
***Big Brother*, Pilgrimage and the Ndembu of Zambia: Examining the Big Brother Phenomenon through the Anthropology of Religion**

Edward Croft Dutton
University of Aberdeen

Abstract: This article will examine the Big Brother television series through the prism of the anthropology of religion. It will examine the ways in which Big Brother is comparable to a pilgrimage on the one hand and a tribal initiation ceremony on the other. In this regard, Victor Turner's research on these subjects, and related criticisms, will be discussed in detail. It will argue that one possible reason for the popularity of Big Brother is that it is a modern liminal phase in which contestants undergo suffering to attain the status of celebrity. This, it will argue, is pertinent because modern society prizes celebrity so highly. Thus, it will argue that the Big Brother programme appeals not only to voyeurism but to a kind of religious or tribal structure—that those who endure suffering have their status raised.

Introduction

[1] The reality television series *Big Brother* has been one of the most successful television franchises of recent years. It has been sold around the world and there have been *Big Brothers* in most European countries, the United States and even a “*Big Brother–Africa*.” In many countries, such as the UK, there was originally only going to be one series, but that series' success was such that many more were commissioned (BBC 2001). In each case, there are thousands of applications for the few places on the show (*The Age* 2005). This article will examine the popularity of *Big Brother* through the prism of the anthropology of religion. It will argue that one of the reasons for the popularity of *Big Brother*, in a celebrity-driven culture, is that participation in *Big Brother* is, in many respects, a kind of modern, voluntary Rite of Passage, which is comparable to the violent initiation rituals of many tribal religions such as the Ndembu, studied by Turner (Turner 1968). It will also present evidence for a comparison to Pilgrimage but will favour the former interpretation overall. In a complex, fragmented society, *Big Brother*, as a television phenomenon, fulfils this function on a broad level. This renders it compelling viewing, because traditionally status-raising rituals of this kind happen away from society's gaze. It also allows us to understand the profound desire, on the part of many, to take part in it. As with Ndembu ritual, and to a lesser extent Pilgrimage, participants undergo suffering and thus have their status raised, in this case to that of “celebrity.”¹

[2] This article will firstly provide an overview of the *Big Brother* phenomenon. Thence, it will discuss previous research on *Big Brother* and Reality Television more broadly as well as research on Rites of Passage that are not overtly religious. Having examined this, the methodological body of the article will examine Turner's (Turner 1969, 1982, 1992) and Turner and Turner's (Turner and Turner 1978) discussions of the liminal phase and pilgrimage. It will also examine the criticisms levelled by Eade and Sallnow (Eade and Sallnow 1991) and others (e.g., Lewis 1971). It will also look at more recent discussions of pilgrimages and rites of passage. Thereafter, it will discuss in detail a number of British *Big Brothers* drawing mainly upon media coverage and the programmes themselves.² It will examine the various ways in which *Big*

Brother is congruous with the various models of pilgrimage discussed and the ways in which it is not. In looking at *Big Brother* through this anthropological model, the article aims to foster a better understanding of why the phenomenon has become so popular in the contemporary media and among the public.

Big Brother: An Overview

[3] The first *Big Brother* was aired in the Netherlands in September 1999. The programme was produced by Dutchman John de Mol and the production company Endemol. The following year a version was produced in the UK and, at the time of writing, seventy countries have had their own *Big Brother*, with many others, such as Russia and Poland, producing their own programmes that are heavily based on the *Big Brother* format. The name was in English in the original Dutch version and refers to the phrase in George Orwell's 1984, "Big Brother is watching you." The programme went a step further than previous "Fly-on-the-Wall" documentaries because contestants were filmed continuously and there was a degree of audience participation: contestants could be voted out by the viewers.

[4] There have been notable variations between the shows from the different countries and between different series in the same country. But in general, *Big Brother* follows a basic format. A number of "Housemates," usually twelve, move into a house in a certain location. The housemates are selected by Endemol and tend to be young, although, in the case of one Greek *Big Brother*, there was a sixty-three year-old housemate. Every area in the house, including the bathrooms, has cameras and for the length of the series, normally around three months, the housemates are continuously filmed, as already stated. During their stay, the conditions are very basic. Washing clothes usually has to be done by hand, for example. The housemates must perform various tasks, set by *Big Brother*, in order to secure a shopping budget and possible other prizes, every week. The housemates have no contact with the outside world, nor do they have access to writing materials, but they are allowed to speak privately to an unseen psychologist in the "Diary Room." Every week, each housemate must privately nominate two people to be evicted from the house. Housemates are forbidden from discussing nominations among themselves. The television watching public vote on whom they wish to be evicted (Anon 2006).³ The eviction is shown live on television with evictees sometimes being jeered. When three housemates are left, the public vote on whom they wish to win. The winner receives a cash prize. In Britain, it has been £100,000 (US \$180,000). The other perceived "prize" of *Big Brother* participation is, albeit transient, celebrity, particularly if the housemate progresses relatively far in the competition.

