The Cultural Seascape, Cosmology and the Magic of Liminality

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Introduction

It was the renowned Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski who, in his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), noticed that extensive ceremonies, magical rituals and taboos went along with the major *kula* voyages or *uvalu-aku*, a complex and endless reciprocal cycle of exchanging necklaces of red shell and bracelets of white shell. Long-distance maritime expeditions to remote islands inhabited by potential enemies made for considerable anxiety, and having *kula* partners as hosts and friends in a hostile social, natural and supernatural environment provided for a sense of safety. Still, there were many dangers to be coped with and these required using magic as “a systematising, regulating, and controlling influence” (*ibid.*: p. 60). The rituals going along with smaller *kula* voyages to nearby locales and islands were considerably less elaborate. In similar fashion, Malinowski (1955: pp. 30–31) pointed out that “in the lagoon fishing, where man can rely completely upon his knowledge and skill, magic does not exist, while in the open-sea fishing, full of danger and uncertainty, there is extensive magical ritual to secure safety and good results”. Malinowski generalized his findings as follows:

> We find magic wherever the elements of chance and accident, and the emotional play between hope and fear have a wide and extensive range. We do not find magic wherever the pursuit is certain, reliable, and well under the control of rational methods and technological processes. Further, we find magic where the element of danger is conspicuous. (*ibid.*: pp. 139–140)

According to Malinowski, this distinction also applies “in entirely modern forms of enterprise” (1965 [1931]: pp. 105).
Malinowski’s proposition was dubbed the anxiety–ritual ‘theory’, and many scholars have subsequently presented data that would seem to corroborate it. For example, numerous anthropologists, ethnologists and folklore researchers point out that fishermen observe taboos, perform magical rituals, use prayer and charms, wear amulets, and attach supernatural meaning to certain omens (for an overview, see van Ginkel, 2007: pp. 93ff.). Some attribute this ‘ritualization’ or ‘psycho-cultural adaptation’ to the economic uncertainties inherent in the occupation, others are inclined to lend more weight to its highly dangerous nature and yet others point to a combination of both factors. The evidence in this regard would seem to be inconclusive. In a few cases, authors discovered that the distinction between ritually simple inshore fishing and ritually complex offshore fishing could be demonstrated in some cases. For instance, Patrick Mullen’s (1988[1978]) study of Texas Gulf Coast commercial fishermen dealt with two groups: bay fishermen, who worked the shallow bays and estuaries along the Texas coast, and deep sea fishermen, who ventured far into the Gulf of Mexico in search of their catch. Mullen found that the bay fishermen, who predominantly worked in safe, protected waters, had few magical rituals or ‘superstitions’ designed to protect themselves against the forces of nature. Deep sea fishermen, by contrast, practised many forms of ritual magic. Elsewhere, however, some modes of inshore fishing are heavily ritualized, probably because the economic outcome is highly uncertain. A good example is the Sicilian mattanza tuna fishery (van Ginkel 2005, 2007), to which I will return below.

Throughout the world, and in Europe and North America in particular, fishermen have a reputation for being — in pejorative terms — a credulous and superstitious lot. Arguably, the nature of their work is routinely perilous and its outcome usually highly uncertain. This may have given rise to ritual coping mechanisms. Strikingly, however, with few exceptions maritime anthropologists have disregarded fishing as a rite of territorial passage, which may also account for the occurrence of fishermen’s rituals and taboos. As the anthropologist and folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1960: p. 23) noted, “the acts of embarking and disembarking [a vessel] ... are often accompanied by rites of separation at the time of departure and by rites of incorporation upon return”. Indeed, such transitions are ritually marked in fishing communities across the world. Interestingly, given van Gennep’s tripartite ritual process of separation, margin (or limen, Latin for ‘threshold’) and aggregation, the fishing voyage itself would represent a period of liminality, of being away from ‘normality’.1 According to Victor Turner (1979: p. 465), who expanded on van Gennep’s work, liminality is “a state or process which
is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes of getting and spending, preserving law and order, and registering structural status”. Liminal time, writes Turner, is not controlled by the clock: “it is a time of enchantment when anything might, even should, happen” (ibid.); it is “full of potency and potentiality” (ibid.: p. 466). In a similar vein, “[l]iminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1977[1969]: p. 95). Liminality is ‘anti-structure’: a ‘gap’ in space, time and social structure. Ridden with ambiguity, the liminal attracts maximum cultural and symbolic attention and is a source of risk, fear, danger and avoidance (Leach, 1964: p. 45).

