

The Role of Clothing in Rites of Passage

by NEUS RIBAS SAN EMETERIO,
director of the Arenys de Mar Museum

Rites of Passage

¹ The anthropologist Manuel Delgado reflects on rites of passage and the concept of transition in his blog: <http://goo.gl/FfWDxM>.

Rites of passage are social practices that represent changes in social status. These changes are generally transitions from one life stage to another that are determined by social convention; a person changes his or her status in a particular place. The concept was introduced in 1909 by the French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, who theorised on changes in the life of an individual in relation to society and the ways in which these changes, namely the transition to adulthood, marriage and death, are consecrated.¹

Rites of passage express not only individual changes but also collective changes. Every society has elaborated ceremonies to dramatise them; in some cases the ceremonies are religious and in others they are social. Examples are the Jewish bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah; the celebrations that were held all over Spain when *quintos* — boys who had reached the age of majority — went off to do their military service; and university graduation ceremonies in the USA.

The individuals who are the focus of these ceremonies tend to dress in a particular way and their attire distinguishes them from the rest of the community. In this article we discuss the importance of clothing and the trousseau in rites of passage such as birth, the transition to adulthood, marriage and death.

Clothing as Information

Clothing provides information and is a means of human communication. Our attire often gives away information about our status, our gender, our occupation, our likes and our dislikes. It says something of our opinions and is a means of self-assertion. In celebrating life changes in rites of passage, society has developed stereotyped dresses and trousseaus that, though they have changed over the centuries, continue to be viewed as necessary.

Traditionally, European society has linked rites of passage to religion: a christening celebrates a new addition to the community and the purification of the newborn; the First Communion signals the passage from childhood to a



Exhibition *Vestits per a l'ocasió, la indumentària en els ritus de pas* (Dressed for the Occasion: Clothing in Rites of Passage) Photograph: Txeni Gil.

wiser age; marriage brings social standing and a family; and finally, a funeral bids farewell to a member of the community. Rites of passage do not just make life changes public; they also bring recognition from the community.

Here, we analyse the role of clothing in rites of passage from the first half of the nineteenth century onwards, when industrialisation and the predominance of urban milieus over rural communities wrought changes in social customs. Industrialisation and increased population density in urban areas made clothing more uniform as it strived for a bourgeois aesthetic, while in rural societies popular clothing remained the norm until practically the first half of the twentieth century. Until the second half of the twentieth century, when mass production was not yet a fact, ceremonial costumes took on a crucial role, and women would often have a particular dress for special occasions such as weddings and christenings.

The Arenys de Mar Museum has produced an exhibition and will soon publish a catalogue on the relationship between clothing and rites of passage. **The exhibition** can be viewed at the Marès Museum in Arenys de Mar from 24 January to 18 December 2016.

Baptism: A Celebration of Life

In the Christian religion, the baptism ritual represents the addition of a new member of the community, the choice of a name and the child's purification. The ceremony is traditionally held soon after birth; in some communities, on the first Sunday. This celerity can be attributed to the high infant mortality rate that persisted until the mid-twentieth century. In addition to being a religious



Two women and a babe in arms on the day of the christening, at the door of a church in Vic.
Photograph: Josep Torrent i Garrigoles, taken between 1895 and 1917. Catalan Hiking Association.

² Another of the traditions linked to christenings that referred to the baby's health was to give out sweets to children. The godparents threw sweets up in the air during the baptismal procession. The book *El veïnat de la meva infantesa. Records d'en Manel Sunyer Mas*, published by the Viladecans City Council, recalls a popular song sung to mark the occasion: "*Tireu confits que no són podrits; tireu avellanes que no són corcades; si no en voleu tirar, el nen es morirà!*" [Throw sweets that aren't rotten; throw hazelnuts that aren't spoiled. If you don't, the baby will die!].