[5] As already indicated, there are many variations between countries and within different editions of the programme in the same country. In France, there are two winners: a male and a female. It is ensured that all the contestants that previously enter the house are single. In various series, a class dynamic has been deliberately introduced into the house. There has been a rich side of the house, where housemates live in luxury, and poor side which serves those housemates. The latter have been able to win their way into the rich side of the house. Some *Big Brothers* have also allowed some contact with the outside world. In the American *Big Brother* in 2001, housemates were told about the aeroplane attacks on the World Trade Centre (Powell 2001). In the Finnish *Big Brother* 2005, an Italian pop-singer, Laura Bono, was allowed into the house to entertain and cook for the two housemates in the rich side of the house, the other housemates having to live in tents in the garden (EMI 2005). The show, while being very popular, has aroused strong criticism in the countries in which it has been shown (e.g., BBC 2002b; Ahde 2005).

Academic Discussion of Big Brother and Non-Religious Rites of Passage

[6] There has been some academic research specifically on *Big Brother*. Much of this simply discusses the programme broadly as a popular phenomenon (Dovey 2001, Johnson-Woods 2002).

Hartley (Hartley 2004) examines *Big Brother* as a means of “taming the self” while Tincknell and Raghuram (Tincknell and Raghuram 2002) use *Big Brother* to examine the phenomenon of audience participation. Adrejevic (2002) looks at *Big Brother* as exemplifying the “surveillance society” while Lavender (2003) discusses *Big Brother* in terms, essentially, of the attractiveness of watching *catharsis*. Yesil (2001) has placed *Big Brother* in the historical context of what he calls “Media Voyeurism.” A number of researchers such as Hill (2002) and Reiss and Wilt (2004) have conducted studies to discover precisely why audiences enjoy watching *Big Brother*. Interestingly, both of these studies have concluded that voyeurism, though important, is not the only factor in the desire to watch *Big Brother*. Thus, Hill finds that people watch *Big Brother* out of a desire for “authentic human experience.” This might be seen as congruous with the argument that I propound below, that it is compelling to watch a particular profound human experience (a Rite of Passage) which is normally hidden from view. Thus, it is voyeuristic, but not in a superficial way. Reiss and Wilt find that people watch *Big Brother* because they enjoy watching other people’s emotions, and especially those that they enjoy experiencing themselves.

[7] There has been no literature looking at *Big Brother* from a religious studies perspective, though Engstrom and Stemic (2003) have looked at the portrayal of religion in Reality TV.⁴ However, there has been literature which has examined rituals which are not overtly or traditionally religious in terms of Rites of Passage, as this article aims to do. For example Dubisch (2004) has explored the phenomenon of American Vietnam War veterans motor-biking from Los Angeles to the Vietnam Wall in Washington DC to pay their respects to their fallen comrades. She has looked at this now annual event, which aims to publicise the cause of POWs, as a kind of secular pilgrimage. Basu (2004) examines the popularity among city-dwelling Scots of going to the Scottish Highlands. He argues that, in many cases, their not-too-distant ancestors were removed from this area during the Highland Clearances (an eighteenth/nineteenth century process whereby landowners removed crofters to make the land profitable). Basu argues that, as such, going to the Highlands is a kind of ancestral pilgrimage. A number of scholars have examined non-religious rituals as Rites of Passage more broadly. Van der Meer (2003) has looked at violence towards homosexuals or, as it is commonly termed “Gay Bashing,” as a Rite of Passage among young men in the Netherlands from both Dutch and immigrant backgrounds. He sees it as a means by which disempowered young men prove their manliness and assert their own importance. Similarly, Merten (2005) has looked at rites of passage among girls in American suburbs, especially “troublesome behaviour” as part of the passage between childhood and adulthood and drinking as a kind of “incorporation” into a more adult world. A number of scholars have examined street parties and the like as ritual and looked at their ritual dynamics. Mitchell (2004) examines this issue through discussing the “Festa” celebration in Malta. He especially focuses on the Festa’s symbolic violence, as this is often such a significant part of many rites of passage.

[8] Many scholars have looked at *Big Brother* as part of a broader examination of Reality TV. Much of this discussion has occurred, unsurprisingly, within the discipline of Media Studies. Mole (2004) examines the way in which such shows create a mechanism for celebrity, while celebrity might not endure, and focuses on Jade Goody, an infamous character from Britain’s *Big Brother* 2002. Biltreyst (2004) examines the controversy and perceived “moral panic” caused by certain reality television shows, including *Big Brother*. Mehl (1994, 104) looks at what is termed the “perfume of scandal” surrounding such programmes and why this is highly attractive to the television audience. Dovey (2000, 83) explores the social aspect of reality TV. He argues that sharing feelings of disgust and revulsion while watching shows such as *Big Brother* can be useful for family bonding. He further argues that the “nightmare” aspect of such programmes, involving watching other people’s suffering, is also fascinating for the audience.