So we might ask: to what extent is fishing (experienced as) a ritually liminal venture and how could this account for the fishermen’s cosmology? And what or who, exactly, is — or is considered to be — liminal? After describing fishing as a rite of territorial passage with quite a number of liminal features, I will critically assess the explanatory value of Turner’s concept of liminality. Does it contribute to our understanding of transitional phenomena, including taboos and rituals?

**Crossing the coastal boundary**

One might view the coast itself as a “symbolic and spatial area of transition” (van Gennep, 1960: p. 18) and therefore as a liminal domain, as indeed some anthropologists have done: “Coasts — the littoral — have features that make them “liminal”, that is, neither one thing nor the other, transitory, and on the threshold. Such features of in-between-ness are often treated culturally as problematic, even taboo” (McCay, 2009: p. 7).² The shoreline definitely is a ‘space between spaces’. The geomorphology of the land–sea divide changes continually; the ownership status of the coastal zone is often unclear and contested and around this site is constructed a whole complex of rituals, taboos and stories that are indicative of a moral geography. Generally, “the sea represented a metaphorical passage boundary from the structured terrestrial landscape to other worlds across its untamed chaos” (Duncan, 2006: p. 33). Its ambiguousness inspired “fear and abhorrence” (Driessen, 2004: p. 43). The sea must therefore be ‘tamed’ through prophylactic rituals. This is evident in annual blessing-of-the-fleet ceremonies and the ritual cleansing of evil from the sea in the Catholic countries of southern Europe and in fisheries-related prayer and thanksgiving days in some Protestant communities. Although they may have lost much of their original spiritual significance and turned into important social events per se, many fishermen would feel ill at ease should these rituals not be performed.
As the Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren (1981: p. 31) observes: “In the cultural management of space, boundaries are important”. The littoral is a liminal — and therefore dangerous — space, and crossing it gives rise to anxiety and requires taking special precautions. Thus, it is not only the coast as such that is liminal: the human transition from one zone to the other also is. Crossing a boundary is what causes people to subdue their anxieties through performing particular rituals and observing specific prohibitions. Fishermen have to cross the land–sea boundary time and again. Although there is a host of taboos that have to be observed by fishermen while they are at sea, ritual avoidances while preparing to sail are especially widespread and strictly observed: “‘sailing day’ is a critical period” (Gill, 1994: p. 9). Catherine Czerkawska (1975: p. 41) argues that “[t]he period between the fisherman leaving his home and actually stepping aboard his boat is a time of preparation for the state of being at sea and many taboos belong to this transitional period”. Following van Gennep (1960: p. 184), we might interpret them as being part and parcel of rites of separation: “the transition from one state to another is a serious step which could not be accomplished without special precautions”. Rituals and taboos serve, among other things, to enable mentally coping with such dangerous transitions from one geophysical and cognitive domain to another. Humanity, as a terrestrial species, does not only have to adapt to maritime surroundings technologically, but also psychologically. By adhering to proscriptions and prohibitions, fishermen try to symbolically mitigate the (supernatural) risks they run upon preparing for and entering a perilous and unreliable environment. Taboos, then, must not be regarded as remnants of traditional worldviews, but as ways of coping with potentially hazardous transitions from land to sea.

Fishermen interpret a myriad of auspicious and inauspicious signs on the way to their boat, reminiscent of sympathetic magic. In many places, they should not bring a black bag or a black suitcase aboard. The association with a coffin seems obvious. Several authors mention that fishermen must never leave for a trip, launch a boat or start new activities on Friday — traditionally thought to be the day Jesus was crucified. In orthodox Protestant societies, sabbatarian fishermen refrain from sailing on Sunday for religious reasons. In some communities, whistling while making one’s way to the ship should be avoided because it might, according to a widespread seamen’s lore, blow up a storm. This type of supernatural risk aversion was a ubiquitous mode of conduct. Such associative thinking is particularly powerful when fishermen are about to set sail, but it is certainly not restricted to this transitory phase. Fishermen who are confronted with what they perceive to be foreboding omens
may adjust their behaviour, for instance by refusing to sail or by performing a purification rite such as touching an iron object or throwing salt over a shoulder. In several maritime communities, for example, fishermen who meet a woman, a clergyman, a person with a physical malformation or a cat — especially a black one — en route to their boat, will refrain from sailing that day to avoid bad luck.

Several authors argue that the crucial symbolism seems to point to the opposition between land and sea, which should not be ‘mixed up’ (Cove, 1978: pp. 146–147; Clark, 1982: p. 160; Knipe and Bromley, 1984: p. 190).4 With regard to the North Yorkshire village of Staithes, David Clark (1982: p. 159) remarks:

Men setting off to their work, to a hazardous and dangerous world in which women had no place, feared the contagion which might result from meeting a member of the opposite sex. … [T]o meet a woman en route to the … boat represented an intrusion whereby the separateness of the two worlds was violated.