³ Casa Sivilla was a lingerie outlet and workshop founded in 1898 by Concepció Carresi Verdager, Sivilla's widow, who was of Italian origin. It became very popular among the Catalan middle class in the twentieth century.

celebration, a christening is also a social and family celebration that announces the arrival of a new member of the community. Until the first quarter of the twentieth century, in many towns in Spain a baptism was proclaimed with a special peal of the bells and a retinue accompanying the newborn baby from the home to the church.²

The newborn who was to be baptised wore a christening gown that distinguished him or her from the other members of the community. The gown is a complex garment made of soft materials such as organza, chiffon or even silk that is decorated with lace and embroidery. It was traditionally white or off-white to represent the purity and innocence of the infant and comprised the gown, a cape and a cap. It was the same for girls and boys. In many cases, it was made by the family, although sometimes it was a gift from the godmother, and it was kept from generation to generation. Wealthy and upper middle class families ordered the gowns from specialised dressmakers. The christening gown appeared in the eighteenth century, when the rite of immersing the baby in water was abandoned.

The Arenys de Mar Museum, in its collection of lace and fabrics, conserves christening gowns from the first half of the nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth century, when the use of the garment declined with the loss of influence of the Catholic Church. In most cases, they have the features mentioned above, and several of them were produced by specialised dressmakers such as Barcelona's Casa Sivilla.³

First Communion: A Step into Adulthood

The First Communion is a ritual by which the child is prepared spiritually to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist, the highest expression of the Christian faith. The ceremony usually takes place when the child is about eight years old. Until the first half of the twentieth century, the ceremony represented, from social and anthropological perspectives, the transition from childhood to adulthood. In a society in which children were not fully schooled and many of them entered the workforce very early, the First Communion represented this transition from one stage to the next.

The dress that symbolises the transition to adulthood is elaborated upon during the twentieth century and particularly from the 1920s onwards. Boys tended to wear a suit and tie, a military uniform or a sailor suit, leaving the short trousers of childhood behind. Girls dressed as brides-to-be, in long white dresses and veils. Social changes in the 1960s led to other, simpler kinds of christening garments, although white continued to be the norm for girls. The tradition of dressing children taking the First Communion in white and as



Nineteenth century wedding in Sant Pere de Terrassa. Author unknown, 6 June 1930. B. Ragón Collection, Municipal Archive of the Terrassa City Council.

4 Clotilde Pascual (1894-1969) was a lacemaker and embroiderer known for her needlework and her reproductions of antique models, which are held by the Decorative Arts Museum and private collectors such as Josep Pascó. The Arenys de Mar Museum preserves the collection of lace and embroidery donated by her family.

5 The bridal chests are one of the most unique types of Catalan furniture and date back to the fifteenth century. They were used to transport, store and display the trousseau.

adults still stands today, although in the case of girls the veil is no longer worn.

First Communion dress included several other elements, some of them religious and others that were part of the trousseau: a rosary, the missal or prayer book, keepsakes and so on. With reference to fabrics, many girls carried a communion bag that was also white or ecru and made of natural materials. In some cases, it was embroidered, like *Clotilde Pascual's bag*,⁴ which she may have embroidered herself with the words *Recuerdo de la Primera Comuni3n* (Keepsake of the First Communion), from 1905.

Marriage: A Change in Family Status

The wedding ceremony was traditionally the end to a process of courtship, engagement and financial negotiations between the two families. Throughout history, especially among wealthy families and the nobility, marriages were a way of making pacts and forging alliances, whether economic or political in nature. For the bride the process was expressed symbolically in items of furniture; she brought to the marriage a bridal chest⁵ containing a domestic trousseau of bed linen, household goods and lingerie that she had collected over time.

The image of the betrothed in the community is still of great importance. They choose special garments for a civilian or religious rite that involves a life change. The garments chosen communicate the new situation to others and have evolved over the centuries in keeping with customs, fashion, economic and social changes, religious tradition and so on. The use of white as the favoured colour for wedding dresses seems to have its origins in the white Honiton lace dress worn by Queen Victoria (1819-1901) when she married Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, in 1840 — a break from the silver and white dress that was the tradition.

Mourning dress for a christening,
Arenys de Mar Museum ([see detail](#)).
Photograph: Irene Masriera.



⁶ These motifs or symbols on fans include love scenes, mythological scenes alluding to love, rose bouquets, flower garlands, bows, the couple's initials and so on.