Turner and the Liminal Phase

[9] It will be the argument of this article that, on many levels, the popularity of the *Big Brother* phenomenon can be explained with reference to Pilgrimage and other Rites of Passage. Turner draws upon Gennep (1960) with the implicit view, found among many societies, that life is divided up into a series of clear stages such as childhood, adulthood, old-age and so on. When one passes between one stage and next—such as by going from being a child to being an adult—then a ritual is necessary to mark this passing. This, Turner argues, is found across numerous societies. This ritual is called a rite of passage because one is in the passage between one clearly defined phase of life and another. There is also the “rite of separation,” when one is ritually separated, and the “rite of incorporation,” when one is ritually brought back into society. Rites of passage, however, involve a “passenger” passing through a gap between two clearly defined existential phases. Turner terms this “betwixt and between” a “liminal phase.”⁵ The word “liminal” is drawn from the Latin “limen,” meaning “corridor,” a passage between one room and another. In this passage, the passenger (or neophyte as Turner terms him/her) experiences a “state of transition” which differs markedly from the previous pre-liminal or future post-liminal experience. This passage tends to involve “segregation, marginality and aggregation” (Turner 1969, 94). In this phase, the passenger lacks a specific place in “cultural space.” He is made “passive and humble” and, indeed, “ground down to be refashioned anew.” As a consequence, the fellow-passengers tend to experience a strong sense of togetherness in which social distinctions and structure become less relevant. Turner terms this feeling *communitas* (Turner 1969, 95). For Turner, “*Communitas* is where structure is not” (Turner 1969, 126). He earlier defines *communitas* less starkly, admitting that it can involve “rudimentary structure” (Turner 1969, 96). However, for Turner, *communitas* develops within the broader structure of the rite of passage. Turner makes clear that “neophytes” must “obey their instructors . . . and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint” (Turner 1969, 95). Hence, *communitas* occurs within a broader controlling structure.

[10] Turner also distinguishes between the “liminal” and the “liminoid.” The distinction between these two is quite nuanced. The “liminoid” tends to be noted in industrial societies. In such complex societies, people’s work lives are segmented into different groups that might have little actual contact. Thus, the city of office-worker is likely to have no contact with the farm labourer even though they are members of the same albeit complex society. These workers are controlled, more than in tribal societies, by structured time and rhythm. They must get to work at a certain time, leave at a certain time, even catch a specific train every single morning. The liminoid is understood, by Turner, to be the break from such rigidity in the form of leisure time for example. To suddenly decide to go to a boxing match after work one day is liminoid. Thus, the liminoid is a ritual that is a break with societal structure. By contrast, the “liminal” is a ritual that is part of societal structure, as in the pubescent rituals of the Ndembu (Turner 1992, 54–56). Liminality is perceived to be less likely in a fragmented, industrial society. However, Turner admits that the liminoid can be found in tribal societies and that the liminal can be found in industrial societies in the form of church and even academic rituals (1992, 58). He further notes the way in which “today’s liminoid is tomorrow’s liminal” (1992, 58), citing the way in which pilgrimage gradually became part of the structure of medieval Christianity, having previously been liminoid.

[11] Turner equally distinguishes between different types of *communitas*. Firstly, there is *existential-spontaneous communitas*. He gives the example of hippie groups as conforming to this type. It is sudden and almost entirely unstructured. Second is *normative communitas*. Here, the original *existential-spontaneous communitas* has been organised into a social system which attempts to maintain the *communitas*. Finally there is *ideological communitas*, in which a utopian group is formed around the original *communitas* (Turner 1969, 132). In tribal societies, however, these liminal rituals can be divided into two kinds, according to Turner. Firstly, there are “life-crisis rituals.” These tend to occur at times of physical or social development—an ex-

ample might be a funeral or the process of giving birth. These can, themselves, be subdivided into “status elevation rituals” such as marriage and “status reversal rituals” as in the case of the “humbled chief.” I would, however, point out that these two kinds of ritual tend to be very different in result. The former tends to be permanent while the latter is only temporary and, perhaps, provides some kind of emotional release for the community before the original situation is restored.⁶ Turner argues that pilgrimage is a status raising ritual (1992). The other type of ritual highlighted by Turner is the “ritual of affliction.” This is performed on individuals who are perceived to have been possessed. It is, effectively, a ritual of exorcism which, through the removal of the spirit, affects status change. Exorcisms can, of course, still be seen in many contemporary Pentecostal groups. Both, however, are characterised by a ritual allowing a person to separate from the group, between one realm and another.⁷

Criticisms of Turner

[12] Turner’s view that a liminal phase will involve *communitas* has been criticised by Eade and Sallnow on empirical grounds. Turner cites the pilgrimage as being a liminal phase. They claim that, certainly in the context of a pilgrimage, there often appears to be evidence of boundary-making procedures and strong animosities between pilgrims (Eade and Sallnow 1991). Eade later argues that the pilgrimage involves *communitas* that is only partially realised (Eade 2000). I would suggest that it can be understood in terms of level. Structure reasserts itself but there is still a broad sense of *communitas* caused by shared liminality. Thus, in this liminal phase, there is a structure on one level and *communitas* on another. Indeed, it could be argued that pilgrims engage in boundary making procedures because they require some kind of structure in an ill-defined and liminal environment. Turner himself points out that liminality is “for many the acme of insecurity, the breakthrough of chaos into cosmos” (Turner 1982, 46). A reassertion of structure would thus be expected (see Dutton 2005).