As Christer Westerdahl (2005: pp. 16–17) contends:

Opposing categories, and the negotiation of them by border-crossers, encompass all kinds of historical maritime cultures. … This cosmological dichotomy is at the core of the magically-loaded categorisations between sea and land that we find in folklore and traditions in fairly recent coastal culture.

He further argues that these spheres are mediated by what he dubs “liminal agents”: objects and creatures that are on the threshold and capable of bridging the two domains. He then deals at some length with two such “boundary-crossers”: elk and seals. Just as some objects and beings are deemed unlucky, others may be considered auspicious: “an important part of maritime ritual behaviour is the agent of liminality, the transition, where an individual thing, person or animal with a distinct association with or belonging to the one world can work favourably to humankind in the other” (ibid.: p. 16).

Elsewhere, I have dealt with the question of why it is that particular categories of human beings and animals should be avoided (see van Ginkel, 2007). They all seem to be ambiguous or intermediary in one sense or another. For the purposes of this paper, it suffices to merely point out that these taboos and beliefs are quite widespread and that they would seem to be indicative of rites of separation, the special ritual preparations and precautions to
actually enter and engage the sea. It is during the phase of liminality that “myth and ritual are elaborated” (Turner, 1977[1969]: p. 167).

**Facing the maritime margin**

From the time of their departure until the moment of their return to the shore, fishermen are liminal *personae* who must observe many prohibitions. According to Mary Douglas (1966), people in liminal states are dangerous because they are ambiguous. Anything associated with them can have power and danger. These things represent pollution, a danger to the society which must be dealt with by means of the appropriate rituals. She writes: “Cultural intolerance of ambiguity is expressed by avoidance, by discrimination, and by pressure to conform” (Douglas, 1975: p. 53). In a similar fashion, Turner argues that “liminal personae nearly always and everywhere are regarded as polluting” (1967: p. 97) and “liminal situations and roles are almost everywhere attributed with magico-religious properties” (Turner, 1977 [1969]: p. 108). Perhaps this is a reason why fisher folk tend to be “a denigrated if not despised segment” of the societies in which they live (Smith, 1977: p. 8). In Europe, they have been viewed, in many cases, as belonging to the lowest social classes and stigmatized accordingly (Coull, 1972: p. 60). For example, fishing in East Coast Scotland and in Portugal has long been regarded as an undesirable and low-prestige — even infamous — occupation (Cole, 1991: p. 43; Nadel-Klein, 1988: p. 193). On the other hand, fishermen may also be the subject of positive cultural attention, for example as virtuous exemplars of an authentic ‘national character’; but being a role model of cultural nationalism does not prevent them from being socially marginalized in real life.

As a rule of thumb, the process of becoming a fisherman starts in childhood and involves informal and gradual enskilment, often in addition to formal education. Fishermen are trained ‘on the job’, and have to learn as apprentices with the entire crew as a collective tutor. Young deckhands who are novices to a crew usually face jokes and pranks being played on them. This way, the peer pressure to perform well is brought home to them early on. Suffering such jokes is a rite of passage that most fishermen have to undergo to learn the occupation’s ropes and ‘to prove their worth’. The quicker they learn to work hard and show themselves dependable colleagues, the sooner such teasing and nagging ceases. Young fishermen are then accepted as full-blown crewmembers: they have achieved their incorporation into the occupational community.

In the case of fishermen at sea, I would argue that they themselves tend to be ambivalent and vulnerable. As Turner (1967: p. 94) writes: “the state of
the ritual subject (“the passenger”) is ambiguous; he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state”. Although he refers to the transition from one structural state to another, specifically in regard to initiation rituals, I would second van Gennep’s view that rites of passage have much wider implications. Magic, rules of avoidance, amulets and the like may provide a subjective feeling of control at a time when fishermen as liminal personae feel particularly exposed to supernatural threats. James Frazer (1922: p. 22) pointed out that this ‘imagined evil’ is what distinguishes taboos from commonsense prohibitions, where “the forbidden action entails a real, not an imaginary evil”.

