Module 7: Cultural Rites of Passage

Unit 7.1 - What is a Rite of Passage?

A rite of passage is an important event that happens at a particular stage of development or growth in our lives. Normally, we will celebrate more than one rite of passage in our lifetime and this celebration is usually associated with a ritual of some kind, e.g. a party, a speech, an exchange of rings.

Some rites of passage are common to more than one culture, e.g. turning 21 is considered a milestone and this rite of passage is usually celebrated with a party. Other rites of passage are specific to one culture or religion, e.g. in the Jewish culture, turning 13 is considered significant and marks the time when a child becomes an adult.

Activity 7.1.1 Date 11 May 2020

Discuss the following with your family:

☐ What cultural or religious beliefs do we have?
☐ Does your culture have a special ceremony when somebody dies?
☐ How are wedding ceremonies conducted in your culture or religion?
Here is some basic information about a few rites of passage from different cultures:

The meaning and significance of the birth ritual in Traditional African culture

Ancestors are very important in traditional African culture. The ancestors have the power to protect or punish people. When a baby is born, the child must be introduced to the rest of the family or clan at a special ceremony and, in doing so, the child is also presented to the ancestors.

The meaning and significance of circumcision

Circumcision is most commonly associated with male children, but some cultures also practice female circumcision. For boys, circumcision involves cutting away the foreskin of the penis. Although this is considered to be a cultural ritual, it is also a very hygienic thing to do. For this reason, many people have their boy children circumcised for medical reasons rather than cultural ones. Jewish and many Muslim boys are usually circumcised soon after they are born. In traditional African culture boys are circumcised when they begin puberty and circumcision is performed to show that a boy has become a man.

The meaning and significance of baptism

Baptism (Christening) is a ritual that is usually associated with Christian churches. Some of these churches baptise their church members when they are babies and some when they are adults sometimes both.
When a baby is baptised, a minister or priest sprinkles holy water and makes the sign of a cross with the water. In Christianity, a cross is a symbol of goodness and everlasting life and the water symbolises washing away of sins.

The baby is also given a name and, once the ceremony is complete, the baby is considered to be a formal member of the church.

When an adult is baptised, water is also used to show that sins have been washed away and a new way of life has begun. This ceremony is similar to the baptism of a child and is usually conducted to symbolise a person’s ‘rebirth’.

Many other cultures also have naming ceremonies for their babies, but they do not have a ritual like Baptism.

The meaning and significance of weddings

A Muslim marriage means the joining of two families, not just the joining of a man and a woman. Marriage is seen as a contract that is blessed by Allah (God) and is undertaken with the purpose of having children. In Muslim culture, a man may have more than one wife.

In Hindu culture marriage is a life-long commitment to one person. Marriage is seen as something sacred and holy, rather than a contract. A Hindu marriage is believed to be one of the ways a family can honour their ancestors.

In Jewish culture, marriage is seen as a holy promise that is bound by a contract in the sight of God. The husband and wife are considered equal but they have different roles. The man must provide for the family and protect his wife and children. The woman must look after the home and raise the children.

Getting married, in African culture, brings two families together. A marriage agreement is made between the families and the future husband promises to pay lobola for his bride, to the future bride’s family. In the past, lobola was usually paid with cows, but in modern times, money can also be used. For Christians, the main purpose of marriage is to spend a life with somebody that you love and to produce children. When Christians get married, they promise God that they will be faithful to each other and love and respect each other.
The meaning and significance of death

Muslims believe that there is another world after death - they call it paradise. A Muslim believes that when he/she dies, if a good life has been lived, their soul will go to paradise. Hindus believe that death is part of a continuing cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth. After death, the soul of the person is transferred to another body. The Hindus call this re-incarnation. Jewish people believe that, if they live a good life; their souls will be resurrected in a perfect world at some future point in time. Christians believe that, when they die, God will judge their life. If they have been good Christians, then their souls will go to Heaven. If not, their souls will go to Hell.

Reading about Rites of Passage: Customs Associated with Death

When a person dies, their body can be buried in a grave (burial) or burnt and the ashes kept or scattered (cremation). In some cultures, the dead are buried in a coffin. In other cultures, the dead are wrapped in a white cloth called a shroud.

People of the Muslim and Jewish faith bury their dead in a special Jewish or Muslim cemetery. In both of these cultures, the burial must take place within 24 hours of death. A Muslim’s grave must always face their holy city - Mecca.

Hindu's cremate their dead.
After the cremation, the ashes are scattered in water - a river, a dam, a lake or the sea.

In traditional African culture, it is important for a person to be buried in the same place that he/she was born. The deceased is buried facing his/her home so that the home is guarded by the spirit of the deceased person. However, if that person died a violent death then they are buried facing away from their home so that those who are still living do not suffer the same death.

People of the Christian faith are permitted to choose whether they want to be buried or cremated. There is usually a religious ceremony at the deceased funeral where people who knew the person who is dead have a chance to speak about him/her and ask God to take their soul to Heaven.

Burials and ceremonies associated with death are not just practiced for the sake of the person who has died; they are also an important part of the healing process that the people who have lost a loved one must go through. These customs help people to cope with their grief.
DATE: 11 may 2020

Answer the following questions in your PSW workbook.

Write questions and answers.

Work neat and diligently.

1. Why are ancestors considered to be important in traditional African culture?

2. Jewish, Muslim and African cultures circumcise their boy children. How does the African cultural rite of passage different from that of the Jews and Muslims?

3. The role of women and men in marriage is different in each culture. Do you think women and men should be equal in marriage or do you think that the man should be the head of the house? Why?

4. Why do you think Muslims and Jews insist on burying their dead within 24 hours of death? (Think about the area where these religions began.)

5. Christians are normally buried in a coffin while the Muslim people bury their dead wrapped in a material shroud. Why do you think these two cultures differ in this way?

6. How would you advise a family who practise traditional African culture to bury their loved one if they could not or were not allowed to bury him/her at the place of their birth?

7. Funerals can cost families a lot of money. Do you think that less money should be spent on funerals?

8. People of the Christian faith can choose to be buried or cremated. Which of these two options do you think is better? Why?