to participants in the initiation rite. The individuals undergoing initiation are in the liminal phase when they are neither what they used to be nor what they will be. Liminality involves ambivalence, ambiguity, and incoherence. Passing from one state into another, individuals are excluded from everyday life, separated from the rest of society in order to spend time in this separation and suspended state. During this phase, the participants in the rite are given, for example, new names referring to their ambivalent “not any more – not yet” status. This ambiguity may also be manifested through the fact that the participants in the rite are deprived of their usual clothes during the period of exclusion, and the clothes they put on reveal neither their previous nor their future status, and not even their gender. The initiated are forced into uniformization, structural invisibility and anonymity. They are treated in an egalitarian manner, and the symbolic power over them is held by the entire community. Individuals in the liminal phase are neither here nor there – they are “in-between” (see: Dajczer, 1984; Deflem, 2002). Turner adds that “novices remain in a state of temporary indeterminacy, outside of the normative social structure. This makes them weak and deprives them of their rights with regard to others. Yet, at the same time, it liberates them from the obligations connected with the structural position occupied” (2005a, p. 41).

Turner identifies three main characteristics of the transitional stage, usually found together in ritual presentations:

(1) contact with the sacred: mysterious polysemous symbols, revealed to the rite's participants in the form of the presentation of sacred objects (e.g., relics, masks, tools – “that which is shown”), actions (e.g., dance – “that which is done”), and instructions (mythical history – “that which is said”);

(2) ludic deconstruction: exaggeration, deformation, showing objects, gestures, actions, and phenomena from the sphere of norms and values in a distorted mirror, which is supposed to induce the novices in the rite to reflect on the basic values of the social and cosmic order), and

(3) simplification of relations in the social structure: the only structural characteristic in this phase is the presence of an authority whom the novices fully obey and to whom they fully submit (see: Deflem, 2002).

From the last of the above components of liminality Turner derived the category of *communitas*, denoting an undifferentiated community of equal individuals. The term *communitas* was taken over from Paul Goodman (see Goodman & Goodman, 1947).

In the liminal phase of the rite of passage, all the initiated are the same and are treated alike. Their background, age, status, or even their name or gender makes no difference. This is the kind of group that Turner refers to as *communitas*. This term can also be defined in opposition to *structure*. *Communitas* appears where structure becomes temporarily suspended. The bonds of *communitas* are antistructural in the sense that they are undifferentiated, egalitarian, direct, and nonrational (which means they are based on nonrational factors: emotional and volitional), while *structure* sustains hierarchy and divisions. *Structure* operates on the basis of rational arguments, whereas in *communitas* emotions and will are more important than reason. This reflects the *logos-mythos* dichotomy in a person's functioning and relations with others in the form of a cultural equivalent of this dichotomy (see Zagórska, 2001, 2004, 2010).

Turner broadened the scope of the term *communitas*, believing that it could serve not only for describing the rites of passage practiced in tribal societies but also for describing groups of people taking part in contemporary sociocultural phenomena. In his opinion, *structure* and *communitas* can be found at all levels of culture and social development. In his research and quest for *communitas*, Turner (2005b) was interested, among other things, in the hippie movement of the 1960s, the pilgrimage movement in Christianity, and “casual” groups such as supporters during a football match. Also sociological and psychological studies on new popular culture phenomena, such as the historical reenactment movement or subcultural dance and music performances, or sport confirm the presence of Turner's *communitas* in those phenomena (see e.g., Higin & Hamilton, 2020; Johnson, 2011; Szlendak, 1998; Zagórska, 2004, 2007, 2009).

In the work of contemporary anthropologists or sociologists it is possible to find references to the tripartite model of the rite of passage and attempts at describing

sociocultural phenomena by means of the categories of liminality and *communitas*. Szakolczai (2009) stresses the importance of the concept of liminality and the necessity of drawing on Turner's theory in modern anthropology, philosophy, and sociology. Thomassen (2009) points to various fields and thematic areas in which the concept of liminality is used. He points out, among other things, the introduction of this concept into Kirkeby's (2008) philosophy of management and into business counseling (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003) or its use with reference to all kinds of minorities.