According to many fishermen across the globe, seeing certain creatures and objects or mentioning certain words forebodes bad fishing, damage to nets or boat, injury or even death of a crewmember or a close relative ashore. For instance, in several European areas fishermen must not refer to a variety of animals — among them pigs, sheep, hares, rabbits, foxes, rats, mice, dogs, cats, ravens, salmon, seals — by their proper names and use noa substitutes instead. In many cases, a pars pro toto is used as a euphemism, for instance ‘curly tails’, ‘long-tails’ or ‘four-footed animals’. To mention another particularly strong taboo that holds sway in several European and North American areas: fishermen should not turn the hatch cover upside down lest the boat would mimic the action and capsize (compare whistling, which is also tabooed at sea because it might ‘cause’ a storm). In a similar way, fishermen believe that a correct interpretation of bad omens can avoid mishaps at sea. There is thus a strong notion of a dreaded consequence that would automatically follow the transgression of a taboo: the ‘interdiction-violation-consequence pattern’ (Mullen, 1988[1978]: p. 29). In this sense, taboos are the mirror image of rituals or, in van Gennep’s terminology, ‘negative rites’. Put simply: taboos lead to avoidance whereas rituals aim to achieve something.

As to the fishing operation itself, there are also many taboos and ritual behaviours. There is a large element of unpredictability and uncertainty in fishing, and success — or the lack thereof — is often explained in terms of luck, bad luck or no luck. To ensure a good catch, certain objects, words, acts and human and animal categories should be avoided. The Japanese folklorist Ōtō (1963: p. 114), for instance, writes that:

[f]ishing is so subject to the vagaries of nature and fortune that fishermen of equal skill, in identical boats, and at the same place at the same time, may haul in vastly unequal catches; consequently all of them try to bolster their luck through adherence to a vast number of taboos and through the practice of many forms of ritual magic.
In the Portuguese maritime community of Nazaré “[t]he importance of knowledge and experience is clearly recognized, but in many ways they fail as explanations. In these cases supernatural explanations are invoked” (Brøgger, 1989: p. 115).

Rituals and the void of the unknown

This hold true not only in more or less ‘traditional’ settings, but sometimes also in ‘modern’ ones, where fisher folk work with sophisticated equipment. After interviewing modern-day British Columbia fishermen, Boshier (1999) concluded with respect to taboos: “Technology has not eroded their ‘power’ and importance”. Crewmembers of San Diego’s ultramodern tuna-fishing fleet and Basque distant-water pair trawlers both perform extensive magical rituals in order to ensure a good catch or to dispel ill fortune (Orbach, 1977; Zulaika, 1981). This is particularly so if catches lag behind expectations for unknown reasons. In that case, fishermen sometimes conduct purification or anti-witchcraft rituals. When I joined the crew of a Dutch beam trawler for a week’s fishing trip, catches were initially bad and a net was torn twice. One of the crewmembers asked in jest, but with a serious undertone: ‘You wouldn’t be a Jonah, would you?’ (A Jonah is a person whom fishermen believe to bring bad luck upon a fishing voyage. Conversely, a lukkerman — literally, a ‘lucky man’ — is a harbinger of fortune). Often fishermen deny their observance of taboos, yet they persist in avoiding certain words, acts, creatures and so on. They do this as a matter of precaution, ‘just in case’. Furthermore, when some misfortune befalls a fisherman, frequently some broken taboo will be pointed out as the cause, in an attempt at post hoc rationalization. Even if some fishermen are sceptical in regard to ‘superstitions’, most of them have seen bad luck ‘as a result’ of ignoring bad omens or breaking taboos when they try to explain why a mishap occurred. If observing a prohibition does not help, it will not harm either and the cost of performing magic is negligible, while the perceived benefits may be huge.

Taboos are about supernaturally controlling the uncontrollable and explaining the inexplicable, filling inevitable knowledge gaps in uncertain and risky pursuits. Fishermen seek signs that make their world and its vagaries more comprehensible. Alec Gill (1994: p. 11) aptly states that ‘superstition’ is “divination in disguise”. Beliefs in supernatural forces are part and parcel of a worldview that is deeply embedded in occupational subcultures in which danger and/or unpredictability are paramount, and success — or even survival — can consequently not be controlled. As Bell (2004 [1993]) argues:
Since their success and survival are linked to elements they cannot control (including the weather, the migratory habits of fish, and the market price for their catch) or can influence only indirectly, if at all (such as a dwindling supply of fish, government regulations, and international treaties), fishermen put great stock in things they can control.

We might assume that such anxieties and accompanying behaviours have meanwhile ceased to exist. This is not necessarily the case, however. Nor should we regard ritualistic modes of behaviour as ‘survivals’ of an older world view. Paradoxically, modern means of production can even create new risks and uncertainties that need to be explained. With respect to drifter skippers in East Anglia, Trevor Lummis (1983, p. 202) discovered that these “captains of a modern industry were driven back to seek refuge in the images and delusions of ‘traditional’ superstition”.

