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Thomassen, B.

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## **From liminoid to limivoid: Understanding contemporary bungee jumping from a cross-cultural perspective**

**Bjørn Thomassen and Maja Balle**

### **Abstract:**

This article is about bungee jumping and how it reflects the world in which we live. During the 1980s bungee jumping became one of the most popular ways of seeking a 'real experience', when the practice was commercialised and introduced as a leisure activity all around the world. This happened in the same period as outdoor sport activities or 'outdoor recreation' exploded in kinds and numbers, clearly linked to the 'experiential turn in tourism' and the proliferation of 'adventure tourism'. A key feature of these activities is the experience of danger: going to the limits, or indeed, standing *on* the limit. Hence, bungee jumping can be seen as an apt metaphor for understanding liminality in contemporary tourism and leisure. The bungee jumping adventure quite literally positions the subject standing on an edge, facing an abyss, jumping into a void. But what kind of limit experiences are these? This question can be addressed, we argue, by matching contemporary bungee jumping experiences against practices of jumping rituals in non-modern societies, which seem to contain some common features with the modern bungee jump. In contrast to more 'classical' ritual passages, contemporary bungee jumping is clearly an example of what Turner called the liminoid. Furthermore, it can be argued that insofar as these experiences involve no transformation of subjectivity or no passage to the 'other world', bungee jumping signifies a further shift from the liminoid to what we call the 'limivoid': the inciting of near-death experiences, a jump into nothingness, a desperate search for experience in a world of ontological excess.

**Keywords:** Adventure Tourism, Bungee Jumping, Experience, Liminality, Liminoid, Pole Rituals, Symbolism

### **Introduction: 'Today you can try your limit'**

Free day in Queenstown, today you can try your limit, options are: Bungy Jumping, Sky Diving, Gondola and Luge, Jet Boating, Parasailing, Paragliding, Canyon Swing and much more !!!

(Brochure description of Day 6 activities for a typical Adventure Tour in New Zealand, Christmas/New Year 2010/2011)

This article is about bungee jumping and how it arguably – or to some degree - reflects the world in which we live. During the 1980s bungee jumping became one of

the most popular ways of seeking a 'real experience', when the practice was commercialised and introduced as a leisure activity around the world. This happened in the same period as outdoor sport activities or 'outdoor recreation' exploded in kinds and numbers, clearly linked to the 'experiential turn in tourism' and the proliferation of 'adventure tourism'. This development has only been reinforced since then, as adventure tourism has established as a widely popular category, with a proliferating number of subdisciplines, including rafting, snowcross, paragliding, skysurfing, cliff diving, paintball, drifting and base jumping – just to mention a few. The more dangerous of these are often termed under the category 'extreme sports'.

To some extent we seem to live in an 'adventure' culture, or a (post-modern?) 'kick culture' (Boeve 1999). The original meaning of the term *adventure* hangs on to it still today, as it in medieval French referred to 'chance' or 'luck'. In Latin (*adventure*) the word referred to something about to happen, a future event, about whose outcome one could not know, a future particle of *advenire*. The term therefore involved the idea of 'venire', which indicates a movement, but also an arrival. In the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, at the threshold of modernity, the word became tied to a dangerous experience, understood as a trial to go through. This ties the etymology to the conceptual discussion of experience, as a dangerous 'passing through'. It is far beyond the limits of this article to go fully into a discussion of the concept of experience. At the same time, it must be stressed that it was exactly via his ethnographic explorations of liminality that Victor Turner came to identify his own project with the philosophy of Dilthey (see for example Turner 1982: 12-19; 1988: 84-97; see also the discussion by Andrews 2009). Turner said that it takes an anthropologist to understand the significance of Dilthey (Turner 1985: 210). Via Dilthey, Turner sought to return to the perhaps greatest question of modern philosophy: how to understand experience. On the one hand, experience had been a cornerstone of both Cartesian and Kantian thought, hence of modern philosophy as such. In contrast to scholasticism and medieval philosophy, allegedly founded on 'dogma', post-Cartesian thought always claimed to derive from human experiences. On the other hand, there was something deeply problematic about modern philosophy and its hold on experience – or rather, its non-hold. Within a Kantian

framework, 'experience' was simply posited as 'being there', but not open to investigation. To Kant, the world was chaotic, and order could only emerge by the imposing powers of the transcendental mind. This problematic attitude and starting point was exactly what Dilthey had realized with full clarity (see Ortega y Gasset 1965, 125-218). Dilthey introduced the term 'Erlebnis' as an attempt to open up a new type of philosophical approach, departing from, and rooted in, 'really lived experience'. The role of philosophy was not to impose order on the chaotic nature of empirical life; the role of philosophy is to understand, from within, the structure of experiences.

In his late works, Turner tentatively argued that Dilthey's project could be sustained by an ethnographic platform, with reference to social drama performed by individuals who in the ritual act bring to the fore cultural essentials. Arnold van Gennep had recognized that such ritual passages share form or patterns, chaotic and open ended as they *also* are. In *Rites of Passage* van Gennep not only suggested a meaningful classification of all existing rites, he also went on to explore 'the basis of characteristic patterns in the order of ceremonies' (1960: 10). Stressing the importance of *transitions* in any society, van Gennep singled out *rites of passage* as a special category, consisting of three sub-categories, namely *rites of separation*, *transition rites*, and *rites of incorporation*. Van Gennep called the middle stage in a rite of passage for a *liminal period* (ibid:11). He called transition rites for *liminal rites*, and he called rites of incorporation for *postliminal rites*. Elaborating van Gennep's work, Turner placed the triadic, sequential and processual structure of rites of passage at the core of anthropology. And he more than indicated that it was *this* structure that 'forms' experience, also at the philosophical level: that the order of experience is established from *within* lived experience of passages. This was fully in line with van Gennep's original framework, and the implicit but important anti-Kantian stance contained within it (see Thomassen 2009). However, Turner had also suggested that in postindustrial societies such liminal rites would largely become replaced by the 'liminoid', e.g. by 'out-of-ordinary' experiences in leisure, arts and, indeed, sports.

Trivial as they may seem, practices of extreme sports and adventure tourism do therefore point to something quite fundamental about what happens to liminality and to experience in contemporary culture. Many of these adventure activities involve near-death experiences, and they keep developing. This proliferation and continuous development of 'adventure disciplines' is in itself of interest. As frontline practitioners of an extreme sport have exhausted one type of extreme experience (which, after some time starts to feel less 'extreme') they consequently try to invent another one. When they succeed establish a minimum number of followers, the activity sometimes becomes 'named' and 'branded', and participants start to discuss and publicize their experience, often on-line. In some cases the activity is recognized as a discipline with national and international championships celebrated around the world. At this step, commercialization develops around the activity, and also via television: sport or adventure channels transmitted globally dedicate an increasing amount of time to these 'non-conventional' sports (some specialized channels *only* transmit extreme sports). Together with the inclusion of these activities into tourist packages (often in 'softer forms' than the 'original' to accommodate a broader paying audience), this ensures that extreme sports, although practiced by relatively low numbers of persons at a regular level, has become part of a mass consumption. While a near-global phenomenon, the development is evidently driven by Western consumption needs. Seemingly, most of adventure sports come from America, Australia and New Zealand, but with Europeans (or well-off non-Westerners) as equally frequent consumers. The price of a jump normally lies somewhere between 100 to 200 Euro, depending on location and the 'package' of which the jump itself is a part.