Sulima (2000) observes that, in their history, societies have developed specific types of liminal personalities ("threshold" people) as well as liminal situations and ideologies of liminality. Liminal personalities can be prophets, artists, philosophers, outsiders, etc., whereas the largest number of liminal situations are those that are related to youth culture rites. As examples, the author mentions rites of status change: eighteenth birthdays, high-school proms, end-of-school balls, or Truant's Day. When it comes to liminal ideologies, he mentions phenomena such as millenarianism, sectarian movements, and youth subcultures.

Another researcher, sociologist, Tomasz Szlendak (1998), draws attention to the resemblance that technoparties show to liminal rite - more accurately, to the liminal phase of the rite. According to him, participants at a technoparty lose their external social status, and the differences between them are blurred, thanks to which "a ritual community of souls" emerges (Szlendak, 1998, p. 86). Also studies by Wanda Zagórska (2004, 2008, 2009) on the participation of young adults in culture-created reality revealed that contemporary cultural phenomena, such as the techno dance and music subculture or the historical reenactment movement, are highly saturated with elements of *communitas* and liminality.

However, both Turner (1982) and Szlendak (1998) stress the differences between *communitas* in tribal rites of passage and contemporary *communitas*. Turner even refers to the latter as *liminoid*. Liminality in rites has some necessity in it and is strictly connected with everyday life. It also has its strictly defined place and limits. *Liminoidality*, by contrast, is usually connected with free time, pleasure, and fun. We are the ones who decide when and how we wish to "get away from everyday life."

References to the theory of *communitas* and to the concept of liminality can be found also in contemporary analyses concerning social and political phenomena in South Africa. Turner's ideas are referred to by scholars such as Spierenburg (2011), who describes the creation of Kgalagadi Transfrontier National Park, or by Human and Robins (2011), who described two cases of elusive and transitory *communitas*: the 2010 FIFA World Cup and the experience of young refugees from Zimbabwe living in Cape Town.

Apart from the above features of the liminal phase (contact with the sacred sphere, ludic deconstruction and simplification of relationships in the social structure), Turner stresses the the characteristic loneliness of novices. Similar to one another in the indeterminacy (suspension) of their status but separated, not bound by any social ties (the

ties having also been suspended), they are lonely. Each of them has to reach the status of an adult alone. The only thing they have in common is the participation in the rite.

The rite of passage presented above – more precisely, the initiation rite – is the way of entering adulthood in tribal communities. Its liminal phase is extremely important, because it is then that the passage from childhood to adulthood appears to take place. A young person learns – through symbols, singing, dancing, performance, or tales – to be an adult. All this is supervised by an adult, who conducts the rite, leads the initiated individuals into the next stage of their lives, and ensures that the rite is held as it should be (the rite specialist). It can be said that it is precisely in the liminal phase that the identity of its participants is formed and their readiness to take on responsibilities for adult life is developed.

3. The Phenomenon of Psychosocial Moratorium Extension and Jeffrey J. Arnett's Theory of Emerging Adulthood

Centuries have elapsed since the time when entry into adulthood took place on a communal basis and through an elaborate rite. Simplifying, it is possible to say that during the course of past centuries a departure from the ritual form of entering adulthood has taken place. In our times, this results in a crisis of initiation rites, the extension of the psychosocial moratorium, the blurring of the threshold of adulthood, or – finally – the emergence of totally subjective criteria of its attainment. Studies such as those by Surma (2007) and Basko (2009) confirm that in Poland, just like in other countries of Western culture, the unambiguous criteria whose fulfillment would definitely classify a person as belonging to the world of adults has been vanishing.