Magical action and ritual avoidance seem to provide answers to ‘the void of the unknown’ or what ‘rational’ knowledge, conventional wisdom and technology leave unexplained. They occur “at the juncture of real and ideal worlds” (Ross, 1982: p. 147). This is in keeping with Turner’s (1977 [1969]: p. vii) observation that “liminal areas of time and space … are often open to the play of thought, feeling, and will; in them are generated new models, often fantastic”. Liminality opens a frame of fantasy and reflexivity, “where suppositions, desires, hypotheses, possibilities” — and, I would add, magical thought and action — “all become legitimate” (ibid.). They provide ancillary or alternative explanatory devices and enable a reinterpretation of the world and its problems. Indeed, as van Baal (1971: p. 278) writes: “In our need for communication we are all bricoleurs, looking for signs which can “explain” our universe”. Basically, fishing is about formulating hypotheses and its success depends on getting them right. Failure may be explained by any number of factors, including ones that are caused by ‘bad luck’ due to breaching a taboo or the presence of an inauspicious object or being. In this case, counter-magic may be applied. Rituals and symbols offer the possibility to (re)conceptualize and (re)order experience (see Hanson, 1981).

The boat as a liminal entity

The boat itself is also subject to considerable ritual attention. Fishermen depend on their boats for their survival, and many have encountered situations in which this was unequivocally brought home to them. To fishermen, a vessel is not merely a material object: it is a piece of equipment that they perceive as having special characteristics and vagaries, a body and a soul.
In other words, boats are saturated with meaning and regarded as ‘subjects’. Interestingly, Czerkawska (1975: p. 44) mentions the Carrick fishermen’s taboo on allowing women aboard their boats, which “seems to have been reinforced by the belief that boats are female and jealousy would make them ‘play up’”. The image of a boat as a fictive woman is widespread among seafarers and has been noted by many authors. This female entity is crucial for economic reproduction, but it is also highly important in a symbolical sense: “The boat is the central implement, the extension of the human body... The boat is a mobile bridge between antagonistic parts, land and sea, it annuls chaos. ... It is ... a liminal agent” (Westerdahl, 2005: p. 3). Such liminal agents “can annul the dangers inherent in the opposition or contrast between sea and land” (ibid.: p. 9).

As I observed on the Dutch island of Texel, fishermen can wax lyrical about the qualities and aesthetics of their vessels and develop an emotional bond with them. In many fisherfolk homes, paintings and photographs of vessels that have been or still are family property decorate the walls. These vessel genealogies often take as prominent a place as family photographs, and show the analogous importance of age. Owners in particular connect their own life history with launches of new boats and they remember all the important events in the vessel’s span of life: when a new engine was installed, when major alterations were made, when and where bumper catches were taken, who were the crew at particular points in time and so on. Many owners give their vessels names referring to their wife, father or mother, a grandfather or grandmother, a brother or a sister, a daughter or a son. The tradition reflects the significance of family ties in fishing identities. Photo shoots of the various stages of the construction of a new boat resemble that of a wedding. There is a baptizing and a naming ceremony for a new vessel, it is adorned with idiosyncratic symbols, and a minister or a priest says a prayer for the well-being of boat and crew and usually donates a ship’s bible. On its maiden voyage, there is a rite of passage when the exchanging of the shipyard’s flag with that of the owner marks the official transition into new hands. Many fishermen — owner-operators and crew — take profound pride in their vessel and experience her as an extension of themselves. Boats are a referent of social status and self-respect and a dominant symbol of identity. The accommodation and the bridge are carpeted and fishermen only enter these domains on stocking-feet to keep things neat and clean. That is the reason why the uninvited boarding of a vessel by strangers — for example inspection officers — can lead to outrage: it is experienced as an intrusion of the private, deeply symbolic domain and even the self.
Returning home: reincorporation

As van Gennep noted, there may be several rites of passage within a larger rite of passage, all with the same tripartite diachronic structure. Going to sea implies a rite of separation from the land and family, but also a rite of incorporation into the marine domain and the social configuration of the crew. Upon returning home, fishermen separate from the natural and social world of the sea and are reincorporated in the shore-based natural and social world. Keeping body and mind together often proves difficult. When fishermen are at sea, they tend to long for home, while once ashore, they want to go back to sea again:

the sea is the institutional reality and the shore the non-institutional reality; the transition from sea to shore automatically excludes the institutional situation. … On the level of cognition both worlds are experienced simultaneously, but as cut off one from the other. (Zulaika, 1981: p. 42)