How are we to understand these developments? What is it about contemporary culture and mass consumption that is so in need of 'adventure'? A key feature of these activities is the experience of danger and going to the limits. In fact, adventure tourism is often branded and sold with slogans such as 'Try Your Limits', or 'Have a Real Experience' (with all the due safety precautions written in small). Clearly therefore, the spread and popularity of adventure tourism involves, in a very essential sense, a search for boundary experience. Bungee Jumping is just one out of many outdoor activities, but we argue here that bungee jumping can be seen as

an apt metaphor for understanding liminality in contemporary tourism and leisure. This is so, we argue, because Bungee Jumping is perhaps the 'extreme sport' or 'extreme adventure' that most quickly spread to wider layers of consumers, and offered to a mass public in a growing number of public spaces, including not only far-away canyons or bridges, but also festivals and fairs, and increasingly also 'regular' and permanent bungee jumping posts or cranes, open to the public with shop-like hours: 'Wanna go for a jump, honey?'. Even more importantly, the bungee jumping adventure quite literally positions the subject standing on an edge, facing an abyss, jumping into a void. It therefore represents an almost archetypical limit experience. But what kind of limit experience is it *really*? In this article we suggest that beginnings of an answer can be most meaningfully searched for by matching contemporary bungee jumping experiences against practices of flying or *jumping*, from high places, developed before or outside Western cultures of mass consumption, in what Turner called 'pre-industrial societies'. This includes very diverse cultural contexts such as the original 'gol' ritual in Melanesia, but also the *volador* ritual in Mexico, and the Indian *Charak-puja*, or 'hook swinging' ritual. We also suggest, very tentatively, the possibility that ancient pole-jumping ritual ceremonies took place already in the Bronze Age. This suggestion is inspired by evidence from the rock carvings at Gerum (Sweden). Our four cases are of course not exhaustive, but by combining pole jumping rituals from wildly diverse settings, we hope to be able to distil some central features of jumping rituals that serve as a meaningful contrast to contemporary bungee jumping.

Our argument is therefore based on ethnographic comparison and partly on archaeological data. The ethnographic data referred to are all collected from reports written by people who have witnessed or experienced the rituals first-hand – which is of course not the case for the Gerum rock carvings. More than an empirical study of modern bungee jumping, what we present here must be understood as an attempt to understand these practices contextually. Our conclusions are tentative and open to further questioning, but we argue that current practises of bungee jumping indicate something central, but also something perplexing about the search for liminal experiences in contemporary culture. We further argue that Turner's notion of the

'liminoid' does not really capture what happens in practices of bungee jumping. We will suggest that such experiences can most aptly be termed as 'limivoid', as they are very essentially about the void and about nothingness. The suggested term may have broader applicability.

### **The 'Gol' ritual: ritual jumping on the Pentecost Island**

Let us start by briefly describing the 'gol' ritual, and try to identify the specific features of the ritual. It was this ritual which was copied and translated into an outdoor extreme sport in the West. Bungee jumping is in fact a particularly interesting adventure sport because it has its origins in 'real' rites of passage as practiced on the Pentecost Island (Vanuatu, former New Hebrides) in the South-western area of the Pacific Ocean. Every spring between April and June men in the southern part of the island (speakers of the Sa language) jump from tall towers (around 20 to 30 metres) with lianas and vines tied to their feet, performing an old ritual called the 'gol' or land diving.

The ritual had been noticed by travellers and anthropologists, but has not yet really been the object of much comparative discussion (see Jolly 1994 for a discussion of the ritual and its use in tourism). The ritual was first given international exposure when David Attenborough and a BBC film crew brought back footage of the ritual in the 1950s. Attenborough, upon visiting the islands for *National Geographic* in the 1950s, insisted on trying the sport himself. In 1979, the first modern day bungee jumps were performed in Bristol, England, by a group of five men who were members of the 'Oxford University Dangerous Sports Club'. Although they were arrested shortly after jumping from the Clifton Suspension Bridge using military-produced shock cords tied to their ankles, they continued to jump in the USA, from where the practice then spread (see Frase 1992, Lyster 1999 and Soden 2003 for a fuller description of this history).

Clear-cut physical danger and peril was and is a part of the original 'gol' ritual. The jumping can lead to death or serious injury, a marking of the body for a life time. The neophyte jumpers do not have elastic cords to break their fall from leaps off

construction cranes, bridges and hot-air balloons. They employ no engineering studies, stress meters or G-force computations. They use no water, safety nets or

Plate 1: The Gol Ritual



Source: photo courtesy of John Nicholls: John Nicholls - J&S Tourism Consulting.

cushions below, just freshly turned earth on a slope. Only natural branches and fibers are used to build the tower the men jump from. Each jumper selects his own vines and builds his own platform on the tower. The falling diver's vines are pulled tight by his weight, thus helping to break the fall.

The ritual was connected to the cycle of yams growing and harvesting. The ritual was (is) also used to show acceptance into manhood. The ritual jumping, therefore, combined both types of rites of passage originally described by van Gennep: rites that mark the passage of an individual or social group from one status to another and



rites which mark transitions in the passage of time (here, harvest). In fact, the architectural details of the tower and the meaning of the ritual are closely related to the sphere of yams growing and to the symbolic connection between yams and men's bodies. The diving is seen as an expression of the daring and forceful powers of young men – the power that in pre-colonial times was seen as an important quality with the warrior. Thus the rite is performed to ensure a good yams harvest just as it celebrates a particular form of masculinity: the young hot warrior hood. The tower and the land dive called *gol* or *nagol* can be translated into the word 'body'. And the shape of the tower that they build out of branches and timber does have close resemblances to the concept of a human body:

'It has ankles, knees, a belly, breasts, shoulders, a head, even genitals. The diving platforms that jut out from the tower are conceived of as the penis and the struts underneath as the vagina of the tower. The tower is thus arguably an exuberantly bisexual body, but it is only younger men diving from it' (Jolly 1994:134).

The myth that explains the origin of the *gol* is about a woman, who is dissatisfied with her husband Tamile's sexual demands. She runs away, and he follows her in to the forest where she climbs up a tree. He climbs after her, and she jumps from the top. But first she shrewdly had tied vines around her ankles – it saves her life. The man, being not so wise, jumps to his death (Jolly 1994:136). Today, when the men jump, the women stand on the ground, watching, shouting and cheering at the jumpers. The act of jumping is considered to be health bringing; a good jump is thought to boost both the bodily wellbeing and strength of those who jump and to be a cure of pain and disease. Skilled jumpers enhance their attractiveness and appeal to women.

Around the month of April, following yam harvest, the tower is constructed by the men in a joint effort (as said, this is the time to build it because the vines have the right succulency and springiness which is crucial for controlling the fall of the divers). The men keep away from women during this period and remain sexually inactive. No women can go near the tower until the day the jumping ceremony is performed.

According to legend, a violation of this taboo would anger the mythic ancestor Tamile, with the risk of provoking an accident and injury of the divers. Women will partake in the 'gol' ritual as observers, and sometimes listeners to the speeches made by men from the tower. They sometimes dance and sing as the men climb the tower.

