

## Rite de transition

A Design Choreographic exploration of cultural value exchange, through development of intercultural ritual artefacts

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**Abstract:** This research project is called *Rite de transition*. By means of DesignChoreography, an approach developed by Sietske Klooster, we explore the rituals revolving around traditional Turkish marriage. In due course, inspired by an emotional and auto-ethnographic interpretation of the explored rituals, Klooster designs a novel ritual and artefact that intend to embody shared values, hence intercultural exchange. We choose for a bodily first person approach as we estimate that the complexities of the modern world – i.e. cultural clashes and the breakdown of cultures - require a radical change in tackling these issues. We suggest to move away from pure rational analytic approach our society adhered to. We are on the verge of a new era that embraces diversity and organic interaction that cannot and does not have to be standardized, fixed or rigidly defined anymore. Our approach is based on embodiment and phenomenology, allowing us to diverge from narrowing down broad societal and cultural issues to mere rational thinking and judging. We use DesignChoreography as a vehicle, since the knowing and making body can experience meanings and values that lie underneath visual appearance. By doing so we bring about our bodily understanding for intercultural interaction and exchange.

**Keywords:** Cultural values; experience-based interaction design; DesignChoreography; embodiment; phenomenology

### 1. CULTURE

Culture is becoming more complex, hidden in the small details of our transcultural society and in the subtleties of human behaviour. As Victor Turner mentions: "We have been too prone to think, in static terms, that cultural superstructures are passive mirrors, mere reflections of sub-structural

productive modes and relations or of the political processes that enforce the dominance of the productively privileged. If we were as dialectical as we claim to be, we would see that it is more a matter of an existential bending back upon ourselves: the same plural subject is the active superstructure that assesses the substructural and structural modalities that we *also* are. Our concreteness, our substantiality is with us in our reflexivity...' (Turner, 1977: vii)

Cultural differences usually are explained and thought of in studies on anthropology, sociology or psychology, amongst others. They seldom are physically experienced and researched with and through our bodily senses. We estimate that cultural complexity – from the perspective of design - makes a first person perspective essential in order to gain a more thorough understanding of what cultural values are about. A first person perspective requires a more intuitive and sensorial exploration of culture, both for designers and non-designers to gain common knowledge on culture.

We look for DesignChoreography and bodily interaction to touch upon the meaning of marriage rituals within a small Turkish community from Emirdağ, living in Brussels. Marriage migration between Turkish communities living in Europe and emigration regions in Turkey is a current academic issue. In Belgium the majority of immigrants with a Turkish background come from this region. Scholarly research has been delivered, especially at the Universities of Antwerp and Ghent, from the field of social sciences, anthropology and ethnography on the question why young people, born and raised in western Europe, till recent years opted for a partner from a region that is largely unknown to them but proves to be their parents', or even grandparents', region of origin? The existence of a 'culture of migration' binding the region of origin with the region of destination in which the family as an institution builds a bridge between tradition and everyday reality, caught our attention and was the initial start for this project. (Timmerman, 2009)

We implement auto-ethnography and DesignChoreography as an emotional research method to start interaction with this culture that seems remote from ours. Its remoteness and difference attracted us to find the deep-rooted values that lie within. Instead of keeping an observational view (which we believe may also be one of the causes of this remoteness or isolation) we are interested to interact with the deep-rooted values this culture must have. As bodily understanding (Abram, 1996) and crafting artefacts is a universal human interaction mode, we estimate that DesignChoreography, as a medium, brings us closer to the essence of what rituals are and what they stand for within the context of this community, in relation to our 'secularised' western society.

## 2. RITUAL

What is the ritual upholding? What function does it serve? What social structures does it maintain? How do we understand them?

The importance of rituals within culture cannot be minimized nor underestimated. Rituals relate to decisive moments in life. Lifecycle rituals are rituals that accompany and assure crucial transitions in human life. The French ethnographer and father of formal 'processual' analysis, Arnold Van Gennep, called them 'rites de passage'. In his major work *Les Rites de Passage*, originally published in 1909, Van Gennep defines rites de passage as rituals, which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age. They mark forgiveness, reconciliation or transitions to adulthood, married life, divorce, healing from sickness, and death. Van Gennep: 'The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another.' (Van Gennep, 1977: 2-3)

Because of the importance of these transitions in life, Van Gennep thinks it legitimate to single out

rites de passage as a special category, which under further analysis may be subdivided into rites of separation, transition rites and rites of incorporation. These three subcategories are not developed to the same extent by all peoples or in every ceremonial pattern. Rites of separation are prominent in funeral ceremonies, rites of incorporation at marriages.