Strikingly, whereas prohibitions while preparing to sail and while at sea are particularly widespread and strictly observed, rites of separation from the seascape and aggregation into the realm of landlubbers would seem to be far less elaborated. Dutch fishermen ‘wash off’ the fishing week by thoroughly cleaning all quarters of the boat and then taking a shower while the vessel is steaming home, but other than that, there is an absence of ritualized behaviour. In the fisheries social science literature, no explicit mention is made of particular rituals or taboos during this concluding phase of the fishing trip. Nor does the sea–land boundary seem to have the same significance on returning from a trip as during preparations for departure and crossing the littoral threshold. Rites of separation from the land and rituals during the liminal phase of the fishing trip would therefore appear to be especially important. Rites of (re)incorporation are considerably less conspicuous. An illustrative example are the meals — caldeirada — Portuguese fishermen share upon a safe return to their homeport (Johnson, 1979: pp. 249–251). Elsewhere, fishermen are known to participate in drinking spells to conclude the fishing week. But it would seem that rituals of incorporation are not as elaborated as rites going along with separation and liminality. Perhaps this is so because fishermen spend most of their working life at sea and their ritualized reincorporation into the shore-based community would only complicate a return to sea. I think, however, that Malinowski’s anxiety–ritual proposition might provide a clue to understanding why the fishermen’s homeward transition is less ritualized. They are returning to physically less dangerous territory and
their uncertainties concerning the catch are over: it has either been plentiful, average or meagre and they cannot change this by performing additional rituals.

**The ritual cycle of the mattanza**

Thus far I have presented examples of rites of maritime passage and the fishermen’s cosmology in a rather eclectic manner; without devoting due attention to the wider ethnographic and historical context, without differentiating the knowledge and belief systems within usually heterogeneous fishing communities, and without presenting a full ritual cycle of one specific occupational community of fishermen.⁷ So here I briefly focus on one particular maritime community.

Throughout the Mediterranean, bluefin tuna have for centuries been caught in abundance using stationary net traps or *tonnara*. On the Sicilian island of Favignana, this fishery was a time-honoured tradition. Due to sharply diminishing catches it had to be abandoned a few years ago. The *tonnara* was an integral part of the fabric of the community, or what Marcel Mauss (1967) would have dubbed a ‘total social phenomenon’ with interlinked economic, social, legal, political, moral, cultural and religious dimensions.⁸ The complex and ritual method of catching tuna followed very precise rules, timings and strictly disciplined practices. It was a passive mode of fishing that required a lot of patience. The *tonnaroti* (tuna fishermen) were often uncertain about whether the tuna would show up at all. The *tonnara* consisted of a series of six successive chambers with distinct names, each divided by a net gate, which led to the final seventh chamber, *la camera della morte*, ‘the chamber of death’. The fishermen herded the tuna from one chamber to the next and when the leader of the operation, the *rais*, decided that there were sufficient fish in the *camera della morte*, he called for the concluding act, a procedure aptly called *la mattanza* (the slaughter).

On the *rais’s* sign, the lifting of the tightly knitted floor net commenced, bringing the tuna to the surface while the men sang in unison. The lead singer of the crew, the *Prima Voce*, sang the verses of the traditional work songs, while the other men chanted the chorus: ‘*aja mole! aja mole!*’ The songs gave rhythm to the heaving of the nets. The *rais* saw to it that the net was raised evenly. On his command ‘*Spara a tunina!*’ the tuna were hooked with barbed gaffs and hauled into the boats, while the fishermen shouted. Their screaming incited them to overcome the vitality of the tuna and expressed grief for the destiny of their prey. There was a frantic atmosphere during the catharsis of gaffing the fish. Once caught, the tuna was no longer addressed
as tonno but as tunnina, indicating its changed status from a wild, free-roaming beast to a ‘tamed’ animal.

The cultural importance of the mattanza showed in the ancient names, songs, ceremonies, rituals and prayers that accompanied the work. All stages of the tonnara operation were rife with taboos and shrouded in religious worship, making it not only a focal point of local economic, social and cultural life, but also of spiritual life. Before deploying the tonnara, a local priest blessed the boats, which were adorned with bouquets of flowers, and all the other equipment, the sea, the fish in it and the rais as well. When the construction of the tonnara was completed, the rais put a ten-foot wooden cross bearing pictures of the patron saints of Favignana, a bronze statue of Saint Peter, a plume of fresh palm fronds, blessed on Palm Thursday, and a bouquet of gladioli and white lilies into the waters near the entrance of the trap. The rais — who was reputed to be ‘an interface between God and the elements’ — prayed for a good catch and the men responded: ‘May God make it so’. At each stage of work, the tonnaroti sang a series of propitiatory songs (scialome). Later on, there would also be prayers to plead to various saints and beckon the tuna. On shore, an outdoor altar construction of the Virgin Mary holding a tuna in her arms faced the sea. Women gathered daily at this Madonna of the Tonnaroti to pray for the success of the mattanza.