Arnett (2006a, 2007a,b) suggests that, nowadays, adulthood is determined not so much by its traditional indicators such as the completion of education, a permanent job, and marriage and parenthood as by the individual character traits, plans, and life choices of young people, who take advantage of freedom from obligations and test the various possibilities that life offers. On that basis, he distinguishes a new stage in human development: emerging adulthood. Numerous scholars disagree with Arnett's views. Sociologists (e.g., Côté & Bynner, 2008, Hendry & Kloep, 2011) draw attention to the significance of the structure of social life in the process of becoming an adult. They are more inclined to attribute the prolonged entry into adulthood to socioeconomic and political conditions of young people's lives rather than to their individual choices. Cécile Van de Velde (2007, 2008) points to the existence of specific models of entering adulthood, that is characteristic to particular European countries. Based on her own studies on the

phenomenon of reaching adulthood by young Europeans, the French sociologist distinguishes categories of experiences that accompany this process, determined by the sociopolitical and cultural characteristics of European societies. She describes four models: "finding one's way," determined by the logic of personal development (Nordic countries, e.g., Denmark), "taking on the responsibility for oneself" (the United Kingdom), "finding one's place," determined by the logic of social integration (France), and "settling down," determined by the logic of being part of one's family (Spain).

According to Erik Erikson (1968), the identity crisis can be solved either by ritual inclusion or by moratorium extension. The former is the case in the currently few tribal communities, where identity crisis connected with the passage from childhood into adulthood is solved through the initiation rite. According to the data of *Survival International* (the only international organization that provides support and help to tribal communities), there are about 150 million people in the world living in communities of this kind. They live in more than 60 countries, and more than half of them live in the Amazonia. The examples include: Brazilian Indians, Australian Aborigines, the Maasai in Kenya, or the Palawan people in the Philippines³.

As regards psychological moratorium – understood as the time of suspended obligations, given to young people so that they can seek experiment, discover, and form their own identity and prepare to take on the responsibilities of adulthood – it has become a way of entering adulthood in highly technicized countries. The period that – in accordance with Erikson's thought – was supposed to be characterized by moratorium extension and to last about three years (until the age of 21) is now subject to considerable extension, and this phenomenon (the lengthening of the time of being "on the threshold," "in-between" – the time of liminality) is a widespread one. Young people do not take on developmental tasks appropriate for their age. The tasks that people typically used to take on in twenties are now taken on in their thirties. Postponing partnership, family, and parental obligations as well as extending the period of professional preparation puts off the moment of becoming an adult. This is indicated, for instance, by a number of statistical and demographic data as well as by the results of psychological empirical studies. The researchers point out that the minority cultures (even in the United States) may be an exception to this rule, where there are practices that lead to shortening the moratorium period, or at least not extending it beyond measure. An example is the research among young Mormons (Arnett, 2000; Nelson, 2003).

According to Erikson (1994), moratorium should end around the age of 21. And yet, research conducted in recent years reveals that, when asked "Do you feel like an adult?", 70% of respondents aged 19-29 years answer as follows: "In some respects I do, and in other respects I do not" (e.g., Arnett, 2004, 2007c; Arnett & Tanner, 2005; Surma, 2007; Basko, 2009,

³ Source: <http://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes> (Retrieved March 8, 2010).

Lubieniecka, 2010). Such an extension of moratorium in time as well as the common occurrence of this phenomenon favors attempts in the field of psychology to distinguish a new developmental period, stretching between adolescence and early adulthood. After all, we are not dealing with the passage from childhood (or youth) to adulthood, but with p a s s i n g. The transitional phase has been considerably extended – sufficiently so as to constitute an observable “separate phase” these days.

