

CHAPTER THREE

THE BODY OF THE RITE: GENDER AND SOCIAL AGES

3.1. *Introduction: Rites of Passage*

In this chapter I will deal from a dynamic perspective with social representations of the body, taking into consideration the different stages of life and the socio-cultural definitions of those stages. Throughout life, bodies undergo biological changes but these are clothed in symbols and attributions which are also gradually modified. Each stage of life is marked off by rites of passage, indicators of transition which determine the inclusion and exclusion of the individual in and from the categories of different age groups. The definition and range of these social ages was rapidly transformed in the second half of the 20th century, as can be seen from alterations in the categories of infancy and youth.

The transitions between these categories are institutionalised by collective rites involving the body and person, and each of these rites tends to reproduce the phases described in Arnold Van Gennep's classic work: separation, liminal transition and incorporation in the new state.¹ However, the ritual is not a mere certification of natural differences, but a collective act which institutionalises systems of classification and differentiation.²

Rites of passage mark the transition between different social states, as is indicated by the way in which the person and his/her body receive a change of name or category. Comparative ethnographic studies have shown wide variations in the age cohorts which make up the kind of social age groups to which I am referring: being a child, young person, adult or old person are labels which must be interpreted in the context of their use. Let us take the illustrative example of the names used to describe individuals of different ages in the central Rif, as studied by David M. Hart in the 1950s. In the Rif, before the name-giving festival, a boy is described as *a'azri* and a girl *dha'azrith*; from the moment the name is received until adolescence, a boy becomes *aharmush* or *afrukh* and a

¹ Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*, Paris, E. Nourry, 1909.

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Ce que parler veut dire: l'économie des échanges linguistiques*, Paris, Fayard, 1982.

girl *dhaharmushth* or *dhafrukth*; in the period between adolescence and marriage, the terms “boy” and “girl” which were used before the name-giving ceremony i.e. *a’azri* and *dha’azrith*, are used again; after marriage, the husband is known as *argaz*, “man”, and his wife *dhamgarth*, “woman”; at the age of about fifty, a man receives the name of *afqir* and a woman that of *dhafqirth*, and a woman over the age of eighty is known as *shwatan*, “little she-devil”.³

In Anjera, the frontier region bordering on Ceuta, the term *bint*, “girl”, in this case referring to a “virgin girl”, is still applied to any woman who has not married and has not had children, at which point she comes to be known as *mra*, “woman”. Thus a 35-year-old woman can be labelled a “girl”, whereas a married 15-year-old mother will be called a “woman”.⁴ This second example shows how interpretations of sexuality and, above all, of reproduction, play a central role in definitions of the person.

Comparison of the different rituals which I will now go on to analyse will reveal the mechanisms used to construct gender differences, and the structural repetition of ritual aspects, such as sacrifice (physical, by slitting the throat of an animal, or symbolic, by means of offerings or tributes), the pre-eminence of certain colours or the use of prophylactic or decorative substances like henna, a complete protective symbol which is applied as much to the recent mother and newly born child as it is to the circumcised boy or the bride and groom at a wedding. By means of these rites, the categories of social classification are naturalised, given that they are inscribed and projected onto the body. I would like to underline that the description of the rituals which follows is not canonical and is full of doubts and questions, because we lack the studies needed to confirm the historicity and transformation of many of these rites, not to say their tremendous variability between regions and classes. My presentation will follow a chronological pattern, from birth to death, and will pass through the phases marked by sexuality and reproduction. It is by passing through these phases that a person acquires his or her forms of social belonging (gender, position in the parentage system, age, religion etc.).

³ David M. Hart, *The Aith Waryaghar of the Moroccan Rif. An Ethnography and History*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology, no. 55, 1976, p. 118.

⁴ Eva E. Rosander, *Women in a Borderland. Managing Muslim identity where Morocco meets Spain*, Stockholm, Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology, 1991.