Since global tourism found its way to the Bunlap tribes of South Pentecost in the beginning of the 1950s the motives and ways of the *gol* have transformed. The ritual, inspired by the tourist revenue it rapidly generated, was taken up by people in the region to whom the ritual was not native, and who did not have the insight and expertise in performing it right and safely. Most illustrative of the nature of the changes of the rite is the famous case from 1972 where a diving performance went terribly wrong and a man was killed because the vines on his ankles broke. The fatal jump was made, out of season when the vines were too juicy, in honor of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on her royal tour to the region, by a Christian converted young Melanesian. The men of the Bunlap tribe had refused to do the jump, and their reaction after the accident was reported to be this:

'They alleged that he had taken a platform that was designed for another man and had broken the rules of sexual segregation by sleeping with his girlfriend the night before. They condemned the way in which, as they saw it, their Christian kin had been persuaded to perform 'like circus animals,' as one old man said, just to please the English queen' (Jolly 1994:138).

### **Men-birds: the *Volador* rituals in Mexico.**

The *volador* ritual or pole-flyer tradition in Mexico most likely has its roots in the pre-Columbian era, as indicated by colonial depictions of the ritual, made short after the conquest of Mexico in 1532 (van Doesburg 2001). The Aztec word for *volador* is *cuauhpatlanque* (plural *quauhpatlanqui*) which can be translated to 'Those who fly by means of a tree' (Stresser-Peán 2005: 22). A version of the traditional ritual is still practiced today and can be seen in many places in Mexico. One of the best places to observe the ritual with the 'flying men' is the city Papantla in the state of Veracruz. Here a 20 meter high pole is erected permanently on the town's *plaza* with the purpose of conducting and preserving the ceremony.

The *volador*-ceremony is conducted most often by five men, but is sometimes performed with two, six or eight participants (Graulich 1989:63, Stresser-Peán 2005:23). Reportedly the ritual is performed, with variation, as follows: At first the capitán or *k'ohal* climb to the top of the pole where a small platform and turning frame is placed. From up here he will salute the four directions of the universe by shaking his artificial bird wings, and lifting a drinking vessel and spraying liquor towards the four directions. Then the remaining four men climb up and seat themselves on the turning frame, just below the capitán, who remains standing on the very top. They bind a rope around their waist. The ropes are tied to and coiled around the pole several times. Slowly the frame starts turning and the capitán plays a small drum and blow a flute that imitate the call of an eagle. Hereafter four of them gently lean backwards and swing head-down from the frame, spinning around the pole whilst the ropes slowly unwinds, as they get closer to the ground. The fifth man stays on the top, while performing a dance and playing the instruments. By the end of the pole-flight each birdman has ideally circled around the pole thirteen times (Stresser-Peán 2005:20, Gibson 1971: 269-70). As the flyers are just about to reach the ground, they swing around and land on their feet.

Ethnographic fieldwork from the 1930's relates that some important preparatory rites take place before the *volador* ceremony can start. These include fasting, nocturnal dancing, and ceremonial offerings of foodstuff to the gods and to the souls of the dead forefathers (Stresser-Peán 2005: 20). Other rituals include the cutting of the tree they select to serve as the jumping pole, and sacrificing of turkeys that are placed, alive, in the hole in the ground where the new pole is being been set up (Stresser-Peán 2005:20-21, Gibson 1971: 276-77). Dancing around the pole before climbing it is also documented in the ethnographic literature (Gibson 1971: 269).

Issues such as sexual abstinence and avoidance of women before a *volador*-performance are evidently crucial for understanding the ritual. Reportedly the flyers, at least in earlier times, lived apart from their wives for eight days before the flight (Gibson 1971: 276-77). Another account tells that the participating *volador*-men

should remain abstinent for up to 20 days before the ritual, the number of days varying from village to village (Stresser-Peán 2005:23).

The accidents that unfortunately but occasionally strike the *volador* ceremony often have fatal consequences. The victim, when this type of lethal accident happens, is often the 'captain', e.g. the leader of the ceremony who is always in risk of falling from the top of the pole, as he is not secured with any rope. When accidents happen, the suspicion is that one of the participants has failed to observe the sexual taboo. The victim of the accident is not necessarily the person who broke the taboo (Stresser-Peán 2005: 23).

The early Spanish chroniclers who arrived in Mexico shortly after the conquest gave accounts of the *volador* spectacle, and reported that the 'bird-men' of that time were clad as herons, griffins or eagles in outfits made with real bird feathers (Durán 1971: 297).<sup>1</sup> The attire of the bird-men has shifted since colonial times. Today they no longer use bird costumes, although they still carry artificial wings. They dress in handmade, finely decorated suits kept in red, yellow and white, trimmed with multicolored bands, and wear conic hats with a crest of ribbons on top to imitate bird feathers.

The *volador* ritual is associated with many interpretations, but there is little doubt that it relates to myth. The total number of windings that the *voladores* perform on their descent (13x4) reaches 52, which is an important number from an ancient Mesoamerican point of view. The number 52 was the amount of years that, according to the Mesoamerican calendar system, made out a full Mesoamerican time cycle in the pre-Columbian era (Miller & Taube 1996: 48). It was considered a great event and a moment in time of great peril when a period of 52 years had been completed. People feared that the sun would be devoured by monsters as it had happened in the mythic past.

It was necessary to carry out special rituals to ensure that the world as the Mesoamericans knew it would continue, and life on earth would be prolonged (Smith 1998: 237). One early Spanish chronicler mentions that the *volador*-ritual was made

Plate 2: Voladores from El Tajín,  
Veracruz, Mexico, 2007.



Source: Photo courtesy of Mette Haakonsen.

in connection with the fulfilling of the 52 year cycle (Torquemada 1969: II: 305-6). The pole-flying was of course a potentially dangerous act to perform, but the threat of the alternative represented an even more horrifying option.

The story of creation of mankind, according to the Aztecs, is a story of birth, death or sacrifice and rebirth. The central myth in the Aztec religion is the legend of the five suns, or eras. Four suns, and so four different worlds, have existed before the present (fifth) one, but have gone under and disappeared due to catastrophes such as hurricanes, or the arrival of man-eating jaguars, or flooding caused by great rains.

When the world is destroyed, it can be born again. But only through the auto-sacrifice of one of the gods, a new sun can be born (Smith 1998:205-243, Miller & Taube 1993: 42). Perhaps the modern day *volador* ritual contains remnants of long forgotten re-enactment dramas, where ritual plays that mirrored the myths of the creation of the world were performed to keep the cosmos in order - but this we cannot know for sure.

The reason why the *voladores* are dressed as birds possibly relates to the Aztec notion that they represent the souls of the dead divinized ancestors, or the souls of dead warriors. It has also been suggested that they represented men destined to be sacrificed, and clad as birds they fell from the sky as potential victims (Krickeberg 1933: 74, Stresser-Peán 2005: 26). With their arms stretched outwards, head down and their bodies spinning downwards, the *voladores* of Papantla arguably represent a unique image of human's everlasting fascination of birds and the desire to be able to fly.

Another theme that is evidenced in the *volador* ritual is that of sacrifice. It is possible that the *volador* ritual originally was connected to the performance of human sacrifices. With reference to the images from the codices *Porfirio Díaz* and *Fernández Leal* it seems that the flying ritual was conducted simultaneously with the killing of prisoners. On both depictions a *volador* pole with the bird-men is seen, and religious specialists or priests watch the ceremony seated on the ground along with the rulers of tribe. Next to the *volador* pole the victim is fixed to a ladder. The sacrificial method was to kill the victim by shooting arrows at him or her.