The introduction of a new developmental period – emerging adulthood – between adolescence and early adulthood has been proposed by Arnett (2004, 2007c; Arnett, Tanner 2005). This new period is supposed to fall between the age of 18 and the age of 25-29 years. The author presented the first outline of his theory in an article published in *American Psychologist* in 2000, and the complete theory – its theoretical and empirical support – is expounded on in the book entitled *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens to the Twenties* (2004). Very soon it turned out that the new theory gained surprisingly, a great popularity. The international interdisciplinary conference on emerging adulthood, organized biennially since 2003, attracts a constantly growing circle of participating researchers. Arnett believes that this new distinct developmental period to be characteristic to modern industrialized societies. In his opinion, this period cannot be identified with late adolescence, from which it differs in involving greater freedom from parental control as well as in a more independent quest. It is not the same as early adulthood, either, since this term assumes that the first stage of adulthood has already been reached, whereas a majority of young people up to the age of 30 have not yet made the choices associated with the status of adulthood, especially those concerning marriage and parenthood. Emerging adults do not consider themselves adolescents, but neither do they perceive themselves as fully adult. Arnett (2004) refers to this as a subjective identity characteristic to this period in life – the young people themselves feel that they are in-between. It can therefore be said that emerging adulthood means, as it were, “being in-between.” The quest that accompanies young people during that time makes this a particularly intensive and unstable period in their life. What is interesting is that much of this quest as well as the failures connected with it are experienced alone, without support from family or friends. This may seem surprising, but young Americans aged 19-29 years spend most of their time (also free time) alone – they spend more time alone than any other age group and are comparable in this respect only with people of advanced age.

Thus, based on the above general description of emerging adulthood, it is possible, following Arnett (2004; Arnett & Tanner, 2005), to identify five distinctive features of this period in life, describing them in terms of time experienced in a special kind of way. These are:

- The time of identity-related quest (a continuation of the quest started in adolescence); trying out various possibilities, mainly in the sphere of close relationships,

work, and outlook as well as seeking what is the best for you and – what follows – gradually taking on obligations.

- The time of frequent changes and a lack of stability: *emerging adults* is the most demographically diverse developmental group; it is difficult to name any demographic regularities or variables that would apply to a majority; the only variable of this kind that Arnett points to is living away from one's family home, but the motivations for moving out or the forms of activity taken up (studies, work, travel) are highly diverse; young people frequently change their place of residence and their occupations.

- The time of the strongest self-focus during the entire life and the time of discerning what one wants in order to make independent decisions; the importance of one's own point of view, the absolutization of one's own experiences, observations, and reflections' gradually striving to achieve one's own goals.

- The time of feeling *in-between*, during transition, a change of developmental status, not an adolescent any more and not an adult yet (subjective identity).

- The time of possibility and hope, when people have a unique opportunity to change and create their own life; emerging adults are characterized by a high optimism about making a life for themselves and the success of their plans.

Thus understood, the developmental period preceding the attainment of the status of an adult appears to have certain features in common with the liminal phase of the rite of passage, presented above. This encourages an attempt to compare these two phenomena connected with crossing the threshold of adulthood.

4. The Liminal Phase vs. Emerging Adulthood

Based on the presented descriptions of the liminal phase and emerging adulthood it is possible to identify certain characteristic features that make these two phenomena similar or different to a smaller or greater extent. Table 1 presents our attempt at comparing them.

Regarding the essence of the liminal phase of the rite of passage and emerging adulthood, the most important similarity is the transitional status of both phenomena: the young people remain in a state of suspension then – they are in-between. The initiated novices are separated from the group, not being children any more but not yet adults. The situation is similar in the case of emerging adults. They already feel they are adults in some respects but in other respects they do not feel that way at all. They cannot be classified as adolescents any more, and they do not seem to be adults, either.

Another similarity is the loneliness of the initiated and emerging adults. Just like the novices are lonely in the initiation rite – as while remaining in suspension they are not bound

to one another by any ties – also lonely are the young people who make the most important decisions and take up the key forms of activity on their own while becoming adults.

Table 1. The liminal phase of the rite of passage according to Arnold van Gennep and emerging adulthood according to Jeffrey J. Arnett [– own study]

	THE LIMINAL PHASE OF THE RITE OF PASSAGE	EMERGING ADULTHOOD
THE ESSENCE OF THE PHENOMENON	Transitional status: a sense of "being in-between," liminality	
	Loneliness	
	Common contact with the sacred (transcendent)	Common contact with the secondary, culture-created reality (the transreal, the profane)
	<i>Communitas</i> as a rule	<i>Communitas</i> as an exception
	Ludic deconstruction	Cultural equivalents of deconstruction present in small social groups (subcultures, music, bands) and in modern art
CONTEXT	SOCIAL Social organization Social consent Sacralization Desacralization	
	DEVELOPMENTAL (identity formation) Giving Seeking and creating Radical collectivism Individualism	

