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## Soldiering and the Rites of Passage

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*Abstract-* Armed forces are kept by the states for purposes of defense. Despite various claims, armies never become redundant. The need for protection of the boundaries, even though, a seemingly “old-fashioned” idea, is always there as a sheer reality to reckon with; for any given country. Being exposed to aggression is a sad probability, which may occur suddenly and hit the fate of any nation. A lot of philosophical sentences about the lacking of human reasoning in soldierly ways have also been uttered. Now, a soldier differs from a civilian and the transformation of the latter being into the former one is a radical social metamorphosis, including moral and physical factors. From an anthropological viewpoint, it is a full initiation ritual or passage rite. This fact alone renders all martial activities entirely rational and compatible with logic.

*Keywords:* soldier; soldierly; initiation / passage rite; military; army.

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# Soldiering and the Rites of Passage

Sinan Çaya

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## I. INTRODUCTION

- “To be, or not to be, that is the question!”-  
Hamlet character of Shakespeare

All along the course of history; admission into an admirable group, has always been attained through certain procedures, finalized by a relevant ceremony-like ritual of some sort.

It was French ethnologist *Arnold van Gennep* (1873-1957) who studied and defined the concept in

terms of a social science approach. *Rites des passages* do not pertain to early human societies alone, by any means. But the most prominent and demonstrative forms did of course, occur in primitive war-waging tribes.

In this particular context; initiation is the passage of a child into manhood by an act of strength, bravery, skill etc. He thereby gets separated from the other children and women —both of whom constitute a vulnerable group in need of protection and are considered lowly in the social status scale— socially. Instead, he is now projected onto the more respected level of a warrior or a fisher or a hunter, and so forth.

In one of the epic stories of the Oghuz Turks, one of the lords, *Dirse Khan* is an unhappy man without progeny. He prays to God for a son and his wish is accepted. The boy grows into splendid adolescence. But, for the moment, he has no name.

The tradition stipulates that a great task be executed to earn a name. In the festivities of another lord, *Bayindir Khan*, the boy engages in a fight with a fierce bull (*boğa* in Turkish) <sup>(1)</sup> and beats it with a mighty fist-blow. The notables of the tribe then bestow him with the glorious name Bogach Khan.



Fig. 1: Bogach Khan against the Bull (internet).

*A Man Called Horse* is a 1970 American Western film starring Richard Harris. *Sioux Indians* <sup>(2)</sup> capture a British citizen, Morgan. He is not killed but kept alive as the laughingstock of the tribe.

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Eventually, to prove himself, he liquidates two warriors from the neighboring rival *Shoshones* <sup>(3)</sup>.

Upon insisting on a fully equal tribal membership; they let him undergo the routine painful passage rite. The initiation in question consists of being

passage rite. The initiation in question consists of being hung on pins piercing the chest, in a ceremonial tent, and revolving around one's own axis in those miserable conditions, overnight.

The survivor is now a prestigious warrior, then. (Morgan accomplishes the testing). Any dead would just be a failure destined to get forgotten, soon. This mentality of such warring people is probably best expressed in a couplet composed by *Dadaloğlu* <sup>(4)</sup>, a well-known epic poet in Turkish collection of verbal literature.

*Numerous valiant comrades find themselves lifeless, on the soil.  
The dead are all bygone. But the living-rest, they belong to us!*

(The defiant bard goes on: *The High Edict of the Sultan is his own possession / While all this hilly landscape is our possessions*).

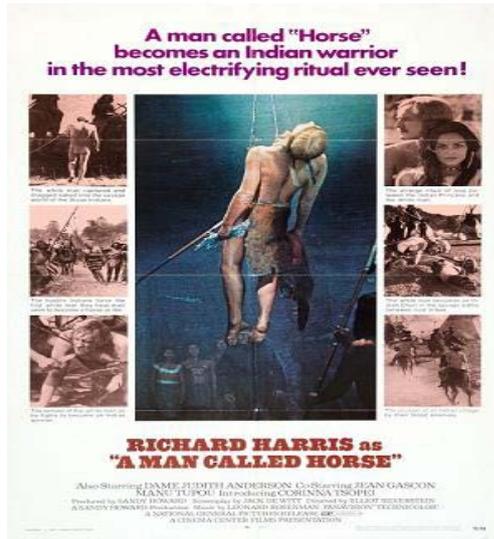


Fig. 2: The above-mentioned movie's poster (internet).