From that moment on, white weddings became popular among the urban classes and brides invariably chose white for their wedding dress. In Spain, until the first half of the twentieth century, among the working classes and the rural bourgeoisie brides wore a black wedding dress and a white veil or black shawl (*mantilla*) covering the head. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, the popularity of the wedding ceremonies of European royalty and nobility led to the establishment of white as the colour of the bridal dress. Wedding dresses followed fashion in a wider sense, though some of their features are still unmistakeable. White as the basic colour, natural materials such as silk and organza, tulle veils and a proliferation of lace and embroidery are some of these unchanging features.

In rural areas, until the first quarter of the twentieth century, those entering into the contract of marriage wore traditional dress on this significant date. In the Catalan tradition, the bride wore traditional dress composed of a doublet, a silk skirt embroidered with flowers, mittens, a silk and lace apron, a handkerchief worn across the chest and a white *mantilla* worn on the head. The latter was the identifying mark of the bride. Informally referred to as *peix* (fish), it was rectangular in shape with rounded ends and was usually embroidered. Sewn to this piece were the large lace ruffles that fell about the head and shoulders of the bride. Salvador Vilarrasa i Vall, in his book *La vida a pagès*, describes the ritual wedding between the *hereu* (traditionally, an heir) and the *pubilla* (traditionally, an heiress): “*la núvia puja a la rectoria per posar-se el vestit de casar i la mantellina i quan està ben arreglada, baixen amb sa mare i germana a l'església*” [the bride goes up to the rectory to put on her wedding dress and shawl, and when she is so arranged she walks down with her mother and sister to church]. Among the wedding *mantillas* kept at the Arenys de Mar Museum there is one worn by Ramona Puigdollers Castells, a *pubilla* from Vic, who had inherited it from her mother and wore it at her wedding to Josep Verdaguer i Callís, a cousin of the priest Cinto Verdaguer, in Vic, in 1855. It is an exceptional piece of ecru hand-embroidered silk tipped with Lille bobbin lace.

During the second half of the nineteenth century and until the end of the First World War, at middle-class weddings the bride's trousseau was completed with other elements such as the wedding fan and the ceremonial handkerchief. Fans, often a gift from the groom made of bobbin lace or needlework, were painstakingly handcrafted by artisans and thus showed the family's wealth. During the first quarter of the twentieth century the wealth of a bridal trousseau could be measured by the amount of lace on the different pieces that made up the wedding dress, all of which were romantic and traditional in their design and bore motifs that referred to marriage.⁶

Wedding dress, 1920s. Carmen Viñas-L'Arca de l'Àvia Collection ([see detail](#)). Photograph: Irene Masriera.



⁷ Arenys lace (*ret fi*) was the white lace made on the Maresme coast north of Barcelona. It was made of cotton or linen and included handmade point ground lace.

⁸ The catalogue *Blanca y radiante* (White and Radiant) describes the symbolism of wedding accessories such as the veil, which represents the desire for a new life and is a reminder of the *flammeum*, a Roman veil that symbolised the virginity of the bride and protection from evil spirits.

⁹ In the first half of the nineteenth century, brides wore a veil or a hat that was sometimes covered with a veil. From the early twentieth century onwards, veils and long trains became common.

Along with the fan, another important element was the white ceremonial handkerchief embroidered with the bride's initials. In Catalan society there were several models of ceremonial handkerchief made of Arenys lace⁷ with floral designs. The Arenys de Mar Museum lent the exhibition at the Catalan History Museum *Do I Love You? A History of Love and Marriage* a ceremonial lace handkerchief with the same lace design found at the Lázaro Galdiano Foundation in Madrid and in collections belonging to private collectors who have been able to confirm that it is a wedding handkerchief.

Among the urban classes, the wedding veil is an important complement to the wedding dress. Its origin seems to date back to the Roman Empire.⁸ In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the veil was relatively small and brides would often wear it over their shoulders. Handmade lace veils were very expensive and few could afford them, but the introduction of machine-woven tulle in the first half of the nineteenth century lowered costs and the use of the veil spread. From the 1920s onwards, veils became longer.⁹

Death: The Final Journey

Bidding goodbye to a member of the community is a social event. In pre-industrial societies the ritual of burial involved the entire community or village. Before the nineteenth century, the body was accompanied by a cortege carrying torches, the number of which reflected the deceased's wealth. With industrialisation, the ceremonies gradually became more focused on the family, who held a vigil the night before the funeral.