Thus, although a complete scheme of rites de passage theoretically includes 'preliminal' rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and 'postliminal' rites (rites of incorporation), in specific instances these three types are not always equally important or equally elaborated. (Van Gennep, 1977: 10-11) According to Turner: 'Van Gennep has shown that all rites of passage or 'transition' are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or limen, signifying "threshold" in Latin) and aggregation. The first phase comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both. During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or the coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and "structural" type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards...'. (Turner, 1977: 94-95)

In his thought provoking book *The Ritual Process*, Victor Turner states that society seems to be 'a process rather than a thing' –a dialectical process with successive phases of structure and communitas. (Turner, 1977: 203) In line with Van Gennep, Turner further developed the concept of liminality, besides that of communitas, structure and antistructure. Liminality, as he calls it, is a state of being in between phases. In a rite of passage the individual in the liminal phase is neither a member of the group he previously was part of, nor is he member of the group he will belong to upon completion of the rite. Turner characterizes this second phase in the ritual process, also called the transitional phase, as one of 'ambiguity': the ritual subjects are suspended between their former and future positions. He equates the transitional phase as the ambiguous 'liminal' period in which the 'passenger' passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. (Turner, 1977: 94)

### **3. AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF MARRIAGE RITUAL**

To support human functioning in these different states of being, conscious transitional moments are essential to embody the new state-of-being and to be able to function accordingly. Transitions are an important matter in life. These rites de passage are supported by artefacts, which become vehicles of transformational action and movement. Ritual artefacts are literal matter for transition or transformation.



**Figure 1:** Performance of henna ritual in Brussels

Within the lifecycle rituals, marriage - according to Van Gennep- constitutes the most important of the transitions from one social category to another, and for at least one of the spouses it involves an economic, (Van Gennep, 1977: 119) territorial (Van Gennep, 1977: 192) and essentially a social act. (Van Gennep, 1977: 117)

The marriage ritual is a complex issue. It is very confusing to understand from the perspective of our culture. In this research project we interacted in an auto-ethnographic way with the Muslim lifecycle ritual of marriage, transposed and adapted to western living circumstances in Brussels. The Muslim ritual of marriage consists of several ceremonies. *“Turkish marriage ritual”, Sietske Klooster observes, “seems more of a process of transformation in family relations, instead of a moment of bonding, such as our moment with the rings. Choosing an object from the beginning was not an option. The Turkish marriage ritual is not built around one clear moment, point or object, but is a whole chain of events and places incorporating many accessories. I had planned to soon choose one object and investigate through that. While working I discovered I could not do so, yet had to go through the maximum confusion about all things that happen. Even with the Turkish there was a lot of confusion, having different ways of doing the same and also interpreting the values behind.”*

Klooster continues: *“I decided to dive into this confusion, give it time to settle and sink down to the pattern, principle that would emerge through taking time to see, listen and hear all this information. Here I decided to let my own process of feeling honest connection develop: where does it trigger a fundamental feel for common ground. Taking time to also let the feels of social cultural difference and even rejection happen, to sense where I felt an appealing ground for exchange.”*

*“Not where we are the same, not where we are different, but where I feel space for exchange and mutual insights...making a puzzle differences that fit with each other. Such as combining the notion of equality between man and woman with the notion of both being fundamentally different and combining these to become a basis for family bonding.”*

Why choosing the henna ritual? *“The henna ritual triggers recognition of an important moment in life that is not ritually supported by our culture: the moment of a woman, saying goodbye to her daughter-mother relationship, to make place for becoming a mother herself. This ritual in marriage focuses on the relating of families and the transformations in there. It also brings in the combination of saying goodbye and being welcomed at the same time; grief and joy happening almost at the same time. Grief because of the loss of the childhood mother by the future bride; joy because of the future bride becoming wife and member of the new family of her husband. Feasting this dichotomy of emotions feels as a very strong concept, which I recognize as a beautiful aspect of life, yet not so much celebrated in our culture.”*

#### **4. DESIGN CHOREOGRAPHY**

With *Rite de transition* we explored the possibilities of cultural interaction and transformation through combined design and choreography, i.e. DesignChoreography, also known as Choreography of Interaction within the field of interaction design. (Klooster, 2005) Here the design of an artefact originates from the design of an action or activity, i.e. a movement, with inherent physical involvement, dynamic quality and experienced meaning. The formation of the movement is done in a bodily way. The designer, just like a choreographer, explores and defines the movement to elicit. Then the artefact is created through making and exploring its affordance of the intended movement.