## II. REMNANTS OF THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

*A passage rite involves passing a physical or moral ordeal of some sort* (Sillamy 1967: 261). *Mankind could not and still cannot renounce the idea of initiation / passage rites, as it is a necessary process from the social point of view, in certain circumstances. The duration of the process or the ease with which it is done or the risks involved, may be of versatile character. Still; the main idea of transformation is always there, in many modern transactions just as it was in archaic or so-called primitive societies* (Çaya 2016).

Famous actor Kirk Douglas was born in Amsterdam quartier of New York in a poor house of immigrant (Russian Jew) parents. In his memoirs (1989: 28) he relates his difficult childhood days in a cosmopolitan neighborhood. The children of the neighborhood had rites of passage applied to the newcomers. They would make the new boy lean against the fountain, count until ten and shout that the church is on fire. At this point the others would rush to the boy and extinguish the imaginary fire by pissing on him.

Colors of belts in judo games are a form of initiation, valid in our day. Wearing the initials of one's university (i.e. H-letter of Harvard) on one's jersey as an honor-student with a high grand point average, or a champion sportsman is another modern version of the antiquated rites des passages. Certain secret societies attribute uttermost importance to the formalities of defined entry rituals. By watching certain initiation ceremonies, one can deduce which values or virtues come first in a given community or a society, for that matter.

In Roman Catholicism anointing the dying person is a *rite de passage*. Diving for the Cross, in Orthodox Christian church, is another example. (In Istanbul, now that the waters of the Golden Horn got cleaned, the ritual was resumed in the Golden Horn, some time ago. The Patriarch of Istanbul throws a wooden cross of substantial size into the waters and one of the young Rum swimmers fetches it).

Certain juvenile gangs apply certain shapes and symbols in the form of tattoos to portions of their bodies. In Japan, a stunted pinky finger is recognized as membership in Yakuza. In ancient times slaves were marked by facial cuts for recognition, in many societies including Persia and Crete among others. Up to a century ago young Chinese females <sup>(5)</sup> were forced to wear iron shoes; allegedly and euphemistically phrased, to keep the feet small; but effectively to cripple the women and connect them to their homes irreversibly (Feet grow despite the enclosure and get crooked).

## III. THE WORKING MECHANISM

'Initiation represents 'any single dramatic ceremonial observance'; it is a '*rite de passage*': Our society gives little formal recognition of the physiological and social changes a boy undergoes at puberty. He may be teased a little when his voice changes [breaks] or when he shaves for the first time. Changes in his social status from childhood are marked by a number of minor events [only]. Neither physiologically, socially, nor legally is there a clear demarcation between boyhood and manhood in our society" (Whiting, Kluckhan & Anthony 1958: 358)

"Members of fraternal and sororal [sisterly] organizations have long believed that the allegiance [loyalty] of a new member would be more secure if his indoctrination included some sort of painful or at least uncomfortable form of initiation: Wearing silly clothes, scrubbing the floor of the fraternity house with a toothbrush, paying a large initiation fee, undergoing painful paddling [walking barefoot] etc." (Raven & Rubin 1976:24).

It is known that the method works well with some new religions or cults, also. Leaders of some new cults also make the recruits pay highly for their belonging procedure. New members may donate all

their property or savings to the cult. They may have to renounce all their relatives and former friends. This abnegation only increases their new devotion, in practice, and it adds to the spiritual pleasure!

Let us make the comparison that even in an amateur football game in a school or university, an easy victory can taste insipid, whereas a victory gained by sweat and energy might be more gratifying for the winning team's players!

#### IV. MILITARY APPLICATIONS

On some occasions; the passage rite is like a seal and stamp of having gained certain knowledge and skills and having proved one's perseverance. A compulsory military service-term and especially the basic training part, falls into this category.

The new recruit endures some difficulties; habituates himself to the circumstances of collective life; gains and displays athletic abilities via sports; learns how to shoot and touch the target; goes without sleep as a sentry at nights, all alone in wilderness; proves his obedience to superiors. In this manner; he gets accepted into a new category of supremacy, different from idle civilian teenagers.

Finally, an official collective martial oath finishes his transition, breaking him off his former *unqualified* years of his life, entirely. Further ahead; his honorable discharge upon completion of the specified term is another phase of the initiation. Now, the young Turkish male has paid his debt to his homeland. In the village coffee-shop, the center of social life, he shall have also his say and he shall also be regarded with respect.