[13] Another possible difficulty with Turner is his failure to distinguish between different kinds of liminal phases. In conceptualising liminality, he examines initiation rituals among pubescent boys in the Ndembu tribe of Zambia (Turner 1969). Here, the *communitas* occurs within a highly structured environment and there is considerable violence towards the neophytes. Indeed, Bloch (1992) focuses on what he calls “rebounding violence” in such phases. By contrast, the pilgrimage tends to be considerably less broadly structured. Indeed, it might be seen, in Lewis’ terms as a peripheral cult (a loosely organised religious group) as opposed to a central cult (a highly organised group on the borders of a society) (Lewis 1971, chap. 1). This distinction will be further examined below in the discussion itself. Moreover, there have been many other recent discussions of pilgrimage, frequently drawing upon and criticising Turner’s model. As has been noted, there are many examinations of pilgrimage in Coleman and Eade’s volume *Reframing Pilgrimage*. These have included examinations of tourism as pilgrimage as in Basu (2004), already discussed. Equally, Coleman and Elsner (1995) have produced a detailed reference volume on pilgrimages in all world religions. Indeed, Coleman (2002) has produced a detailed examination of the models of pilgrimage proposed by Turner and Eade and Sallnow respectively. In particular, he examines the various ways in which Turner’s model and Eade and Sallnow’s “contestation model” can be reconciled and how they overlap. More broadly, Olaveson (2001) has examined the connections between Durkheim’s concept of “effervescence” (the fusion of the self with the community during ritual) and Turner’s *communitas* as they relate to pilgrimage. And, of course, there are many fascinating examinations of diverse pilgrimages, often advocating a particular model (see, e.g., Murphy 1994).

Big Brother Participation and Pilgrimage

[14] In a number of respects, *Big Brother* can be seen as kind of modern pilgrimage in the public gaze. However, as I will further argue below, this comparison is a broad one. Most obviously,

participation in *Big Brother* involves a clear break with the norms of everyday life. However, it is liminal rather than liminoid because, in Britain and many other countries, it is an annual occurrence. In a media saturated society, it is, effectively, part of the structure of life at least currently. As with pilgrimage, the contestant leaves behind their normal friendships and living area in order to enter the *Big Brother* House. Equally, participation in the programme means that one is almost entirely cut off from the world that one knows. Certainly, in the context of the medieval pilgrimages assessed by Turner, a pilgrim travelling from Bath to Canterbury would be cut off from the world that she, in the case of the Wife of Bath, knew well. Equally, Turner emphasises the degree of hardship involved in the pilgrimage. He examines how pilgrims on lengthy journeys might lack basic provisions or be subject to the whims of bandits on the route of the pilgrimage (Turner and Turner 1978). Similarly, participation in *Big Brother* involves clear examples of hardship. As already discussed, washing facilities are basic to say the least. In Britain's 2004 *Big Brother*, contestants were forced to shower in the middle of the room where they could be seen. Moreover, in the same series, there were no separate rooms for males and females, insufficient beds, washing could only be done at certain times, members were awakened in the middle of the night and so forth. As would be expected with a liminal phase, there was a strong ritualistic aspect to participation. In all series, contestants enter the house in the full gaze of the cameras with only a small wheeled suitcase. When housemates are evicted from the *Big Brother* House, they traditionally dress for the occasion. When they leave, they will either be booed or cheered by the crowd (e.g., BBC 2002a). They then pose for photographs and are taken to a studio where they are interviewed live and shown a compilation of clips of themselves in the house. This, indeed, might be understood, in Turner's terms, as a ritual of reintegration into the broader society which they have left.