At the end of each mattanza, the tonnaroti praised the Lord and jumped into the bloody water in a ritual act that was symbolic of regeneration and reproduction (Serge Collet, personal communication). If the catch had been plentiful, they sang a song of praise for the rais and metaphorically promised him the most beautiful girl in town as his prize. The lyrics sometimes turned bawdy, and the singers might even poke fun at the rais — the only time his authority could be freely mocked. The tonnaroti revered the Madonna del Rosario in the church of Sant’ Anna and they offered the first tuna they caught to her. The whole procedure was repeated several times during the tuna season, which began by April with the setting of the nets and ended in the course of June, if possible by the feast day of St. Anthony on 13 June.

It is not difficult to see in the mattanza a number of the aspects presented earlier. Capturing tuna in tonnara was a highly uncertain business: catches used to fluctuate sharply and this may have been a reason why the fishery was shrouded in rituals and taboos. It also involved rites of territorial passage and liminality and a mixture of institutional and folk religion. The question is, however, whether analyzing the fishermen’s cosmology in such terms would enhance our comprehension of it. So let us have a closer look at the conceptual apparatus, Turner’s in particular.
Discussion and conclusion: the concept and magic of liminality

The problem with concepts that become popular almost overnight is that scholars ‘discover’ a variety of phenomena that can be labelled with a specific term. Thus, nations are ‘imagined’, ambiguous categories ‘taboo’, communities and cultures (symbolically) ‘constructed’, and traditions ‘invented’. Some such concepts are primarily descriptive, while others may have a more analytical character, but in both cases their meaning becomes easily overstretched. They are then incorporated as part of a terminology that usually leaves its exact significance implicit, as if a concept is self-explanatory. This has certainly been the case with Turner’s concept of liminality and the way social scientists have applied it. The notion would appear to be extraordinarily fluid and all sorts of ambivalent phenomena and entities have been dubbed ‘liminal’. We may discern, for example, mostly in Turner’s own work:

- liminal space (space away from quotidian space, a ‘spaceless place’);
- liminal time, period or phase (a period away from ‘normality’, a ritual phase, an emerging state of being or an event in between phases);
- liminal personae (‘threshold people’, humans in between statuses or positions, in the interstices or ‘limbo’ of social structure, unclassifiable persons);
- liminal entities (everything that is ‘statusless’, ‘neither here nor there’, ‘betwixt and between’);
- liminal phenomena (phenomena that do not fit clear-cut categories and are ‘concerned with calendrical, biological, and social structural cycles’).
- liminal symbols (Turner is not specific, but I suspect these symbols would include taboo humans, animals and objects with a supernatural vengeance);
- liminal agents (objects or phenomena that, according to Westerdahl, represent contrasting worlds and as ‘border-crossers’ are capable of annulling oppositions and dangers).

This is not a comprehensive inventory (for example, Turner also mentions liminal situations and liminal roles), but it gives an idea of the multifarious faces of liminality. In evolutionary fashion, Turner (1979: p. 492) further distinguished between liminal and liminoid phenomena:

Liminal phenomena tend to dominate in tribal and early agrarian societies; they are collective, concerned with calendrical, biological, and social structural cycles; they are integrated into the total social process; they reflect the collective experience of a community
over time; and they may be said to be ‘functional’ or ‘eufunctional,’ even when they seem to ‘invert’ status hierarchies found in the non-liminal domain. Liminoid phenomena, on the other hand, flourish in societies of more complex structure, where, in Henry Maine’s terms, ‘contract has replaced status’ as the major social bond, where people voluntarily enter into relationships instead of being born into them.

Liminoid phenomena are liminal-like yet not exactly liminal phenomena, says Turner somewhat puzzlingly. I do not deem this distinction very useful, particularly not if it is connected with a simple–complex or tribal–modern dichotomy. I would prefer van Gennep’s original use of the term liminality, which he considered to apply to the mid-phase of rites of passage in all societies.

The rather lapidary, socially, and historically de-contextualized examples of the cultural seascape I have presented here seem to point out that fishing is a profoundly liminal venture. One might even ask: what is not liminal when it comes to fisheries-related space, time, personae, entities or phenomena? And if everything is liminal, what explanatory value does the concept of liminality have? As with the ambiguity–taboo nexus, there is a risk of ending up with a taint of tautology: something or someone is liminal because of categorical in-between-ness and in-between-ness is liminal because it does not fit a clear-cut category. As I have already indicated in the introduction, liminality is, according to Turner (1979: p. 465), “a time of enchantment when anything might, even should, happen”. However, if we look at the initiation rites that he is particularly concerned with, we know beforehand where the liminal ‘passengers’ — the ‘initiands’ — will end up: they will achieve their new, elevated status and are reincorporated into the quotidian community. Thus, the outcome of the liminal period is inevitable — there are no ‘failed or fallen angels’ — and the diachronic dynamic of rites of passage is rather mechanistic (although the liminal condition may be institutionalized and become permanent, as in monastic life [Turner 1977 (1969): p. 107]).