Besides the similarities, there are visible differences between the liminal phase and emerging adulthood, too. They concern the three characteristics of liminality enumerated by Turner (1967, as cited in Deflem, 2002). In the contemporary version, they assume the form of merely fragmentary, desacralized cultural counterparts of what constituted the essence of the liminal phase in tribal cultures. And thus, as opposed to the initiation rite, emerging adulthood does not involve contact with the sacred, *communitas*, or ludic deconstruction in its traditional form. The lack of the first component is due to faith and religion having been moved to the private, individual sphere, whereby it has lost its universal dimension. The

process of secularization, increasingly stronger especially in the last two centuries, plays an important role here as well. In traditional societies the entire life is pervaded with the sacred dimension. All rites are immersed in the sacred. In modern times it is no longer possible to speak of a sacred dimension in the process of entering adulthood. It seems, though, that what is strictly associated with the sacred sphere in a tribal community may be linked with the culture-created transreal reality today. Eliade stressed that the sacred is timeless and is not part of social reality. Every human being, regardless of place and time, feels the need for transcendence (transcendent needs). It can be supposed that nowadays this need manifests itself in a different way and is expressed by means of different symbolism – through young people's participation in the secondary reality generated by contemporary cultural phenomena (Zagórska, 2001, 2004, 2007).

The orientation towards individualism, characteristic in Western societies, is also responsible for the lack of the *communitas* category among emerging adults. Their quest and their ways of becoming adults are so diverse that it is difficult in this case to speak of an undifferentiated community of equal individuals (Turner, 1975). In a tribal community, every young man at a suitable age had to go through the initiation rite, remain in the liminal phase for some time, and belong to *communitas*. He did not choose it; neither was it entertainment for him. The contemporary *communitas*, even if they concern young people, have a casual character and mainly result from attempts to get away from work, from everyday life, or even from reality. Perhaps young people these days seek a substitute for the primeval *communitas* in small groups, subcultures, or Internet forums.

The same seems to apply also to ludic deconstruction. It is not found in its universal dimension in emerging adulthood because there is no one to stimulate young people – through masks, costumes, exaggerations, overstatement, etc. – to reflect on what is happening in their lives. It seems, however, that traces of this, just like in the case of *communitas*, can be found in small groups, mostly subcultural (where it happens that singers or musicians may play the role as guides in entering adulthood), and perhaps also in modern art.

Subculture is often defined as a relatively stable social group remaining on the margin of the social life trends that dominate in a given system, expressing its separate identity by negating or challenging the established and commonly accepted patterns of culture. This very definition points to a resemblance of subculture to *communitas* in the rite of passage. Marginalization, the suspension of the previous status, group members becoming similar to one another, sometimes using slang language – these are only selected features that the two phenomena have in common. Likewise, defiance, elements of intragroup ritualy, and various forms of manifesting the fact that one belongs to the group (shocking behavior diverging from the norm, clothing, or bearing) reveal similarity to ludic deconstruction. A black coat, bovver boots, ruffled and dyed hair, numerous earrings and

studs, black make-up (the equivalents of masks or paintings on the bodies of tribe members, those conducting the rite and those being initiated) – these are the signs that, on the one hand, clearly distinguish a punk from other people, and on the other – allow him to better internalize the group's rules and facilitate adopting its beliefs.

As regards modern art, it seems that some artists seek to encourage their audience to reflect on themselves or the world using measures similar to those that were used in the liminal phase of the initiation rite.

Considering the broader context of the liminal phase and emerging adulthood, it must be noted that both phenomena are embedded in social life and strictly connected with identity formation. However, this manifests itself in a different way in each of them.