Until the second half of the twentieth century, when a person died the immediate family displayed their grief by wearing black. Tradition dictated a specific period of mourning; in some areas of Andalusia this could be eight years for members of the immediate family. In a man's case, mourning was expressed by wearing black for the first year and dark colours thereafter. His dress was distinguished by features such as a black ribbon on his hat and a black armband around the left sleeve of his jacket. A woman wore a long veil over her hat, hiding her face; this kind of veil was later replaced by a black gauze veil that was placed directly over the head. During religious ceremonies, everyone wore black or dark colours and women wore a veil or a *mantilla* over their heads.

The entire family wore mourning dress, including the children; nonetheless, the mourning christening dress embroidered with the number 613 that is preserved at the Arenys de Mar Museum is striking. It belonged to Francesc Sarraís Serra, who was born circa 1850 in Berga and who had lost his father before he was born. The family made a mourning dress lined with ecru silk and black silk lace around the hem.

Conclusion: Clothing Continues to Mark Special Occasions

Despite changes in society, rite of passage celebrations continue to be an essential part of a person's life cycle and clothing makes clear his or her change in status. Social changes and the decline in religion as a central part of rite of passage celebrations has not led to their disappearance. The businesses devoted to ceremonies such as first communions and weddings are an ongoing testament to the importance given by families and society to rites of passage. ●

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AMADES, Joan: *Costumari Català*, Edicions 62 Barcelona.
- ÁLVAREZ, Consuelo, BORRÁS, José Ma., FERNÁNDEZ, David, GONZÁLEZ, Elvira, HERRADÓN, Ma. Antonia and VÁZQUEZ, Elena: *Bebés. Usos y costumbres sobre el nacimiento*. Costume Museum, Madrid 2013.
- CORDNER, Susanna: *A Romantic Frame of Mind*, blog *Here Comes the Bride*, Victoria and Albert Museum. <http://goo.gl/waarQv>. February 2015.
- CORDNER, Susanna: *A Georgian Romance*, blog *Here Comes the Bride*, Victoria and Albert Museum. <http://goo.gl/waarQv>. August 2014.
- CREIXELLS I CABEZA, Rosa: *Les caixes catalanes del Museu de Granollers*. Treballs Lauro 12. 1996, <http://goo.gl/xo2Kpy>.
- GARRICH, Montserrat and VENTOSA, Sílvia: *Els vestits populars a Catalunya*. Brau Edicions, Figueres, 2014.
- MENDOZA Urgal, Maria del Mar: *El vestido femenino y su identidad: El vestido en el arte de finales del siglo xx y principios del siglo xxi*, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Facultad de Bellas Artes, Madrid 2010.
- RÀFOLS, J. F.: *Diccionario Biográfico de Artistas de Cataluña*, Editorial Millà. Barcelona 1953
- RIVIERE, Margarita: *Diccionario de la moda*, Editorial Debolsillo, Barcelona 2014.
- RODRÍGUEZ COLLADO, Mercedes: *La pieza del mes: Eduard Moureau y Fábrica Alexandre. Abanico, 1858* National Romanticism Museum, June 2010. <http://goo.gl/ns4DhL>.
- SAURET, Teresa (ed.): *Blanca y radiante. Desde la invisibilidad a la presencia en el universo femenino*. Malaga City Council, Area of Culture, Municipal Heritage Museum. Malaga 2009.
- SUNYER MAS, Manel: *El veïnat de la meva infantesa. Records d'en Manel Sunyer Mas*. Viladecans City Council, 2004
- VENDRELL, Felip: *Històries de l'amor pagès. Costums i usos amorosos dels pagesos catalans*. Edicions Grata, Capellades, 1998.
- VILARRASA, Salvador: *La vida a pagès*, Impremta Maideu, Ripoll 1975.
- ZASSO, Anne: *Marriage*, Editions Assoulin. Paris, 1999.
- VARIOUS AUTHORS: *La dona y el romanticisme*. Lecture series. Quaderns del Museu Frederic Marès. 1996.