In certain regions of Turkey like the Thrace, a young man deserves to get a wife only after completing the service and never before his departure to the barracks. This is a very rational tradition, too. Service is much more difficult for a married man.

In my childhood days I heard a beautiful tale full of initiation motifs from my maternal grandfather: A poverty-stricken but clever and brave young man falls in love with the daughter of the Grand Vizier. He then personally goes to demand her hand in marriage from the powerful father. The high official is outraged but curious. When the expected allusion to his lowly status is mentioned, the adolescent calmly replies that he is the son of the sultan and thus there should be no problem, in this respect. In principle, is not the sultan the father of all subjects? The Grand vizier is dumbfounded but is quick to acknowledge the intelligence and the moral courage of the youth facing him.

He resorts to the following formula: He orders the zealous suitor to go out and re-enter the room. "Now, you are a corporal, son" he says. The procedure is repeated a number of times, the youth getting promoted incrementally: Second lieutenant, first lieutenant, captain, major, lieutenant-colonel, full colonel and finally pasha; before being accorded the girl.

The critical aspect of the tale lies in the initiation motif. The Vizier does not make him a general right away. He makes him wait in each step (if only in a symbolic manner) so that he actually somehow gains that particular rank. In armed forces in the real world, too, the same procedure is sometimes resorted to and the appearances are saved accordingly, in times of need.

Indeed; in 1968 Mexican Olympic games; an Ethiopian <sup>(6)</sup> athlete placed first in marathon: Mamo Wolde (1932-2002). Emperor Haile Selassie (1892-1975) (with the nickname *Lions of Lions*) was watching from the honor lodge. He immediately issued an order to his officers:

-Promote Wolde to the rank of sergeant!



Fig. 3: Champion Wolde (internet)

#### V. CONCLUSION

In our day; military ways and means are harshly criticized in certain circles. Especially the 'hot' basic training or boot camp is regarded as the culmination of illogical persecution. Some so-called philosophical sayings do claim that soldiering commences at the very point where logic comes to an end. But in reality; all martial values and virtues may also be taken into account, from the point of view of *passage rites*. Only then; all the negative arguments fall flat and a new perspective emerges, from where one can deduce that martial practices contain all ins and outs of the finest logic and the utmost high human reasoning!

##### Notes

1. Besides the famous bull fighting games in Spain and Mexico, Bull-leaping is a motif of the culture in Minoan Crete. The game consists of a skilled jump over a released bull in a confined space. The leaper takes hold of the horns and when the animal jerks his head, the movement aids the leaper to land on the ground smoothly with an artistic somersault. In a historical novel of Mary Renault based on Greek mythology; Thesus gets enslaved by the Cretans and spends some time on the island as a bull-dancer. He survives and taking profit of an earthquake, he organizes a revolt with the cooperation of other team members. They

confiscate a ship and return home to Athens, sound and safe.

- American Indians, especially in the North, were proud and belligerent people whose folklore contains epic motifs of all sorts. Before the arrival of the white man, they were warring among themselves. In social science literature; *counting coups* (recorded by the number of notches on a wooden object or the number of feathers in the head-dress) is a measure of the bravery acts of a young Indian warrior (like dashing into enemy tents and bringing an object as booty).

From the writings of anthropologist Wilson (1974: 163-164) we infer that the *Iroquois* were once at war with *Cherokees*. The author gives the resume of a mode-hunter from the former tribe. He respects the nature properly. He spares young animals, which are able to reproduce. He even smears some honey on the barks of trees, for the bears. One day enemies from the latter tribe kill him. When his body is discovered; all animals in the region cooperate and revive the good hunter; thanks to a collectively prepared magical potion. Before leaving him, the animals engage in a sacred chant, the melody of which sticks to the hunter's memory. But the recipe of the potion is not revealed. It would only be apparent to a virgin, determined by this chant, they herald.

- It appears that the *Shoshoni* mentioned in the passage later evolved into a peaceful tribe, in the half-arid Great Basin region. They became more of gatherers (including grass seeds, roots, berries) less of hunters, as a matter of fact.

Anthropologist Julian Haynes Steward (1902-1972) recites that in every autumn season the *Shoshoni* gathered pine nuts and stored them for the coming winter. Although in winter they formed larger population groups, they did not stick to stable social units, due to the fact that pine nuts were not available in the same places year by year. Their social structure was accordingly affected, staying more fluid than rigid and making leadership more fuzzy than conspicuous (Çaya 2016).

