



rites of passage lesson

Folklife Program

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What is a ritual? Why do we have rituals? Why are they important? People do not form their identities naturally but as part of a cultural process. Rituals help to make individuals feel that they belong to a larger group; they are community sanctioned methods of marking natural or social transitions, times of danger, when outcomes can be unpredictable. These ceremonies attempt to control the natural world by marking a natural physical change like birth, adolescence, and death with a social/sacred ceremony. The educational aspect of rituals helps to teach individuals their role in the larger social group; they are often used to pass on group history to novices and remind the larger group of the importance of cultural continuity. With every generation, change must be made to seem part of the greater scheme of life.

Societies also have rituals to mark nonbiological events that mark status changes such as graduation, marriage, induction into different groups (military, scouts, first jobs) that involve special dress, a period of isolation with their peers and away from the rest of society, some kind of ceremony, and a recognition of the changed status (these also apply to those rituals that mark biological changes).

Below are questions to ask your students about rituals. Ask them to think of rituals in their own lives--and why they are important. Remind them that folklorists and anthropologists regard rituals as status transforming events; they do not use the term to refer to habits such as daily tooth brushing.

You can have your students do a variety of activities for this unit: make of list of rites of passage in their communities, interview others about important rites of passage in theirs, make an inventory of the components of several rites of passage and compare them, compare similar rites of passage in different cultures. A final project could include a web site or exhibit, re-enactments of different rites of passage for different cultures or essays describing, comparing, and contrasting rites of passage in different cultures.

Goals: Increase cross-cultural understanding, exploration of processes

Objectives: Interviewing, listening, comparing/contrasting components of events, explaining events to others

BACKGROUND QUESTIONS & INFORMATION:

1. What is a ritual?

A transition from one status to another—some kind of transformation **must** occur. Rituals are generally sacred ceremonies as opposed to profane (everyday) ones, yet even profane ones often invoke a spiritual authority to sanction them (e.g. religious benediction at secular graduation).

2. What is the purpose of ritual?

A community sanctioned method of marking a natural or social transition. Transitions are a time of danger, when outcomes can be unpredictable. Hence, rituals attempt to control the natural world by marking a natural physical change with a social/sacred ceremony.

3. Three stages of a ritual:

Entrance into a novice status, threshold or in-between time (often a time of seclusion), transition completed/new status achieved.

4. What are some examples of natural events that rituals mark? (Please note: those events listed below are not comprehensive.)

For holidays/communities: changes of season, the middle of a season (New Year, fall/harvest holiday, spring/rebirth, beginning and end of summer [Memorial Day, Labor Day], winter solstice (Christmas, Chanukah, Diwali, Tet, Chinese New Year), Spring Equinox [Easter, Passover, Holi, SE Asian New Years], summer solstice [July 4, Mid-Summer's Eve, Ascension of the Buddha]).

For individuals in communities: Birth—Christening, Baptism, Brit/Circumcision, Naming; Adolescence—Bar/Bat Mitzvot, receiving gar, quinceañera, getting a driver's license, graduation; Adulthood—Marriage, first job, first house; Mid-life—Menopause/Croning, Retirement; Death (funerals).

5. What are some examples of social/sacred events that rituals mark?

Circumcision, First Communion, Consecration, Bar/Bat Mitzvot, Confirmation, Marriage, Anniversaries, Birthdays, Graduation.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS TO ANSWER:

7. Why are rituals so important for society?

8. How do different cultures deal with this transitional time via formally constructed rituals?