The liminal phase of the initiation rite is experienced only by the initiated boys, but this rite has enormous significance to the entire community. It gives the tribe adult men, who can start families and act for the benefit of the village and who know and are able to pass on the sacred history (the living myth). This is why the rite is organized by the community for its young members. The old ones instruct the novices and help them enter the new role. Moreover, just like the entire life of the tribe, the rite is immersed in the sacred – and this applies especially to the liminal phase of the initiation rite, during which initiation into the tribe's myth takes place. The transmission and reenactment of sacred history in the initiation rite highlights the importance of this event and facilitates the “passage.”

Nowadays, young people do not have “becoming an adult” organized for them by anyone. They seldom want to take advice or instruction from older people, but it is also true that the latter are not always willing or able to give it. Everyone has to become an adult on his or her own. This is confirmed by difficulties in identifying the objective indicators of adulthood (see: Arnett, 2004; Arnett & Tunner, 2005; Surma, 2007). Society accepts and supports the situation in which every young person seeks a way to “become an adult” on his or her own, even if the period of this quest becomes longer and longer, which seems to be disadvantageous to society. It is also less and less often, as already signaled above, that this quest is in any way connected with the sphere of the sacred. Faith and religion are becoming more and more individual and private matters, which makes it difficult to attribute to them a strictly defined role in “becoming an adult.”

The relations with identity formation are different in the two discussed ways of entering adulthood as well. In the initiation rite, it is in the liminal phase that identity is given through the exposition of symbols, singing, dancing, acting out scenes connected with the sacred history (the tribe's myth), and tale-telling. Nowadays, identity formation has moved beyond adolescence and has its continuation in emerging adulthood, where it is the most important task.

Differences in this case seem to be connected mainly with the pursuit of different goals, stemming from cultural specificity. In the initiation rite, a person "is made," takes the identity given to him or her, is accustomed to a certain vision and has no choice. There is clarity here, a precisely defined ritual that introduces the initiated into adulthood. The strictly set limits of each stage do not permit the extension of any phase of the rite in time – particularly the liminal phase, which the novices are ritually led out of. Nowadays, by contrast, we are convinced that a person "makes himself or herself" to a smaller or greater degree and creates his or her own identity. Before taking on final obligations, he or she is faced with choices, but these have to be choices that will enable the person to become independent. A tribal community was governed by collectivism, life in a strictly interrelated group, adaptation to the group, and meeting its expectations. In Western culture, the contrary tendencies dominate – individualism is promoted, and it is important for everyone to be an independent and separate individual.

Summing up, the young people who become adults nowadays mainly do the seeking and experimenting on their own. We are witnessing the results, visible in this process, of the functioning of a cultural system that, following Margaret Mead (1978), we could certainly call prefigurative. Individualism and subjectivism, characteristic of becoming an adult today, result in the lack of a threshold to cross or a criterion for young people to meet in order to leave the stage of experimenting and seeking. This problem did not exist for the people initiated in tribal communities, where the phases of the rite were strictly defined and never extended.

We therefore believe that emerging adulthood is a liminal period, but such that, on the one hand, is elaborate and extended in time (lasting even a number of years), and on the other – degraded in its symbolism and significance (nonsanctified).

Concluding Thoughts

As a result of extensive research on initiation, Turner (1975) perceived liminality as a stage of social life, both in the tribal ritual and in our times. He believed liminality or liminal time to be a normal or even necessary phenomenon in the social structure. It appears, breaks the structure and suspends it so that everything can return to normal and so that order can be restored. According to Turner, liminality should have a transitional character and be a period between two other stages, the way this used to happen originally.

The danger of modernity oriented towards consumption and hedonism lies in the fact that wherever liminality appears today (small groups, subcultures, the Internet, etc.), a desire to maintain it also arises. More and more young people want to remain in a state of suspension, indeterminacy, and transition. People find it increasingly difficult to bid a definite farewell to the carefree attitude of childhood and youth; at the same time, they do

not feel mature enough to take on full responsibility for themselves and for others and to take care of them. As a result, they take advantage of social consent to moratorium identity – to becoming an adult in a temporally indefinite manner and to the prolonged process of becoming mature enough to care not only for oneself. The results of a lack in maturity rites are thus beginning to make themselves particularly keenly felt nowadays. They can also be perceived in the distinctive features of emerging adulthood.

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