Van Gennep should be credited for having a century ago introduced the notion of rite de passage with its tripartite structural dynamic, and Turner for having some four decades ago elaborated upon its mid-phase social process that is characterized by liminality. Both are important sensitizing concepts, but nothing more — or less — than that: they focus our attention on the universal logic, form and function of certain phenomena, but in themselves they cannot and do not explain particular features of these phenomena nor what they mean for the personae conducting or undergoing rites of (territorial)
passage. The concept of liminality can therefore not explain the magic of liminality. Nor can Malinowski’s anxiety–ritual proposition explain the exact nature of fishermen’s rituals and taboos. It is a functionalist reduction that, among other things, ignores the question of why it is that taboos and rituals pertain to particular phenomena and categories.9 Here, the ambiguity–taboo nexus proposed by Douglas (1966) and Leach (1964) is particularly helpful, but as said, it may easily turn into a tautology.

In conclusion, we have a set of concepts and propositions that are useful to understand, in part, why it is that in many geographic settings fishermen are prone to conduct certain rituals and observe certain taboos. They are also useful to understand, in part, why we find so many family resemblances in their world view and modes of ritual behaviour. However, without thorough ethnographic contextualization, we are unable to move beyond these preconceived ideas. They are mere stepping stones. We have to look at ways in which the fishermen’s lore is integrated into wider cognitive systems and cosmologies. Doing so requires looking at this knowledge “not as a neat and orderly cultural system, shared by all in the community, but as a repertoire which may function in direct contradiction to other ideas, or coexist through a system of cultural compartmentalization and situational selection” (Löfgren, 1989: p. 51).

Moreover, in classificatory systems ambiguity and liminality are ‘structural’ conditions, hence their ‘in-between-ness’. Yet taboos and rituals may change or even disappear under the influence of technological, economic, political or other developments and internal and external socio-cultural processes, as well, while we may assume that ambiguous and liminal situations that allegedly gave rise to them continue to exist. For example, if the land–sea crossing is highly ritualized at a particular time, how may we account for the disappearance of rituals and taboos in another decade? The transition would seem to be structurally similar, so something else has probably changed and with it expressions of liminality. (Conversely, but less likely, boundary-crossing may have ceased to exist while taboos and rituals persist.) Such changes present a problem to the conceptual framework of Turner. The framework has an eye for dynamics, but only to the extent that the diachronic of phases in rites of passage is a structural transition. Such frameworks are therefore essentially static. What we need in analyzing fishermen’s taboos and rituals, then, is an anthropological approach that does justice to their situational and historical contexts and overcomes the limits of liminality.
Notes

1 Van Gennep also uses the terms preliminal, liminal and postliminal (1960: p. 21).

2 See also Westerdahl (2005: p. 11) and, in particular with respect to the beach, Preston-Whyte (2004).

3 In a more general sense, Löfgren (1999: p. 25) contends: “In border crossings there is often a great focus on the staging of departures and arrivals as well as the liminalities of being betwixt and between, in transit. It is this process of intensification through various cultural techniques that gives border crossings their powerful charge”.

4 Westerdahl (2005) contends that the fishermen’s subjects of taboo are all land-related, which is, however, definitely not the case (see van Ginkel, 2007).

5 Noa is a Maori word for a word or form of blessing which lifts spiritual restrictions, implied prohibitions and taboos.

6 Pars pro toto is a Latin term for a ‘part taken as a whole’.

7 The best example of an ethnographically contextualized description of fishermen’s rituals at sea is Zulaika (1981).

8 Total social phenomena “concern the whole of society and its institutions” or “embrace a large number of institutions”. They “are at once, legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological and so on” (Mauss, 1967: p. 76).

9 Much the same goes for social reductionism, as evidenced in the work of Knipe and Bromley (1984: p. 190) and Palmer (1989), who state that rituals and taboos foster cooperation and strengthen group cohesiveness; or in the work of Beck (1977: p. 201) and Lummis (1985: p. 159), who contend that their ideological function is to mitigate status differences and legitimize the social order. I am not claiming that such explanations are ‘wrong’, but that they are one-dimensional and reduce highly complex phenomena to a single causal factor.

References


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