The ritual has also been connected to phenomena such as fertility, sacrifice, rain, wind, sun, harvest and the marking of the four cardinal directions and the four elements (Gibson 1971:271-3, Stresser-Peán 2005:26, Graulich 1989: 63-64). Any safe or convincing conclusion about the origin of and motive behind the *volador* ritual is difficult to draw. Perhaps Stresser-Peán puts it right when he says that it is perfectly possible that the Indians attributed several different meanings to the ritual

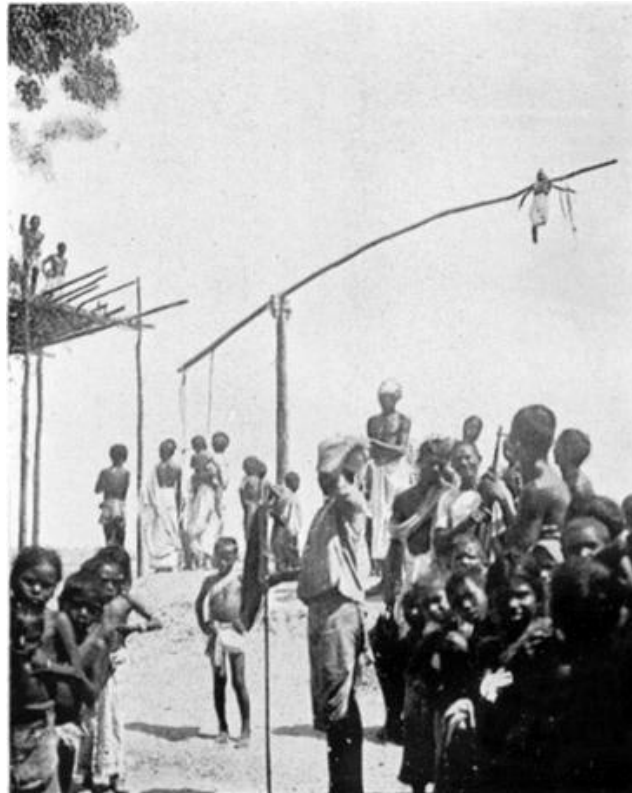
at the same time (Stresser-Peán 2005: 27). Michel Graulich makes this concluding remark:

‘Obviously the ritual always aims at assuring fertility and the *voladores* mostly represented the dead who came down to impregnate the earth’ (Graulich 1989: 64)

### **The Indian *Charak-puja*, or the ‘hook swinging’ ritual .**

The *hook-swinging* ritual, also known as *charak-puja*, is a part of the traditional Bengali festival dedicated to Shiva and his wife Durga. Because of written sources and direct oral testimonies, we know that the origin of the ritual has foundations in a myth where child birth and crop fertility is the main topic. The *charak-puja* has been practiced widely in India since long before the British colonization. One of the earliest reports of the ritual was written in 1582 by Caspero Balbi. The translation of *charac-puja* would be the ‘wheel form of worship’ or ‘revolving ceremony’ (Powell 1914:148).

Plate 3: Hook swinging, India



Source: Public domain

The agonizing ritual involves a high pole, with an attached frame from where a person's suspended body hangs in hooks inserted to the skin of the back in a manner that allows rotating in a vertical plane. The pole ritual is still performed today at special occasions. A description of the customary ritual comes from J. Powell who eye witnessed and photographed the ritual in 1912 (see two of his photos above). Accordingly, the person who performed the ritual had by the means of expert helpers two iron hooks passed through the fleshy portion of the back, one on either side of the spine, just above the kidneys. With a rope attached to the hooks, he was then gently lifted up in the air from a tall platform, and was moved around on a rotating bar that lay across the top of an upright pole, forty feet tall. He was thus rotated from two to five minutes, or stayed suspended as long as he wished. Bells and garlands

Plate 4: Hook swinging, India



Source: Public domain

of flowers were hung around his head and neck during the ceremony. As soon as he was taken down he lay on his stomach for the hooks to be extracted by the men who



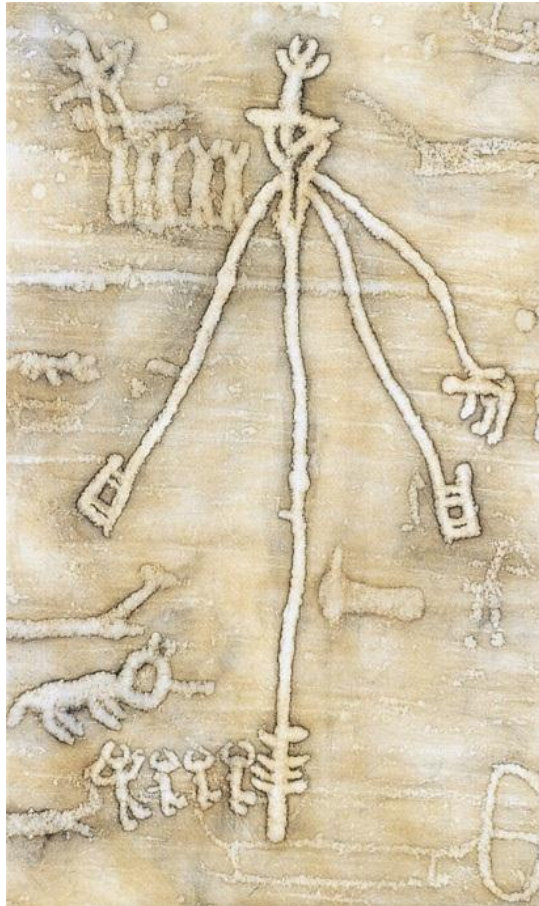
inserted them (Powell 1914:153). Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the rite was performed only when special rules of behavior had been observed in due time before the ritual was conducted. Three days before the hook-swinging ceremony took place the participator was in a state of taboo - exactly like neophytes have been documented to be across the variety of world cultures. He was not allowed to eat, and drank water only once a day. He was required to seclude himself from his family and wife, and could speak to no one. As soon as the hooks had been withdrawn after the ceremony he was allowed to drink water sweetened with sugar, as the first thing (Powell 1914:153). It is said that only the lower caste people were 'swung', whereas the people belonging to the higher ones, who were already in the god's good turn were exempt.

With regards to interpretation, we are therefore on relatively safe ground to conclude that the *charak-puja* was and still is a classical ritual passage including the three steps identified by Arnold van Gennep: separation, liminality and reintegration (with a new or enhanced status that is publicly recognized). The written sources available also evidence that the ritual, at least in its origins, was tied to larger cosmological perceptions of birth and death and also to fertility. The Hinduist mythology that sustains the ritual may be a rewritten version of an already existing 'script', much like Christian rituals are known to be Christianized versions of more ancient fertility rites tied to pre-Christian cosmological calendars (it is quite likely, for example, that the caste element has been introduced at a later stage).

### **The rock carvings at Gerum: Bronze Age Pole Jumping?**

The last of our cases stands out from the rest as it takes the form of a rock carving from *Lilla Gerum* in Bohuslän (see below). Due to the fact that we have no ethnographic evidence, no written sources or other valid data to support our ideas about this image, interpretations must remain somewhat speculative. The image nevertheless inspires us to assume that what is seen on the rock carving might be some kind of 'pole-jumping' ritual – and we are of course not the first ones to suggest so. It should however be noted that other interpretations of this image do exist, and that area specialists will certainly find reasons to question our assumptions. The

**Plate 6:** Rubbing of 'Lilla Gerum' by Evers Dietrich around 1960.



Source: picture courtesy of Tanums Hällristningsmuseum, Sweden.

larger argument of this article does not stand or fall with the Gerum image; yet, since this is the most ancient known depiction of what *might* be a possible pole jumping act, any comparative effort must at least make mention of it.