[15] However, there are two more central aspects of comparison. Turner argues that *communitas* is an integral part of the liminal phase. Clearly, there is a strong symbolic *communitas* in the *Big Brother* house. Housemates are forced to share everything and work together in various amusing or degrading tasks. They have very little privacy, being forced to sleep together and even wash in full view of other contestants and the cameras. Moreover, the shared experience of being in the house is likely, at least at first, to foster a broad bonding between the contestants. This is generally assisted by the producers of the programme who organise bonding events within the house such as formal meals, a pretend wedding, a 1970s disco party (all with large amounts of alcohol provided). Thus, contestants engage in forms of carnal activity together. It has long been argued that such activity creates bonds (see, e.g., Robertson-Smith 1889) However, as has been noted, Turner understands *communitas* to involve a breaking-down of social structures. This is, once more, ensured by the producers of *Big Brother*. The programme tends to select contestants that represent a broad cross-section of society. In Britain, at least, they represent, to varying degrees, society's various geographical, class and racial sub-groups. Britain's *Big Brother 2005* is, perhaps, a very pertinent example of this. Sam and Derek were both branded as "posh" in the press. They represented, for *The Sun*, the upper-middle or upper-class (*The Sun*, 2005).⁸ Derek, Craig and Kemal were homosexual, representing another vocal societal sub-group. Britain's ethnic minorities were represented by Kemal (Turkish), Derek, Makosi, Vanessa and Science (Black). Indeed, Britain's white working-class was represented by Saskia, Maxwell, Lesley and Anthony. Areas of the country were also represented. Anthony was from Newcastle in the north, Maxwell and Saskia were from London in the south and Mary was from Ireland. Finally, foreigners living in the UK were represented by Makosi, from Zimbabwe, and Roberto, from Italy. Thus, the house was a deliberate social mix—a forced *communitas* between people living in Britain from different classes, races, areas and other cultural subgroups. As stated, one of the criticisms of Turner's model is the empirical evidence of deliberate boundary-making procedures by pilgrims. A very similar criticism was levelled even with regard to Ndembu initiation ritual in an early review of *The Ritual Process* (Schwartz 1972). The housemates in the 2005

Big Brother were constantly watched by a team of British academics, variously psychologists and behavioural experts. It was noted, some way into the series, that the house had effectively divided into two groups and that these groups were constructed along racial and, to some extent, class lines (Brown 2005). The larger group was composed of foreigners and ethnic minorities while the smaller group was composed of white, English, working-class housemates (*Daily Mail* 2005). This divide did not develop until some time into the series which would be congruous with Eade and Sallnow's criticism of Turner.

[16] The other important aspect of *Big Brother*, and another important parallel with pilgrimage, is that of status. According to Turner, pilgrimage is a status-raising ritual. Those who returned from pilgrimage were held in higher esteem by society. There is a strong argument for claiming that the same is true of *Big Brother* participation. *Big Brother*, in most of the countries in which it is shown, is widely watched and reported on in the tabloid press. Thus, by virtue of going in the *Big Brother* House, a person becomes, to some extent, a celebrity. They are on the television and in the newspapers and they remain so at least for the period of the programme. Mole (2004) points out that this fame is generally very fleeting. However, some contestants remain in the spotlight, with appearances on celebrity game shows and so forth, for years after their participation in the show. Certainly, there is a strong case for claiming that becoming a celebrity is a matter of enhanced social status. A considerable body of literature has examined the various ways in which celebrities are idolised and looked up to in the modern world where, formally, this might have been the case with royalty. This precise point is made by Koch (1999) in article entitled "From Kingdom to Stardom." Similar arguments are propounded by Rojek (2001) and Gitlin (1998).⁹ "Celebrity" is a status and if a person is a celebrity then that person is considered, by many people, to be of higher status, at least in that aspect of life, than one who is not a celebrity. Many sociologists, for example Milner (2005), have drawn upon Weber to look at ways in which celebrities are essentially a kind revered social class. In many ways, *Big Brother* contestants are a special kind of celebrity because they are not necessarily famous for any achievement or talent, though this may be discerned during the course of the programme. They are simply famous for being themselves. Of course, the extent of this status-raising varies. In a British context, Jade Goody, from *Big Brother III*, and "Nasty" Nick Bateman, from *Big Brother I*, are household names even though neither won the contest.¹⁰ But, as Mole points out, most contestants simply fade into obscurity. Indeed, Mole makes the point that, precisely because they fade away, it is the mechanism that creates them that survives. Thus, those who seek to be famous make their way to a specific place in order to be so—*The Big Brother* House is one example. However, it is a very interesting example because unlike programmes such as *Pop Idol*, there is no agenda behind it other than, in essence, making a compelling television programme with a side effect of celebrity. However, in a celebrity culture, those who wish to raise their status go to such a place and, of course, it outlives their achievement (Mole 2004). The same point could be made about individual pilgrimage and the endurance of the popularity of a specific shrine.¹¹ Indeed, a further point of commonality with pilgrimage is that the *Big Brother* experience does not happen at a specific time in life. Contestants have ranged from their late teens to their early sixties in one case, although they do generally seem to be in their twenties or early thirties. Equally, a pilgrimage, or at least those assessed by Turner, draws people from diverse age groups.

