

The Final Exam for Yoga Instructors as a “Rite de passage”

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Abstract: *In this paper we talk about the final exam for the instructors of yoga at the International Yoga Academy in Belgrade, viewed as a transition rite. The final exam is a closing act which ends a period in life of an individual through which its status in society is formally changed. The aim of this work is to discover the latent meaning and function of the final exam for yoga instructors through an analysis of the symbolic behavior (ritual) on its manifestation level. The final exam for instructors in the International Yoga Academy of the Yoga Federation of Serbia in Belgrade that provides programs of education accredited by the Health Council of Serbia, was taken to be the object of analysis. Aside from the indicated transition structure of a rite in three phases, final exam for yoga instructors is characterized by the carried out demarcation of time in the first place, followed by marking out the social development of an individual through visible elements (clothes, food, behavior), clearly distinct from social routines and everyday life. Analysis confirms the already established ritual pattern of transition that accompanies the education process. In conclusion, the final exam in the International Yoga Academy of the Yoga Federation of Serbia in Belgrade is a part of the educational process that changes the status of participants in society, in ethnological and anthropological literature regarded as the transition rite.*

Keywords: *final exam in yoga, transition rite, ritual, change of social status, ethnology and anthropology*

Introductory discussion

“Any rich man can feed the body, but only those who have knowledge can feed the soul. And if you have that knowledge, it is your duty then to help others that they may also acquire it.” (*Krishnamurti*)

As it is observed in ethnology and anthropology (Vodopija, 1976), certain actions that make up the high school graduations and final exams at the universities, have the meaning of a “rite de passage” (crossing ritual). In this paper we search to answer the question whether there are any actions that make up the “rite de passage” in regard to the final exam for yoga instructors in the International Yoga Academy of the Yoga Federation of Serbia in Belgrade.

The basic thesis is that the final exam is a closing act that ends a certain period and changes the status of an individual in the society. As a sources for this paper there were used the ethnographic material and information available on the website of the Yoga Federation of Serbia (6) and International Yoga Academy (7), and on the other hand, the primary experiences in undirected observation. The object of this research was denoted through an ideal-type model in terms of an ideal functioning of the final exam model for yoga instructors.

The aim of this paper is to discover the latent meaning and function of final examinations for yoga instructors through the analysis of symbolic behavior (rituals) on its manifestation level. In order to come to these meanings and functions, a semiological analysis of ritual is necessary, or rather, its decoding. The following methodological procedure was applied: description of the examined phenomenon, its breaking up into elements, their classification in a diachronic structure of transition rites, formulation of important messages, meanings and purposes of this ritual. Thus, in this case, the communication theory of ritual can be considered the most appropriate for this paper. The main thesis of communication theory is that culture communicates, and that the

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task of an anthropologist is to discover, record and interpret non-verbal aspects of communication, in which different types of cultural behavior can carry information and be interpreted as messages (Leach, 1983).

Theoretical and methodological approach

The outside world knows what we learned through their senses. The phenomena we observe are the attributes that we attach to them depending on how our senses operate and the way the human mind is built to classify and interpret incoming stimuli. “The man’s innate desire to clearly define the world around them, to bring some logical order in a – naturally – chaotic world around him” (Strauss, 1972).

“In accordance with the dispositions of his mind, man marks and classifies all living things, objects, phenomena and events with which he comes into contact. Therefore, he uses verbal and nonverbal symbols to “organize” his world” (Leach, 1983). We divide the continuum of space and time that surrounds us. Leach says that all non-verbal dimensions of diverse cultures, as the style of dress, the configuration of the villages, architecture, furniture, food, cooking, music, physical gestures, postures and so on, are organized in structured sets in order to incarnate the encoded information in a manner analogous to sounds, words and sentences from natural languages. Symbolic behavior is one of the indicators that characterize social status and social relations. Most of the ritual events are related to the crossing of social boundaries and changes in social status. Such ritual events are used to indicate the intervals in the flow of social time (Leach, 1983), and in the anthropological literature such rituals are known as transition rites. “The crossing of boundaries and thresholds is always marked by a ritual, including the transition from one social status to the other.” (Leach, 1983)

Status change is the change in category, but on the level of action, that change requires a ritual in which the transition within the social boundaries takes place in the period of time. The same principle applies to the advancement of an individual in his social life – from the student of yoga to the yoga instructor. Participant – student moves from one to another social status, as he moved from a child to adult. Taking the new status – yoga instructor, constitutes a period of social time, or social duration, while the ritual that marks transition from one status to the other, although possessing a temporal duration, according to Leach, represents an interval of social timelessness, in terms of social time.

In a very broad sense, all transition rituals possess a three-phase similarity of structure. The overall flow of time, therefore, has a form presented as follows:

Separation phase/segregation rite

The participant who experiences a change in status is first separated from his initial role, moved from everyday situations, demonstrating thus, through symbolic behavior, the separation from a previous stable point in social structure (Leach, 1983).

