

## Zu Victor Turners Konzeption von „Liminalität“ und „Communitas“\*

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**Abstract.** The work of the Scottish anthropologist Victor Turner on ritual and symbolism and especially his concepts of liminality and *communitas* are experiencing a broad reception at present. Turner's elaborate and unsystematic manner of presentation, however, render a precise definition of his concepts difficult and thus also their correct application. In this article an attempt is made to recapitulate Turner's theory of liminality and *communitas* and to examine it in the context of its origin while taking into account its historical background in anthropological theory. After his studies among the Ndembu of Zambia Turner – a social anthropologist by training – pursued the central idea that symbolic and ritual actions ensure the cohesion of society as well as its renewal. This premise originated in the theory of his teacher Max Gluckman, who emphasized the aspect of conflict in the integration of society. However, Turner introduced views into the basis of structural-functionalism that were conditioned by his own biography and have their origin in Neo-Thomistic metaphysics. The key to the understanding of his concepts is his conviction, expressed in his analysis of the Ndembu *Chihamba* ritual, that ritual reveals the pure „act-of-being“ that transcends all limitations and in which all things participate. This basic idea underpins Turner's analysis of the cohesive function of symbols in society as well as his concepts of liminality and *communitas*. Although Turner has the merit of having drawn attention to the non-structured, the contradictions and the ambiguity in the culture of man, his ideological commitment results in methodological weaknesses that impair the epistemological value of his theory. In the course of time his generalizations and deductions, that were developed *a priori*, lose any empirical foundation in reality and history whatsoever, and – especially in his later works – assume the character of a somewhat obscure speculative philosophy.

Victor W. Turner (1920–1983) gehört zu den fruchtbarsten und bekanntesten Religionsethnologen der jüngsten Vergangenheit. Der aus Schottland stammende Forscher stand anfangs in der Tradition der britischen Social Anthropology. In den 50er Jahren bis Anfang der 60er Jahre arbeitete er bei Max Gluckman an der Universität von Manchester; im Auftrag des britischen Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (Lusaka) führte er zwischen 1950 und 1954 zwei längere Feldforschungen bei den Ndembu in Sambia durch und verfaßte 1957 eine Monographie über die Sozialstruktur dieses Stammes. Danach verlagerte sich sein Interesse zunehmend auf die Ndembu-Rituale, besonders auf deren semantische Struktur und soziale Hintergründe.<sup>1</sup> 1963 erhielt er eine Professur an der Cornell University in Ithaca, USA, und verließ Großbritannien für immer. Ab 1968 lehrte er in Chicago, 1977 wechselte er an die University of Virginia, wo er bis zu seinem Tod blieb.<sup>2</sup>

\* Für hilfreiche Anregungen und Unterstützung danke ich László Vajda.

<sup>1</sup> Bes. 1961, 1962a, 1962b, 1967, 1968a.

<sup>2</sup> Die biographischen Angaben stützen sich auf Wolanin 1978:12 und Willis 1984:73f.