Big Brother, Structure and Violence

[17] Thus, in those respects, *Big Brother* might legitimately be understood as a kind of modern pilgrimage, something which assists us in understanding its appeal. However, there are a number of respects in which, I would argue, a pilgrimage is not an entirely appropriate comparison. This article has already briefly examined Lewis' distinction between the central cult and the peripheral cult. Naturally, this distinction, as with any typology, suffers from questions over

how it is possible to distinguish between the two types but that does not mean that it cannot be useful, at least when examining groups that are the extreme representation of both types. Put simply, the nature of the housemates' experience on a programme such as *Big Brother* is very different from that experienced by the kinds of pilgrims examined by Eade and Sallnow. In many ways, it is comparable to the initiation rituals examined by Turner in *The Ritual Process* because of the degree of violence, generally but not always psychological, involved. Moreover, a group of pilgrims tends to have no formal outside structure controlling it other than the broader laws of society. This is not the case with the *Big Brother* contestants. As with the Ndembu initiation rites assessed by Turner, there is a rigid formal structure controlling the contestants in the *Big Brother* House. They are forced to live in and stay in a particular location. As with the neophytes, they are expected to obey *Big Brother* without question and if they do not then they will be punished. For example, in Britain's *Big Brother IV* a contestant known as Kitten was simply thrown out of the house for refusing to obey the rules. Refusal to nominate other candidates has led, in a number of cases in Britain, to the one who refused being threatened with automatic potential eviction if he or she does not nominate. Thus, in many respects, there is a broad controlling structure in *Big Brother* which does not exist in most pilgrimages and certainly not in those discussed by Eade and Sallnow or Turner.

[18] The other issue is the violence in rites of passage. As stated, this issue has been examined by Bloch (1992) and also by Murphy (1994), for example. Bloch argues that the violence in a rite of passage removes a person's old identity and even causes them to dislike their pre-liminal sense of self. Certainly, violence, of many kinds, is an important part of the *Big Brother* experience. This, again, is present in tribal initiation rituals but not generally in Pilgrimage. Indeed, this violence is inflicted by the authority. One form of violence can be seen in humiliation and lack of privacy. The lack of privacy itself is likely to be psychologically difficult, as every movement and sound is recorded. In the case of many British *Big Brothers*, humiliation is caused by the very structure of the house: the showers are in public, for example. Equally, the addition of a rich and poor side to the house deliberately imposes considerable hardship and humiliation on those living in the poor side of house or, in the case of the Finnish *Big Brother*, living in the snow-covered garden. Many of the tasks which the contestants undergo are, if not humiliating, then, at the very least, physically or psychologically difficult. In Britain's *Big Brother IV*, for example, these included being handcuffed to another housemate of the opposite sex for an entire week and being in the army—in simulated army conditions—for a week. In *Big Brother III*, contestants were forced to live off near-starvation rations for a week when they failed their “weekly task” and, consequently, did not earn sufficient funds for food. As such, the *Big Brother* experience appears to be far more comparable to initiation rituals than to Pilgrimage. As with initiation rituals, the contestants are separated from society—although they are under its gaze—controlled and frequently made to suffer. However, by virtue of having been in this environment, they are accorded, to varying degrees, celebrity status.¹² Of course, this comparison is not water tight. As stated, the initiation ceremony occurs at a certain age and, unlike *Big Brother*, it tends not be voluntary. Thus, *Big Brother* might be seen to combine aspects of both pilgrimage and initiation ritual.

[19] However, in the essential ways the function is the same as Ndembu rites: by going into the *Big Brother House* and undergoing the assorted tasks and difficulties it has to offer, a person's status is raised and they become a celebrity. This is marked, effectively, by a rite of separation as one enters and a rite of integration as one leaves with, to varying degrees, one's new status of “celebrity.” As such, in watching *Big Brother*, one is not simply being voyeuristic. The audience are watching the creation of celebrities and watching them being created in a similar way to way in which “men” were created in the Zambian Ndembu tribe studied by Turner. In this sense, the

Big Brother phenomenon has a clear dynamic that is best assessed through the anthropology of religion.

Conclusion

[20] One possible reason for the popularity of *Big Brother*, and part of the desire to participate in it, can be discerned by analysing it from an anthropology of religion perspective. *Big Brother* is, in many respects, highly comparable to the kind of initiation rituals in tribes such as the Ndembu. The participant is separated from society and placed in a highly controlled environment, like the neophytes, where he must obey “Big Brother” without question. *Communitas* is deliberately created through the tasks themselves and the diverse social mix often placed in the house in the first place. As with Turner’s analysis, this is a transitional or liminal phase in which the participant becomes, to varying degrees, a celebrity. He reaches this status through being in the house and enduring its various difficulties and there are rites of entry and exit from the house.

[21] This article has examined the way in which, in popular culture, “celebrity” is an issue of status, something which people aspire to become. Thus, *Big Brother*, as with Ndembu initiation, is a status-raising ritual. This comparison is preferred to that of Pilgrimage because, although pilgrimage, like *Big Brother* participation, is voluntary, it does not tend to be broadly structured. Moreover, pilgrimage works as a comparison because it does not occur at a specific time in life but rather devotees tend to elect to do it at any point they wish. However, one could argue that, broadly, those who participate in *Big Brother* are relatively young. As such, it might be seen to combine aspects of both pilgrimage and initiation. Thus, in watching *Big Brother*, as stated, viewers are not merely being voyeuristic and looking for a kind of soap opera. This has been demonstrated, in particular, by Hill’s research. They are interested in watching profound and authentic human experience. There is a strong case for arguing that they are watching a kind of religious ritual writ-large in which celebrity, rather than the perception of religiosity or improved place in a tribal society, are attained through a form of suffering.