And the scene depicted is indeed a striking one. The carving is pecked into a relatively smooth, down sloping rock face, and was made more than two thousand years ago by an unknown prehistoric 'artist'. The image has been dated to bronze-age (1800 – 500 B.C.) and it is found in an area with many other rock carvings.<sup>ii</sup> The carving is a part of a 9x6 meter wide stone panel displaying numerous other carved

figures such as ships, humans, animals, footprints, circles and cup marks. The image is made with a stone pegging technique, with simple, full drawn lines. Each line has the breadth of a human finger, more or less. The central element in what we assume to be a pole-ritual scene contains a vertical positioned, stylized *tree* or *pole* with a platform on top of it. The pole is placed on the deck of a ship (the ship, however, might be a later addition), drawn in a highly stylized manner. An upright human figure wearing a horned helmet is perched on a platform on top of the pole. The figure's arms are stretched up toward the sky. From underneath the platform three straight lines or 'ropes' are drawn, reaching halfway down the pole. Each of the lines has human figures attached to the end of them – they seem suspended in the air, as if hanging from the ropes, swinging in the air. Four other human figures, also wearing what seems to be helmets, and with erect penises stands at the lower part of the scene, to the left of the ship that carries the pole.

The question about how these ancient images should be interpreted is a perpetual problem. We have very few direct clues about what exactly the scene depicts, who is on it, why, or by whom they were made – and interpretation will therefore have to be conjectural. One scholar has interpreted the image as a Scandinavian rendering of the Mexican *volador* ritual (Evers 1991). His idea is that the Bronze Age people of Scandinavia had paddled all the way to Mesoamerica where they saw a *volador* ritual performed, paddled back to Scandinavia and made the carving after getting the inspiration in Mesoamerica. This suggestion has been contested by other scholars who argue against this Trans-Atlantic journey, stressing that there is no indication that any contacts existed between the two areas at this time, and that there are better ways of explaining this type of motive in prehistoric Scandinavia (Nielsen et al. 2009). Instead they suggest that interpretations of the Gerum image should be made by using local historical and ethnographic testimonies about tree and pole rituals as analogical source material. Such customs have been documented in written sources from the region over the past centuries. It appears that pole rituals have been performed at various occasions, and still do occur in Sweden in connection with the so called may pole festival, a custom with strong roots in Pre-Christian belief systems. This was a major theme in *The Golden Bough*, where Frazer (1996)

dedicated a whole chapter to the survival of tree cults in modern Europe, entitled 'Relics of Tree Worship in Modern Europe'.

It seems tempting to suggest that the image depicts something that has to do with demonstration of virility and manhood; and here some of the symbolism (erect penis, horned helmets and lifted arms) do seem to speak their own language. It is therefore equally tempting to suggest that the image can be interpreted as a ritual passage into manhood. *Arguably*, the pole itself symbolizes manhood, or the passageway into manhood. *If* (and we stress the 'if') the image depicts a ritual passage, the four men standing below the pole are possibly men who have already gone through the ritual (hence their erected penis and horned helmets). From their movement, they could be seen as dancing, or running. The figure on the top of the pole *could* resemble a ceremony master with a religious or spiritual function, linking to the Gods above. Following this line of interpretation, the human beings hanging in the ropes would be (almost certainly male) neophytes undergoing a ritual passage. They are suspended in the air, and are therefore quite literally 'caught' in the liminal phase. Their uninitiated status would be indicated by the lack of horns/helmets and the absence of an erected penis. We state these suggestions as mere hypotheses.

Second, based on more recent ethnographic material, and following here the suggestions by Nielsen et al (2009) it seems equally tempting to suggest or imagine that the pole ritual has been celebrated during transition moments in the calendar year, for example during the passage from one season to another. In Scandinavia, May feasts are widely known to symbolize passage into summer and with clear symbolic references to both human and natural fertility. We leave these as suggestions; if at all valid (and judgment will never be final), they do point to shared features pertaining to cross-cultural symbolism of jumping rituals that, in any case, we can now proceed to sum up.

### **Shared features and common themes in the jumping rituals**

It is now time to draw together the material presented and discuss how it might put contemporary bungee jumping into a new light. It would of course be absurd to press

all the different jumping rituals into one scheme of analysis. The rituals presented are not simply the 'same', and it would be absurd to claim so. Clearly enough, interpretation must in each case be cautiously placed within the culture-specific cosmological notions of life and death, not to mention material culture and the wider social whole in which these performances have been or are taking place; and in the case of Gerum we have so limited knowledge about that social 'whole' that the commonalities we suggest here may not necessarily apply to that specific Bronze Age setting. With that caveat in mind, the material presented does indicate some shared features or common themes that can now be made explicit.

### **Rites of passage: liminality and the role of transition**

In terms of general interpretation, there are strong indications that the ritual jumping in all of the cases combines the two fundamental and universal types of rites of passage originally described by van Gennep in his masterpiece, *Rites of Passage*: rites that mark the passage of an individual or social group from one status to another and those which mark transitions in the passage of time (which, as in the *gol* ritual, is often connected to harvest) (van Gennep 1960: 10). The rites are quite simply classical examples of ritual passages in liminal time and space.

The liminal character is underlined by the polluted status of the jumper during the period that runs up until the jumping event, surrounded by various (evidently culture-specific) taboos. In their liminal phase, the jumpers represent a challenge to stability and order, and must not be brought into contact with the normal world. For the individual jumper, the rite is a way to demonstrate manhood. Various culture specific versions of jumping rites have without much doubt represented a ritual passage into manhood – or a continued demonstration of that manhood status. In many cases it may therefore have involved a real, substantial transformation of a man's identity and social status. This personal aspect, however, is in all cases tied to a wider social cosmology and mythology that renders the jumping meaningful. The jumping ritual is therefore also a collective ritual whereby a society moves from one moment into another, signifying a passage or marking of time in a wider cosmological calendar.

The Pacific Ocean material points to a feature that may be shared across cultures: namely that the tree pole itself (here a tower) represents an axis of transition and transformation. Although this again is almost impossible to 'prove', it would tie the jumping rituals to central features of shamanistic belief systems and to the symbolic role of trees as representing both life and death and transformation in a wide variety of cultures.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Flying and the dangerous in-between: trickster figures**

On the basis of the presented material, we also believe it is possible to venture into a general comment on the importance of flying – although here one must of course be even more careful about interpretation. The physical act of flying is crucial to the rituals we have invoked. Flying has often (perhaps everywhere and always?) been a secret human ambition. Most human beings (it seems) have recurrent dreams about flying. To imitate flying was in most cultural contexts, however, far from an innocent experience. In fact, the act of flying has often been linked to trickster figures – powerful, but also highly ambivalent figures that defy and erase boundaries. In classical Greece two prime divinities were venerated at crossroads: Hermes and Hecate; the latter came to be especially linked to road junctions. Images to both these deities were erected at such locations. Hermes, the trickster *par excellence* among those crossing the boundaries did not only overcome the boundaries between law and order (as the god of thieves) but with his winged sandals could also cross over between life and death and back, in a truly shamanic manner.

The significant, transformative and symbolic role of flying, of being extended in air, recurs in many rituals and myths studied by anthropologists and archaeologists around the world. From the rituals presented here, it seems quite clear that the liminal state is both produced and symbolized by human bodies 'falling', becoming, if only for a split second, weightless, betwixt and between. The 'flying act' is liminality condensed in time and space and epitomizes exactly the kind of extreme danger related to threshold experiences. This danger, moreover, is not only physical. While 'in the air', the human being, it seems, can be 'taken' in different directions. It does seem relevant to invoke the figure, found in different cultures, of the flying trickster.