- The famous bard of Taurus nomadic Turkmen tribes, *Dadaloğlu*, supported the revolt of *Kozanoğlu* against an Ottoman army commanded by *Dervish Pasha* (in 1865), sent to render the nomads sedentary subjects, by brute force.
- Allegedly the purpose was to facilitate tax collection and army-conscriptions. But some authors insinuate that *Sultan Abdülaziz* was convinced by British authorities: Manpower was needed to grow cotton on the suitable Cilicia plain. Plans were made about shipping the rich product to England, to sustain the monstrously-growing textile plants of the wild capitalism, at the time.

Novelist *Yashar Kemal*, in a trilogy, wrote about the last landlords trying to keep the virtuous feudal norms alive. The protagonist is *Dervish Bey*. His grandfather had named him *Dervish* after the pasha on the opposite camp! The commander's nobility was appreciated even by the rebellious ringleaders.

- The overwhelming majority of *rites des passages* pertains to males; but females are not totally exempt from the concept. Female circumcision is one dramatic example, performed in some parts of Africa, even in contemporary times. As a mild form of female-initiation, we can give the example of girls' earlobes getting pierced for earrings. Moreover; here is a *case story*.

My widow-aunt's daughter got married to a rich young man, years ago. One day my aunt came to pay a visit to her sister, my mother, a school teacher. The aunt complained that at her new house her daughter was being ordered by the mother-in-law to mend torn socks. "Needle and thread to repair socks in a well-to-do house?" she would complain. Mother contemplated for a moment and softly spoke:  
-Maybe they want the bride to be familiar with sewing cloths, anyhow.

Then the aunty fell into a resigned silence. Mother had explained in simple words that it was part of an initiation of some sort. Traditionally a married woman is a good tailor as well as a good cook.

- Ethiopians make good marathoners. My former gym teacher was an admirer of *Abebe Bikila*, who always ran barefooted except once.

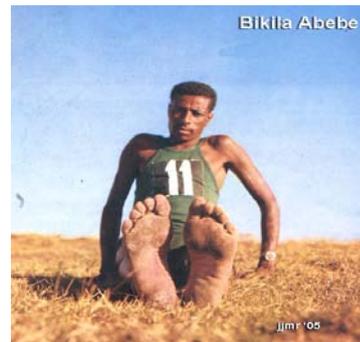


Fig.4: Champion Bikila (1932-1973) (internet).

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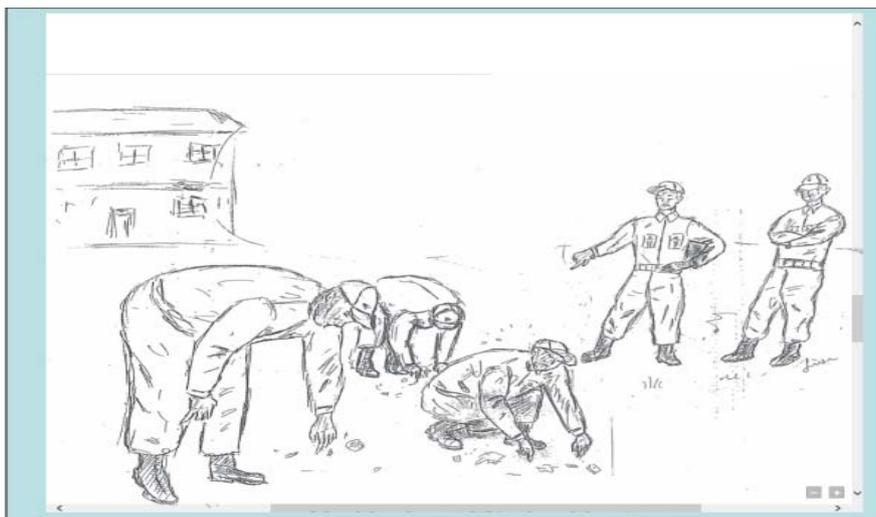
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### APPENDIX: MORE VISUAL MATERIAL



*Fig.5:* Many Turkish youths look forward to the military service, despite expected hardships (illustration by the Author).



*Fig. 6:* A common morning activity is cleaning the barracks territory, which is carried out by the newer recruits under the supervision of the senior plain soldiers (illustration by the Author).



*Fig. 7:* Earning double stripes on the arm is a further sweet *initiation* for some. A proud photograph is immediately sent home. In villages, this rank becomes a life-long nickname (illustration by the Author).