Marginal phase

After the “segregation rite” comes an interval of social timelessness, which may last for a few moments or stretch for months. Social time has stopped leaving the participant without a status. The general feature of such rituals of marginality is to keep the participant physically separated from ordinary people. Social separation is further emphasized by keeping him apart through all kinds of special rules and restrictions regarding food, clothing and movement in general (Leach, 1983).

Aggregation phase

Starting afresh and fitting into his new role that corresponds to his new everyday social status, the participant returns to everyday situations or “normal” time (Leach, 1983).

Case analysis and interpretation

At the International Yoga Academy, Yoga Federation of Serbia, education of candidates for yoga instructors includes 200 class hours in 8 months of duration.

A candidate (student) is entitled to a final exam (diploma) by presenting the following documents:

- certificate of regular attendance of classes during school,
- certificate of passed exams, term papers and positive assessment of term papers,
- certificate of pre-exam conduct of five public classes under the supervision of senior instructors (certificate must be signed individually by each senior instructor, certifying that the candidate has conducted yoga classes with the quality).

The final exam is conducted before a three-member commission. Candidate defends his thesis orally (approximate volume of work is up to 60 pages); presents a conduct of a yoga class; demonstrates the practice of *asanas*, meditation techniques, *pranayamas*, *mudras* and *bandas*, manifesting a maturity and giving satisfactory answers to questions posed by the members of the commission. Upon the completion of the course and the final exam, candidate receives a certificate that allows him to work as a yoga instructor. Yoga Federation of Serbia has complied with the education standards of the European and world yoga association. With this certificate, instructors can give yoga classes in all countries in the world. Yoga Federation of Serbia is a member of the World and European Yoga Federation (6).

The ideal-type description of the final exam for yoga instructors, object of this analysis, is not a mere description of the yoga instructors final exam in the Yoga Federation of Serbia such “as it is”, but rather a model that is ideal-type in the sense of an ideal functioning of certain rules posted in the available materials of the Yoga Federation of Serbia, selected in a manner that corresponds to the aim of this paper.

Transition rite of the final exam for yoga instructors consists of the following elements:

1. Preparations for the exam (dressing in clothes for yoga)

The clothing of the participants:

- putting on new outfit (a part can stand instead of a whole)
- wearing a festive outfit
- wearing a clean outfit.

2. Final exam

3. The celebration, graduation

Separation phase

A participant who comes to the final exam for yoga instructor takes off his clothes and dresses an outfit for yoga “...outside of context clothing has no ‘meaning’, but when gather to form a ‘uniform’, they are distinct signs of specified social roles in specified social contexts” (Leach, 1983). Participants with whom I conducted an informal conversation bought a new piece of clothing for the final exam: bottom part of a sweat suit, a T-shirt, while majority also bought new socks to practice in.

The presence of new clothes, although reduced in detail, that a participant puts on before taking the exam (new outfit or part of a new outfit) points to “separation” from his previous status. In this way, through symbolic behavior, a participant marks his movement across social boundaries, separating himself from a fixed point in social structure. Change of clothes as well as new clothes are elements of a separation phase/segregation rite, and this change is based on the existence of opposing pairs, which can be displayed as follows:

official, change, exam clothes	informal, no change, “daily” clothing
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Liminal phase

After the separation phase, a participant is due for the liminal phase in which a test situation takes place. In this phase, a participant is physically separated from other people. For him this is an interval of no status, outside of society, outside of time, which is a basic feature of marginal states.

“A new cycle starts. At the ending period of beginners’ lessons for instructors, part of the knowledge is transmitted by instructors... Pleasantness and kindness in their addressing of future instructors are accompanied by their power and security, the will to share their knowledge... I admire the gentleness of this sense of community and the desire to embrace and incorporate each view and every experience available, right next to us, lest we remain deprived of one more opinion, one more learning from all those present” (8)

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“Official tone that characterizes the exam situation has the meaning of marginal rituals. At the same time, when the relationship in a liminal phase is compared to the relationship existing between the same entities at the beginning period (before the exam) and the final period, a new condition (after the exam), we may note that it is characteristic for the phase before the exam not to establish rigid and very strictly structured relationships between teachers and students, the atmosphere is more ‘democratic’” (Kovačević, 19982).

Expressed in a binary opposition	
liminal phase – structured	initial and final state – unstructured
Before and after the exam	
test situation – authority, official, structured	democracy, unofficial, unstructured

What marks the liminal phase is the prescribed way in which the exam situation takes place. Rules prescribed and the publicity of the exam in itself, result from defined rules set forth in the Ethical code of the Yoga Federation of Serbia (6) that determine the exam location, composition of the commission, as well as their activities. The exam situation in itself (liminal phase) is determined and public, while the separation and the aggregation phase, observed in this way, are a private matter of each participant.