The motive was famously analysed in Layard's early 20<sup>th</sup> century ethnography of the *bwili*, e.g. the 'flying trickster' in Malakula, Melanesia, incidentally not far away from where the original 'gol' ritual was performed (Layard 1930). The trickster myths, so dominant in the wider region, might be related to themes and symbols depicted in cave rock art which was found on the same and neighbouring islands, with a significant number of representations of falling human bodies (see Wallis 2002).<sup>iv</sup>

The link between ritual passages and flying/falling is best indicated by reference to a widespread belief in Melanesia concerning the afterlife. The route taken by the soul to the afterworld is well-defined. However, if a spirit from Aurora in Vanuata does not belong to a graded society (e.g. one of the societies into which a person enters at the end of a ritual passage) he is as *nothing* and hangs like a flying fox from a tree; e.g. permanently suspended in the air, like a flying animal. This, needless to say, represented a horrible departure from this life, the threat of a void, a perpetual liminality caused by the lack of culturalizing rituals of the personhood.

### **Birds and feathers**

Another indication of the link between ritual passages and flying has to do with the role of birds and bird symbolism. The symbolic role of birds in shamanist religions (and, of course, beyond) must certainly be tied to the intrinsic in-between nature (land/sea/air) of the bird itself. Perhaps their role is also related to the capability of birds to sing and dance (two very fundamental mimetic techniques also for humans, and fundamental for almost any ritual). More to the point, birds represented in a very direct way stages of trance in ritual experiences, as Layard showed for the Malakula, and which led him to coin the term 'flying tricksters': the *bwili* is transformed into a fowl. Wallis has recently argued that the images found in the Abeialau Cave, Malakula, depict 'stages of trance'. Malakula happens to be geographically placed right in front of the Pentecostal Island. The motifs of the rock paintings are plausibly part of a wider ritual mythology of jumping/flying that may have been shared by inhabitants of the wider area.

It should also be noted that the wearing of feathers is in itself a sign of having gone through a rite of passage: feathers are common sacred objects worn by initiated men in the wider Melanesian area (Wallis 2002: 751). For New Guinea Baruya shamans, for example, a single eagle feather is attached to the head of future shamans in the Koulakita ceremony and is thenceforth worn at the top of the head as a mark of their status, and to repel evil spirits (ibid., with ref to Godelier 1986). Feathers are common sacred objects still worn by initiated men in the wider Melanesian area. Similar symbolism is found in connection with the *voladores* in central Mexico. The strong parallels to feather symbolism in native North and South American societies are so evident that no further comment is necessary.

### **Contrast and comparison**

'It's the most scary thing ever! I totally forgot that I was attached to a bungee cord... You have a feeling like your falling, and your gonna die! Then the cord jerks you back, it hurts haha. It's fun though.'

(anonymous Bungee Jumper summing up her experience in an online forum).

What does all of this material presented have to say about modern bungee jumping? We are not arguing that reference to premodern ritual jumping 'proves' anything about modern bungee practices. We do argue that they serve to put them into a deeper perspective, one that throws light on this and similar practices - and perhaps also indicates something slightly problematic about 'experience' in contemporary leisure consumption.

In a way, one part of our conclusion can be easily drawn: modern bungee jumping stands out as an anthropological phenomenon exactly by having lost any reference to deeper-lying notions of cosmology and ritual passages, the 'cultural stuff' that in each of the cases presented have made such rituals pregnant with symbolism and meaning.

But here one might of course still ask: is modern bungee jumping not *a/so* simply another version of 'limit experience', much akin to what youngsters around the world



have been engaged in, apparently for millennia, and seemingly around the world? And here the answer should almost certainly be a 'Yes'. It is of course important to stress the emotional and psychological dimension to extreme sports, and also to acknowledge that the search for an 'adrenaline rush' or 'kick experiences' is arguably a universal and perennial part of human culture. All cultures have methods with which certain psychological states are provoked with an intensified sensory experience. Bungee jumping, as other sports of the kind, are conceptually akin to what the French sport philosopher Roger Caillois called 'vertigo games', which promote repressed bodily and emotional feelings, such as spasm, seizure, shock. It is also very plausible that jumping rituals around the world, and far back in time, quite simply have been ways for young men to show off and to 'have a rush'. It would be foolish to disregard these 'mundane' aspects of rituals, in any cultural or historical context.

At the same time, differences stand out, and they are substantial. While provoking 'danger' and 'fear', modern bungee is void of a more existential danger related to in-between experiences. In 'non-modern' jumping a failure in the ritual performance would be seen as linked to a disturbance or violation of social taboos, and indeed putting at risk an entire cosmological order. In bungee jumping, the physical danger has been decoupled from what in most cultural contexts quite clearly seems to be a deeper-lying 'religious' danger: a passage one must go through, but very carefully so. We would be very naïve to simply dismiss such 'serious attitudes' as superstition or mystic beliefs. It is, as argued very clearly by Szokolczai (2009), *our* neglect of the seriousness of liminal experiences that needs to be problematized. How human beings, and societies, go through a 'passage' and come out on 'the other side' *is* and will remain a fundamental and formative experience, not just a joke.

Furthermore, whereas most societies throughout human history have designated specific spaces or moments to such 'extreme' activities, linking them to ritual drama and symbolism with a high degree of social control over events and symbol-interpretation, in a modern setting the search for such experiences have clearly become much more individualistic and voluntary, decoupling the bodily experience

from the relatively 'fixed' schemata of social rituals. It was partly this observation that induced Victor Turner to distinguish between liminal and liminoid experiences.

This helps to underline one further aspect which does seem to mark a difference between 'non-modern' and 'modern' adrenaline experiences: in extreme sports, sensations are commonly sought for *their own sake* and involve a 'simple intoxication with the permeation of terror and anxiety' (Caillois 2001: 95). These vertiginous activities involve 'aberrant disciplines, heroic feats accomplished to no purpose or profit, disinterested, mortally dangerous and useless, they are of merit in finishing admirable witness, even if not generally recognised, to human perseverance, ambition, and hardness' (ibid.: 138). In other words, extreme sports are certainly a way for individuals to demonstrate courage and virility, a way to 'show off'. Elias and Dunning (1970) provided a general framework of explanation for such sporting activities by suggesting that mimetic leisure activities, like extreme sports, facilitate the release of instinctual, affective and emotional impulses, which again is a universal 'drive'. However, also for Dunning and Elias, the search for such experience takes on a new dimension in modern consumer societies. Sports (like bungee jumping) offer an experience of intensity, danger and risk and therefore represent 'the quest for excitement in unexciting societies'.

### **From Liminal to Liminoid to Limivoid?**

Let us finally try to draw some even further perspectives from the material presented, returning to the larger theoretical debate pertaining to liminality in contemporary consumption culture. At a first glance, the case studies seem to represent perfect evidence for Turner's distinction between the liminal and the liminoid. In his famous article, 'Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow and Ritual: an essay in comparative symbology' (1982), Turner suggested that liminal experiences in modern consumerist societies to a large extent have been replaced by 'liminoid' moments, where creativity and uncertainty unfold in art and leisure activities. Turner saw that rituals had lost much of their social force in modern societies, compared for example to the Ndembu which he had spent decades studying. This, however, does not mean that 'liminality' disappears, but rather indicates that it has been reconfigured: in art

and leisure, Turner said, we recreate 'life in the conditional'. Every culture has ways of incorporating the playful. The question is *how*, not *if*.