In this case a novel ritual is created, inspired by the traditional Turkish Muslim marriage ritual, and interpreted in a western European way. Bodily communication between these two cultures here is essential.

Sietske Klooster is DesignChoreographer. The combination, moreover integration of design and choreography is her communication vehicle *par excellence* to facilitate societal transformation. Her approach involves movement as the pivotal modality to bodily reveal shared values and to co-create from this common ground. Her DesignChoreographies evolve through experiments and iterations of moving, making and reflecting on action, in close interaction with different stakeholders. This bodily way of creative interaction enables people to engage and participate in a process of embodied transformation, tuning in to inherent motivation to do so. Sietske literally choreographs matter of transformation (Hummels, 2012); i.e. an iterative process of events and inherent artefacts (and/or installations) that make people feel and embody possible societal transformation.

Here the created objects are not the goal of the process, but a means. They are vehicles to explore where societal values can evolve. Moreover, where transformational ideas are accepted and thus engaged with, based on intrinsic values and motivations. Consequently identity is not lost, yet supported to further develop in interaction with ‘the other’. We believe this process might even enhance cultural diversity.



**Figure 2:** Henna try-out



**Figure 3:** The future bride's henna hand

## **5. DESIGN CHOREOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF MARRIAGE RITUAL**

During this project, Klooster 'travelled' between the Turkish community living in Schaerbeek, Brussels and her own western European culture. She created a novel DesignChoreographic ritual, cross-pollinating the values behind traditional Turkish marriage ritual and our Western notion of it. After investigating the different ritual moments and artefacts of the Turkish Muslim community, she choosed the henna rite as her source of DesignChoreographic transformation. The henna rite, according to Klooster, is about a woman letting go of her childhood and daughterly ties with her mother, to make place for a relationship that belongs to the state of maturity; becoming wife with her husband. By undergoing this ritual, facilitated by a Turkish mother and her daughters, Klooster realised how this transformational moment was lost in our own culture, as a consequence of societal change that was never ritually supported. In western society we move out of the

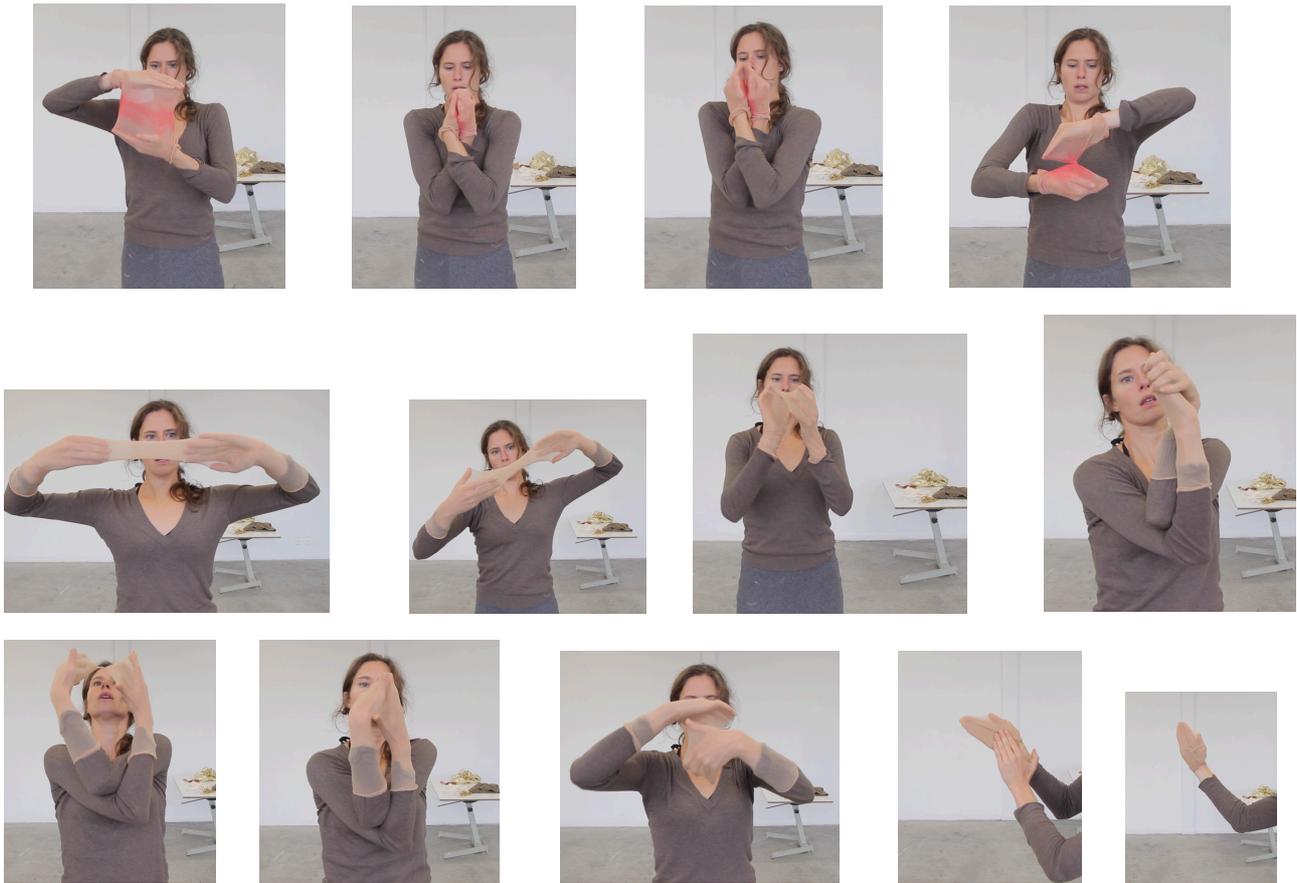
mother-daughter relation to become an independent, self-sufficient woman. From that state a woman finds and chooses her partner, as her own individual choice, to then move into a woman and man relationship.