Notes

1. Of course, this is not the only way that the popularity of *Big Brother* could be explained using the anthropology of religion method. It might be argued, drawing upon Robertson-Smith (1889), for example, that watching the contestants go about carnal activities such as eating and even sex helps to create a bond between themselves and the viewer. But, in a way, this itself is part of the “suffering” dimension for the contestants. The contestants are entirely deprived of any privacy. Thus, I would argue that the question of suffering and status is the most germane aspect to *Big Brother* anthropologically. However, I entirely appreciate that there are other dimensions which could be fruitful from this perspective as well. The article aims to speak, however, to scholars of religion more broadly through the comparison to Pilgrimage, an important religious activity and ritual in tribal religions.
2. Thus, this article cannot be said to have involved participant observation fieldwork. It involved arm-chair anthropology in the very literal sense of watching all six series of *Big Brother* television in Britain and the first, and so far only, Finnish series of the programme. Questions might be raised over the degree to which these are representative of *Big Brother* world-wide and the article will, therefore, examine any differences between the different series from different countries.
3. Some readers may be sceptical about citing the *Wikipedia Encyclopedia* because of its democratic nature. I would counter that this entry, at least, cites all of its sources and has undergone detailed discussion to reach its current point. It is a useful historical summary and I recommend *Wikipedia*, at least with regard to this particular entry.
4. It might also be asked why this article has chosen to concentrate on *Big Brother* rather than other reality television programmes also involving separation such as *Survivor* or *Amazing Race*. I would submit that *Big Brother* has been by far the most successful of these shows and when it is broadcast it garners substantial media attention to a far greater extent than the shows mentioned above. As such,

- in looking at *Big Brother* from a ritual perspective, participation in it is status-raising to a far greater extent than participation in *Amazing Race* or one of many other programmes similar to *Big Brother*.
5. The notion of *rites de passage* was originally coined by Genep (1960). This was first published in 1908.
 6. An example of such a ritual might be the officers cooking for the troops in the British army at Christmas. After Christmas, the situation returns to normal.
 7. For a more detailed discussion of exorcism see, for example, Lewis (1971).
 8. Both *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* (which I will also cite) are British, tabloid quality newspapers. The former is the most widely read newspaper in Britain.
 9. For a detailed history of the concept of celebrity see Braudy (Braudy 1986).
 10. In the UK, for example, the concept of *Celebrity Big Brother* has been born. In general, minor-celebrities and former-celebrities enter. It is perceived that this boosts their profile—raises their celebrity status further. The same can be said for the programme *I'm a Celebrity! Get me out of Here!* in which celebrities live in a jungle. This, in fact, has been more successful in Britain than *Celebrity Big Brother*.
 11. As an aside, the French *Big Brother* could be seen to employ a further status-raising aspect. This is because contestants are all single and are encouraged to become part of a couple which, it might be argued, is seen as being of a higher status.
 12. Indeed, one might develop this argument, following Mole, to claim that there is a further “ritual” of recently evicted *Big Brother* contestants appearing on certain television programmes and going to certain parties before they attain the new status of “former celebrities” and generally fade into almost total obscurity.

References

- Ahde, Hilikka. 2005. "Kvartaalikapitalismista yhteiskunnan epäjumala." *Auto ja Kuljetusala*. 14 December.
- Andrejevic, Mark. 2002. "The Kinder, Gentler Gaze of *Big Brother*: Reality TV in the Era of Digital Capitalism." *New Media and Society*, 4,2: 251–70.
- Anon. 2006. "Big Brother (Television Programme)." *Wikipedia*. <www.wikipedia.org> Retrieved 15 January.
- Basu, Paul. 2004. "Route Metaphors of Roots Tourism in the Scottish Highland Diaspora." In *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*. Edited by Simon Coleman and John Eade, 150–74. London; Routledge.
- BBC. 2001. "Big Brother 2 Repeats Success." *BBC News Online* <www.bbc.co.uk/news> 29 May.
- BBC. 2002a. "Surprise Big Brother Exit for Adele." *BBC News Online*. <www.bbc.co.uk/news> 5 July.
- BBC. 2002b. "Record Numbers Watch Big Brother 3." *BBC News Online*. <www.bbc.co.uk/news> 8 July.
- Biltrey, Daniel. 2004. "Media Audiences and the Game of Controversy: On Reality TV, Moral Panic and Controversial Media Stories." *Journal of Media Practice*. 5,1: 7–24.
- Bloch, Maurice. 1992. *Prey Into Hunter*. London: Routledge.
- Braudy, Leo. 1986. *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, Stuart. 2005. "Big Brother 2005 Update." *First Screen.com*. <www.FirstScreen.com> 1 July.
- Coleman, Simon. 2002. "Do you Believe in Pilgrimage? *Communitas*, Contestation and Beyond." *Anthropological Theory* 2,3: 355–68."
- Coleman, Simon and John Elsner. 1995. *Pilgrimage: Past and Present in World Religions*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Daily Mail*. 2005. "The Highlights of BB6." <www.dailymail.col.uk> 12 August.
- Dovey, Jon. 2001. "Big Brother." In *The Television Genre Book*. Edited by Glen Creeber, 134–37. London: British Film Institute.
- . 2000. *Freakshow*. London: Pluto Press.
- Dubisch, Jill. 2004. "The Heartland of America: Memory, Motion and the Reconstruction of History on a Motorcycle Pilgrimage." In *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*. Edited by Coleman, Simon and Eade, John, 105–32. London; Routledge.