Liminality, in Turner's view, is a way for society to reveal itself, to open up its essential codes of behaviour and values, to either play with these and re-assemble them in novel ways (the ludic element is crucial), or to confirm their existence. Liminality is a rejuvenating force as well as a force by which traditions are confirmed, solidified and socially transmitted to the neophytes. The subjunctive mood of culture in the modern age instead developed into the liminoid: human experiences similar to the liminal ones, yet different. Liminoid phenomena have liminal qualities, but at the same time they do not really belong to rituals and are therefore also not stages or phases in a ritual. The liminoid resembles without being identical with the liminal (1982: 32). Turner suggested a perhaps oversimplified dichotomy between symbolic systems of a 'traditional' and a 'modern' type, arguing that 'we must distinguish between symbolic systems and genres which developed before and after the Industrial Revolution' (1982: 30). The liminoid is the modern break from normality, a playful as-if experience. Here Turner explicitly invoked forms of entertainment such as theatre and sports, art and even literature as the modern equivalents of 'culture in the subjunctive'. As rituals have faded away or lost much of their function and meaning, they have become replaced by the performative genres (ibid.: 79). The as-if culture that develops in these genres, like ritual itself, involves a kind of reflexive playfulness that may generate novelty and innovation in self-understanding and perhaps even in shaking up or sometimes reverting social roles, hierarchies, values or established views, and with possible ramifications for the wider public sphere.

However, Turner stresses that such modes of expression no longer belong to a rather fixed scheme of social ritual, shared by the entire social group. Postindustrial society is much too fractured for such 'unified' ritual experiences; specialization and rationalization have splintered the social fabric alongside a general process of individualization. Meaning has become personal. Expressive culture develops into several specialized fields and genres, and nobody is any longer forced to undergo the same ritual passages. Rather, individuals themselves *seek* such liminoid

experiences on a voluntary basis. Liminoid phenomena develop within relatively independent genres, and the engagement with these phenomena become tied to the individual consumption of the 'out-of-ordinary' as a commodity. Instead of the collective and obligatory we have the individual and the optional.

This decoupling of the liminoid from a ritual sequence also means that liminoid genres, in a larger sense, are no longer 'context-sensitive'. The liminoid has no reference to the rhythms and cycles of nature and human life, as was the case in premodern ritual. The out of ordinary is decoupled from calendrical, biological and social structural cycles. Both timing and placing of the liminal becomes rather random or idiosyncratic. In short, the liminoid develops outside that framework of ritual passage which was so fundamental to the very concept of liminality as proposed by Van Gennep. Cultural performance in the ritual-liminal mode therefore stands in some kind of opposition to the industrial-liminoid forms of entertainment and performance. Hence the need for a new term. Liminality has survived, but it has changed. Turner's view clearly has to be understood in line with a general framework of understanding modernization as individualization, specialization, rationalization and also secularization; the liminoid survives, but no longer as collectively agreed upon rituals at the core of society, but rather as individualized searches for excitement at the (spatial and temporal) fringes of the social. And yet, Turner clearly saw in these genres the seeds of renewal and the positive survival of the playful. The importance of these insights could hardly be exaggerated. Turner's framework has had massive effects on the study of liminal experiences, and has become a household term in anthropology and cultural studies, in particular for scholars working within the fields of arts, leisure and tourism. Yet there might be reasons why we should not simply embrace his terminology and the larger 'view' of the liminoid that goes with it. It may be that Turner argued both too much and too little.

On the one hand, and as argued also by Rowe (2008), Turner's distinction between the 'ritualistic' and the 'non-ritualistic' is overdrawn, and perhaps not necessary at all. Football games, to state the obvious, are highly ritualized performances, for both practitioners and audience. They are even tied to a calendar (the season, initiated by

pre-season games) that to quite a few people has huge symbolic importance, and come to serve as real identity markers. Turner may also be overstating the individualistic nature of liminoid experiences. For the specific case of bungee jumping (and perhaps more markedly so for other extreme sports) community bonds do in fact develop alongside these practices. While certainly open to individual choices, they are clearly also social phenomena. This is not only so for practitioners of the sport, who even develop their own language and codes of behavior but also becomes clear from the fact that many bungee posts are placed at the centre of leisure parks, or erected in the context of festivals. Being seen and being recognized and becoming accepted into a group is an important part of the jumping. The actual experience is therefore not *completely* individualized, to the extent that jumpers will almost always be accompanied with friends or family who witness the jump (and/or who participate in it as well). Quite a few jumpers also share their feat with a global readership via their blogs or youtube films. Still, the social group participating in the event is individually selected, and the entire undertaking does of course remain voluntary. Sports and extreme sports may on this note be very different from the performance of other genres like the writing of poetry and painting, genres that are indeed tied to a solitary experience, but which Turner lumps into the same category.

In short, it is often the case that the performance of extreme sports takes on highly ritualistic forms, although clearly no longer within a religious framework. Modern bungee jumping may even replicate some even more evident aspects of a 'classical' *rite de passage*. Daring activities, such a bungee jumping, are sometimes arranged on *Stags-night* or *bachelors-night*. This is the time where a man who is about to get married celebrate the future event by spending an action packed day with friends – and some times bungee jumping for the groom to-be is a central part of the programme for the day (<http://www.polterabend.dk/annonce/Alle/386/730/>). The celebration on the *stags-night* marks the coming of his status-transformation: from unmarried, to married.

On the other hand, Turner's suggestions may result overtly 'positive' concerning the innovative nature of what he calls the 'liminoid'. In his depictions of the liminoid

Turner includes such an array of activities (sports, literature, universities, fine arts) that not only does their joint categorization become analytically problematic: equally so does his normative assumption, most often implicit, that such activities are both creative and playful in a positive sense. The jumping may in many cases be connected to no element of self-reflection whatsoever. It is hard to see how the performance of extreme sports could ever effect substantive changes that impact social and moral order. Whether this is so or not, will of course depend on the single jumper and his/her experiences, and what we suggest here can only be brought to fuller light via ethnographic studies of bungee jumping and other extreme sports, involving the point of view of the participants. Yet, it does seem to be the case that while bungee jumping retains clearly ritual elements, and more so than Turner's framework allows us to recognize, the practicing of bungee hardly involves those features of 'anti-structure' that Turner claim still to be present in the liminoid. Bungee jumping may contain very little or perhaps even nothing of that reflexivity and scrutiny that leads to innovation or heightened consciousness of roles, a reflection of the links that tie individuals to society. It is for this reason that one might instead invoke the term 'limivoid'.

We invoke this term 'limivoid' as it contains the notion of boundary and limit experiences (*limes*) but ties it to the experiential void that seems to go with such experiences in 'extreme sports', exemplified in the modern interpretation of the bungee jumping ritual. It is a feeling of danger, it is a culture-specific elaboration of falling/flying, and it is clearly a provoked near-death experience. It is a jump into the abyss: a jump into the void – and that is it. It is fun, of course, a short laugh, a moment of playful encounter with death, and then back to normality.

We are of course not arguing that people cannot simply have a good time and 'feel the adrenaline' when jumping from a crane in an elastic chord; they can of course, and there is nothing inherently 'wrong' with that. Nor are we arguing that 'pre-modern' rituals were always *only* religious and therefore 'good' and positively meaningful. The very likely connection between the *Volador* ritual and human sacrifice should suffice to dismantle any such Romantic utopia. What we do argue is that just as non-modern practices of flying rituals were deeply tied to 'religious' experience and

personality transforming ordeals, so has modern extreme sports, and the larger entertainment industry built around it, become tied to an invocation of liminal experience that is essentially void of experiential substance. Arguably, this also means that the in-between experience itself has undergone a radical transformation: the 'other side' of the experience is no longer a transformed or re-generated human being, nor is it an entry into another season or period of a cosmological calendar. The jump is into a void which is simply a ...bottomless void with no other meaning. The other side of the experience is quite simply 'death', a death which is of course not real, but which is 'nearly' felt, just for the fun of it. And once it has been nearly felt, it is back to 'normal'. There is no 'other' on the other side.