However, this societal change - an increase from two to three states, bringing in the state of being independent - was never ritually supported in our culture. A conscious ritual moment of letting go of motherly care and deliberately go out to become autonomous is non-existent. Klooster therefore chose to bodily investigate how to ritualize this forgotten yet essential transitional or liminal moment, inspired by a deeper physical understanding of the Turkish Muslim marriage ritual.



**Figure 4:** Movement exploration by Sietske Klooster with beads

To further develop her interpretation of the henna ritual, Klooster explored the role of hand palm, as this body part is central in the Turkish Muslim ritual. The reason for henna application on this body part is not univocal and involves a myriad of practical and symbolic levels. Yet instead of rationally determining the pragmatic and symbolic origin of this body part, Klooster explored to experience her interpretation of movement pivoting around the palm of the hand, both in the act of separation (mother-daughter) and in the bonding (husband-wife). She primarily searched for the meaning experienced through the movement since movement provides a common understanding or, as Schwartz mentions within the context of the relationship between the dancer or performer and her stage, 'the body must be realized as a matrix of meaning. We learn to think from the body outward'. (Schwartz, 1996: 79) Because of this matrix, people who speak different languages may often be able to communicate with the language of gesture. Schwartz: 'Everyone shares a common repertoire of action schemes, even though there are instances in which specific gestures convey different or even opposite meanings in different cultures.' (Schwartz, 1996: 81)



**Figure 5:** Film stills of further movement explorations by Sietske Klooster

Through her bodily investigations she explored the existing movements and impulsively transformed these into her interpretation, to the point where she started to resonate and felt a connection and meaning arising. It became a movement of letting go of the hand palm contact, by untangling of the arms and fingers and hence literal loosening of the mother-daughter relationship.

From there she improvised the movement into the state of being on ones own, becoming an independent woman. Here her arms that just moved out of the entanglement fall into relaxation, hanging, grounding and looseness. This is the contemporary intermediate western European state that developed over the last decades.

After first having accommodated to this state, feeling stable yet flexible in it, she chose the moment to start a new bonding. The bonding of a woman that chooses a man to be with is about entangling arms and fingers and joining the palms of the hands in an act of symmetry thus mutuality. The reverse of the untangling she previously chose to go through with her mother; a bilateral entanglement.

To facilitate this movement, Klooster iteratively made an artefact that literally incorporates all three states, and can be passed on over generations of time, evolving from one state to the other endlessly. She made several design explorations that she evaluated in physical interaction with different members of the Turkish community. The process resulted in a sleeve that covers wrist and hand. This sleeve facilitates the transition moments between the three states, and 'preserves' the states between the transition moments.