This is an opposition: public (official) : private (unofficial).

Aggregation phase

During 2007/2008 yet another generation of yoga instructors, the fourth, was trained in the International Academy for Yoga Teachers Education of the Yoga Federation of Serbia. Seven instructors have passed the final exam. The diplomas of the Yoga Federation of Serbia, signed by the International Yoga Academy, were awarded on the New Year’s Eve festivity, on January 2, 2009, a solemn moment attended by all of the instructors of the Yoga Federation of Serbia, as well as the new generation of trainees (students). Immediately after the award of diplomas they were ready to begin conducting yoga classes (7).

“On October 13, 2010, diplomas were awarded to a new generation of yoga instructors, at the celebration held in the Yoga Federation of Serbia. The celebration was honored by the appearance of Art Yoga Similiris. The ceremony was particularly embellished by the youngest members of the Yoga Federation of Serbia. The names of new instructors are already to be found in the Register of Certified Instructors on the website of the Yoga Federation of Serbia. The celebration was sweetened by vegetarian culinary specialties at the end... and by the performance of Kirtana (music) (7)”

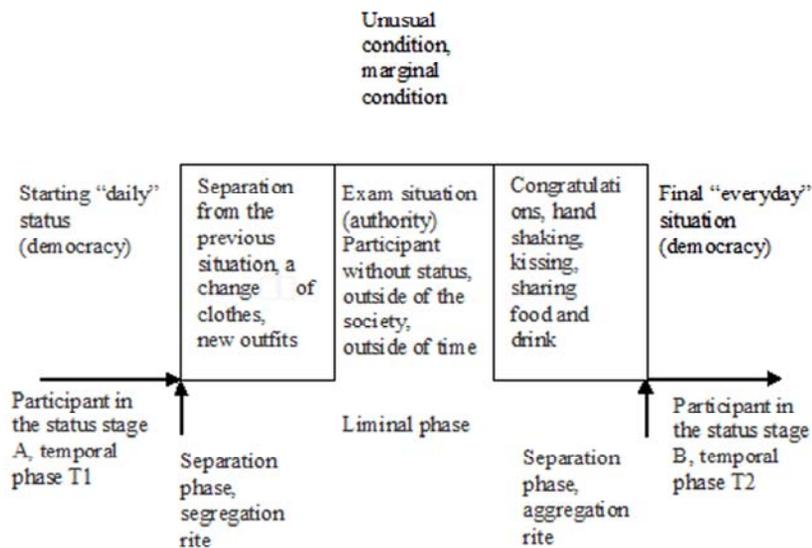
Congratulations expressed to a participant for a passed exam is a typical compliment action of an aggregation phase (Van Gennep, 1960), followed then by “feasting”. Common eating and drinking are the central part of an aggregation ritual. Food is among the strongest ritual symbols of community (from the couples’ sharing of a same dish up to the Last Supper).

The social status of participants at the beginning of the final exam is different from their social status at the end, while both differ from the state of absence of status – a state in the middle of the exam situation.

Binary opposition: change of social status of participants:

Participant (status A)
In the central part where the exam takes place the participant is without status
Yoga instructor (status B)

Based on everything stated above, we can set the scheme of transition rites related to the final exam for yoga instructors in the Yoga Center of Serbia:



Graphic representation of Van Gennep's, three-part structure of transition rites: presented by Edmund Leach.

Conclusion

We started from the thesis that the final exam for yoga instructors at the International Yoga Academy of the Yoga Federation of Serbia possesses a characteristic and content of the structure of a transition rite, that is, of a change of social status of students - participants. The final exam of yoga instructors have been considered in the wider theoretical context. There was conducted review of theoretical determinants on the concrete example. Aside from the indicated structure of transition rites in three phases, the final exam for yoga instructors is also characterized by the demarcation of time followed by the marking out of the social development of an individual through visible elements (clothes, food, behavior) of the event, clearly distinct from social routines and everyday life. Ensuing analysis confirms the already established pattern of a ritual crossing that accompanies an educational process. The conclusion is that the final exam at the International Yoga Academy of the Yoga Federation of Serbia is a part of the educational process that changes the status of participants in the society, which is regarded as a transition rite in the ethnological and anthropological literature. However, one must not

lose from sight that the thematic scope of this analysis is relatively narrow: only social dimension was embraced, that is, the change of social status of participants, while the paper was based on the social dimension of time as an important determinant of changes in social status of participants. Further explorations should be directed towards expanding the field of research on social dimensions of space where the action takes place during the final exam, not covered by this paper since it doesn't correspond to its topic nor intention. It is therefore necessary to expand the field of research and include other components that make up the final exam of a yoga instructor within the framework of analysis.

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