### **Final reflection: Searching for experience**

We seem to live in a world hungry for experience. In our almost desperate hunger for experience, we seek for ever more 'kick experiences' (Boeve 1999). We are fascinated by the boundary, and the tourism and leisure industries thrive on that fascination. Indeed, as expressed by Giesen (2009), modernity is *at its heart* a constant breaking of 'boundaries'. Here it is of course difficult not to draw parallels to the larger contemporary entertainment industry, and its systematic fixation on death and violence, sex and humour: universal limit or out-of-the-ordinary experiences that have diffused, routinized and come to stand for the 'normal' itself. The search for kick experiences must be seen as a search for constant excess and boundary transgression, and what has been termed 'post-modern' culture is nothing but a continuation of it. Most often such kick experiences have no formative impact on the subject, and so the craving remains. These out-of-ordinary experiences take place as any genuine encounter with the transcendental or with the 'other' has become less and less possible. As argued by Boeve (1999: 57) 'real experience presupposes a story, a memory, a platform from where we can point at an experience to give it a meaningful place. The kick is then a pseudo experience, a non-experience, and the accumulation of kicks an effort to make us forget about the absence of the story'. As indicated above, this may not *always* hold true for bungee jumping – but in a larger perspective there is probably truth to the statement. It is lurking meaninglessness that fosters our craving for constant 'experience'.

Here, it seems, lies a further ambivalence. The contemporary scene is characterized by a double movement, or rather, a split attitude: on the one hand there is an implosion of liminality, conquering the 'centre', even in a spatial sense of that word (see Thomassen 2012). We constantly search for limit experience, we would almost want to live on the edge. The need for an adrenaline rush is of course also what has produced an exponential growth of gambling, that 'one moment' of 'excitement' that has penetrated into our everyday life with gambling games and scratch cards offered in super markets, Ryan Air flights and of course on our computer screens, in the hype of virtual gambling; this one moment of excitement without which a growing number of people simply cannot live a single day of their life. But this search takes place within a cultural configuration that almost systematically has closed itself off from experiences as genuine transformative encounters, or liminal moments that can actually change one's life (Szokolczai 2009: 163). This amounts to a cultural fear and perhaps even a cultural *denial* of liminality, and indeed of transformative experience as such.

There is something highly paradoxical going on here: the limit experiences that characterize contemporary consumption culture are all connected to a maximization of the emotions, a way to freely indulge in pleasure, fear, laughter and the enjoyment of goods. It seems like we should be living in a world where the forces towards the maximization of such sentiments have never been more liberated and free, and where the possibilities for optimizing joy and pleasure should have reached a zenith. We can bungee jump in 'pleasure parks' whenever we want; we can choose our holidays based on exactly the kind of experience it can offer us. And yet, a growing number of people within this wonderland are now making use of drugs and medicine to just confront or even *make real* the most basic of human experiences: feeling joy at all, dealing with suffering, experiencing sexual stimulation. Nietzsche's claim that we live in a life-denying civilization has perhaps never been truer; and the surprising thing is that unbound acquisition and 'free' and secularized consumption only seem to reinforce the diagnosis.



On this note bungee jumping critically displays a 'willing' or 'wanting' search for experience, as the individual forcefully throws him or herself into the void. What we may have forgotten, and what we may need to rediscover, in all its simplicity, is another kind of experience where things just happen *to* us, when life itself presents us with extremes that we need to confront and elaborate, and carefully so (on the importance of 'passive experience', see also Szokolczai 2004). This amounts to what Eric Voegelin (1978) identified as an 'open attitude' towards the 'ground' of human existence, toward life and death, and a contemplating stance toward our role within these two poles that frame our existence; and without such an 'open attitude', experience will always result impoverished from the outset. Transcendental experiences do happen, they are part of human history (James 1997), but they cannot simply be brought about by an act of will. An experience is something we *undergo*. Life itself presents us with these boundaries and extremes, and that is why cultures, as van Gennep saw, respond to them in ways that are comparable. After all, we did not choose to be born, and yet the passage into the world is important, and in need of cultural elaboration. We don't choose when and how to die, and yet it happens. Modern science is trying hard to make child birth a willed action, but procreation and life-giving remains tied to forces that are indeed beyond our will. We don't choose when we can procreate, as we don't choose to enter puberty, it just happens; yet the *way* we enter adulthood, and *how* we encounter sexuality within ourselves and toward the other *does* matter. We did not create the world, we were born into it, but it presents us daily with moments of transition from light to dark and dark to light that shape our lives, in sleep and in being awake, and in the brief limbo moments in-between the two states, when all seems fluid, real and unreal. We 'make friends' and they change our lives, but it is a mutual act, and the emotions that grow within a human relationship are again beyond rational control. We lose friends and beloved ones without wanting to and it is often dramatic; yet it happens, it can be life-transforming, and we need get 'over' or 'through' it, and in some meaningful way. Illness happens; we must confront it, we must go through it. We *fall* in love without cranes and chords to hold us up and we are certainly not in control; yet it happens to us.

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**Authors details:** Bjørn Thomassen (corresponding author) is Associate Professor, Chair of the Department of International Relations, The American University of Rome. He is also Co-Editor of *Journal of International Political Anthropology* ([www.politicalanthropology.org](http://www.politicalanthropology.org))

Email: [bjorn\\_thomassen@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bjorn_thomassen@yahoo.co.uk)

Maja Balle is a MA student at the Department of American Indian Languages and Cultures, Institute of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen,

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<sup>i</sup> Images from around year 1500 depicting the *volador* ceremony appear in pictographs in two pre-Spanish codices; *Códice Porfirio Díaz* and *Códice Fernández Leal* from the Cuicateca region in Mexico. The drawn depictions show very clearly that the men really wore bird-costumes.

<sup>ii</sup> The Bohuslän region, in which this panel is located, is famous because of the abundance of Bronze Age rock carvings that can be found here.

<sup>iii</sup> Indeed, the word 'axis' may even be etymologically connected to 'tree'. The IE word for oak was *\*dreu*, which metonymically would come to signify tree in Northern European languages, with *\*aiks* becoming the proto-Germanic word for oak. Linguists claim *\*aiks* of unknown origin and with no certain cognates outside Germanic languages, but the closeness to axis (deriving from PIE *\*aks*) seems striking. The latin word for tree, 'arbor/arbos' is no less interesting. It derives from 'alba', which means 'white' and 'light', and also denotes that moment of 'white light' in the morning between night and daylight: dawn, *daybreak*, or as indeed in modern Italian, 'alba'.

<sup>iv</sup> The joint appearance of fish and bird figures in the Malakula rock art (see Wallis 2003: 752) may indicate that both types of animals are seen as 'spirit-helpers', connecting to the 'above' and the 'below'; the animals may also, as Wallis suggests, express or symbolize liminal trance experiences that relate to the weightlessness sensed while flying or being underwater. We are of course not suggesting that the jumping rituals originate directly from trance experiences, but only point to converging and perhaps related symbolisms and themes.