**Figure 6:** Intertwining movements with the designed artefact

The sleeve affords the intertwining moment of alliance with a man to start a new family. The movement ends with the bride having her hand covered in the flower-shaped entanglement, centered in the palm of her hand. An entanglement-glove that can be stored till the moment when the bride has become a mother that has to let go of her own daughter.

In the untangling moment of letting go, the entanglement-glove is put on again, transferred to the hand of the daughter, and untwined to become a light and free hanging sleeve around her hand; an airy sleeve with literal space to move into independence, and open for a new entanglement with a man, when she chooses too.

As said, in between these moments the sleeve can be kept as a frozen symbol of the transitions. Either as the loosened sleeve while living alone for a while, until the right novel relationship is found, or as entangled sleeve, while founding a family and until the daughter will leave the house. A novel symbolism is initiated here, through bodily investigation and through interactive interpretation with the Turkish community members.

When making a novel ritual object, Klooster mentioned, there is the danger of becoming enticed by known symbolism and of the object as such. Klooster specifically tried to feel the delicate difference between the object as carrier of symbolism and the factual experience of a ritual movement and its inherent meaning, facilitated by a ritual object. By material retrenchment and embodied investigation, the designer escapes the existing 'frozen' symbolism and finds what lies underneath it and felt in the physical experience of the ritual movement. From this bodily basis it is possible to investigate the experience of shared values, or at least values that are mutually understood. This is where contemporary living and thus dynamic symbolism and tradition can arise, in close connection with a mutual embodied understanding of ritual meaning and values between cultures.

## 6. FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

With *Rite de transition* we interactively explored what the henna ritual within the traditional Turkish Muslim context is about. We experientially investigated from a western European perspective, using DesignChoreography as a means to communicate with the other culture and distil a mutual understanding. Body language and communication through making literally brings connection and concrete bodily understanding of exchanging ideas about cultural values. In this particular case, design and choreography bring about interaction between cultures and thus exchange, instead of trying to understand in a cognitive, verbal and thus more distant observational way. By making and doing the transfer, the transformation literally happens, while learning about each other at the same time.

We focused our attention on culturally embedded aesthetic values and how to realize a contemporary understanding of this, (r)evolving between cultures. We worked with the DesignChoreography approach based on our belief in embodiment and phenomenology, to stimulate societal transformation. Within this process, we looked for novel ways and venues to enhance mutual respect and appreciation as a basic attitude to cultural dialogue and understanding. This physical approach is what we consider to be our new language in the intercultural context, including the importance of reflection on action instead of mere rational observation and communication.

We estimate that *Rite de transition* introduces a novel approach and level to cultural studies: creative bodily interaction as a way to explore common ground and value exchange. Designers here can facilitate and contribute to cultural studies to become interactive, more than being merely a study of finding facts and why they are the way they are. Cultural studies here become dynamic, just like cultures are as a phenomenon in itself.

*Rite de transition* is not a finished story. It is meant as a starter. We intend to further reflect on this first part of the project with a Turkish Muslim family and a western European family. This we plan to do as a bridge to a second trajectory, where a designer with roots in Turkish Muslim culture takes over the current DesignChoreography and brings about a next iteration, manifesting his/her embodied explorations and interpretations. Thus DesignChoreography on rituals becomes a matter of intercultural development and transformation. The first person perspectives and interactions of designers and involved cultures thus bring about tangible cultural dialogue and consequently development.

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Dr. Johanna Kint has a background in art history (KULeuven) and design history. She obtained a PHD at the Delft University of Technology, on a thesis contextualising the World fair of 1958 as embodiment of humanistic modernism. She coaches and teaches at Bachelor and Master's level at the TU/e and at LUCA campus Brussels. More recently, her research focuses on socio-cultural issues related to the multicultural neighborhood of Brussels and reflection and action upon culturally embedded aesthetic and ethical values and their relevance on the language of dynamic form and gesture.

Sietske Klooster graduated in 2003 at the faculty of Industrial Design Engineering of the University of Technology in Delft. Here she started to develop her own design approach during her graduation project 'design moves'. She further developed this approach in close cooperation with the faculty of Industrial Design of the TU Eindhoven, focusing on Choreography of Interaction. Next she moved into the combination of farm and city life, with food incorporated in her embodied design work. The choreography of food production and consumption became her core business. Currently 'The MilkSalon' is running as a case study to illustrate her design principles.