- Dutton, Edward Croft. 2005. "Crop-tops, Hipsters and Liminality: Fashion and Differentiation in Two Evangelical Student Groups." *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 9 (Spring).
- Eade, John. 2000. "Introduction to the Illinois Paperback." In *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*. Edited by John Eade and Michael Sallnow, 1–9. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Eade, John and Michael Sallnow. 1991. "Introduction." In *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*. Edited by John Eade and Michael Sallnow, 1–29. London: Routledge.
- EMI Finland. 2005. "Italian uusi tähti Helsinkiin Laura Bono ja Irina tuplakonsertissa." *EMI Finland Online*. <www.emi.fi> 24 October.
- Engstrom, Erika and Beth Semic. 2003. "Portrayal of Religion in Reality TV Programming: Hegemony and the Contemporary American Wedding." *Journal of Media and Religion* 2,3: 145–63.
- Gennep, Arnold van. 1960. *Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge.
- Gitlin, Todd. 1998. "The Culture of Celebrity." *Dissent*, 45: 81–3.
- Hartley, John. 2004. "Kiss Me Kat: Shakespeare, Big Brother and the Taming of the Self." In *Reality TV: The Remaking of Television Culture*. Edited by Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, 522–59. New York: New York University Press.
- Hill, Annette. 2002. "Big Brother: The Real Audience." *Television and New Media*, 3,3: 323–40.
- Johnson-Woods, Toni. 2002. *Big Brother: Why did Reality TV Show become such a Phenomenon?* St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- Koch, Gertrud. 1999. "From Kingdom to Stardom." *Constellations* 6: 206–15.
- Lavender, Andy. 2003. "Pleasure, Performance and the Big Brother Experience." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 13,2: 15–23.
- Lewis, I. M. 1971. *Ecstatic Religion*. London: Routledge.
- Meer, Theo van der. 2003. "Gay Bashing—a Rite of Passage?" *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 5,2: 153–65.
- Mehl, Dominique. 1994. "La television compassionnelle." *Reseaux*, 63: 101–22.
- Merten, Don. 2005. "Transition and Trouble: Rites of Passage for Suburban Girls." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 36,2: 132–48.
- Mitchell, Jon. 2004. "Ritual Structure and Ritual Agency: Rebounding Violence and the Maltese Festa." *Social Anthropology* 12,1: 57–75.
- Mole, Tom. 2004. "Hypertrophic Celebrity." *M/C Journal* 7,5. <<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0411/08-mole.php>>
- Milner, Murray. 2005. "Celebrity Culture as a Status System." *The Hedgehog Review: Celebrity Culture* 7,1: 66–77.
- Murphy, Michael Dean. 1994. "Class, Community, and Costume in an Andalusian Pilgrimage." *Anthropological Quarterly* 67,2: 49–61.
- Olaveson, Tim. 2001. "Collective Effervescence and *Communitas*: Processional Modes of Ritual and Society in Emile Durkheim and Victor Turner." *Dialectical Anthropology* 26,2: 89–124.
- Powell, John. 2001. "US Attack Affects BBII." *Jam*. <www.jam.canoe.ca> 13 September.
- Reiss, Steven and James Wilt. 2004. "Why People Watch Reality TV." *Media Psychology* 6,4: 363–78.
- Robertson-Smith, William. 1889. *The Religion of the Semites*. London: Black.
- Rojek, Chris. 2001. *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Schwartz, Thomas. 1972. "The Ritual Process." *American Anthropologist* 74,4: 906.
- The Age*. 2005. "Thousands of BB Hopefuls." <www.theage.com.au> 22 January.
- The Sun*. 2005. "Lesley is Evicted." *The Sun Online*. <www.thesun.co.uk>
- Tincknell, Estella and Parvati Raghuram. 2002. "Big Brother: Reconfiguring the 'Active' Audience of Cultural Studies?" *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 5,2: 199–215.
- Turner, Victor. 1982. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. Baltimore: PAJ Publications.
- . 1968. *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes Amongst the Ndembu of Zambia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- . 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine Publishers.

———. 1992. *Blazing the Trail*. University of Arizona Press.

——— and Turner, Edith. 1978. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Yesil, Basil. 2001. "Reel Pleasure: Exploring the Historical Roots of Media Voyeurism and Exhibitionism." *Counterblast* 1, 1, <www.nyu.edu/pubs/counterblast>