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**Layers of passage: The ritual performance and liminal bleed of the Beltane Fire Festival, Edinburgh**

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## **Introduction**

This chapter examines the ritual performance of the Beltane Fire Festival (BFF) which occurs annually on the 30<sup>th</sup> April on Calton Hill, Edinburgh. The BFF is a contemporary reinterpretation of an ancient Celtic festival celebrating the passage of the seasons. It is a spring festival marking the end of winter and the beginning of summer. As such, the underlying symbolism of the BFF is renewal and rebirth, given the relationship to the passage of the seasons and, furthermore, fertility of people, land and livestock (BFS 2007; Frazer 1922). The contemporary BFF is an interesting context as while it is based on a traditional agrarian and calendrical rite of passage celebrating the passage of a season, it also embodies life-crises style rites of passage for many of the performers in its modern re-interpretation as a liminoid experience (Turner 1975). The contemporary BFF also symbolises a subversion and transgression from social norms as it contains features of Bakhtin's (1984) carnivalesque (see Matheson and Tinsley 2010).

Drawing on seminal studies, as well as contemporary work on ritual in festivities as a framework, this chapter investigates the BFF ritual performance. The research objectives are: first, to investigate the historical developments of this festival; second, delineate the dimensions and performance of ritual; and, finally, to examine performer/organiser experiences of more personal rites of passage. In terms of the latter, a conceptualisation of liminal bleed is offered as a means to frame liminoid experiences which have internally recognised value, even if not formally so by society in the same manner as a traditional liminal rite of passage. Bleed in this instance is borrowed and adapted from the printing term – “the seeping of a dye or colour into an adjacent colour or area” (Oxford Dictionaries 2010) – to capture the transfer of self-empowering liminoid experiences which bleed into other life settings, whether structured or anti-structured. This conceptualisation is sought to redress the significance of liminoid experience in the context of structured society or experiences of other anti-structured contexts, as there is a tendency to downplay the potentiality of this role not only by Turner himself in his strict segregation of traditional liminality

but also in contemporary studies of the liminoid where it may not be explored or only briefly mentioned.

### **Dimensions and critiques of ritual**

Any study involving ritual is indebted to the groundwork laid by Arnold van Gennep ([1908] 1975) in establishing the concept of *rites of passage*. In this, he identifies three major phases related to “life crises” and periodic events such as changes of the seasons. In both cases van Gennep ([1908] 1975) referred to these three major phases as separation (pre-liminal), transition (liminal) and incorporation (postliminal). Explaining further the linkage of periodic and life crisis rites, Abrahams (1983 167) posits: “because they employ many of the same means of bringing people together in rites of passage, calendared events such as festivals have often been regarded as simply a different kind of rite”. For rituals representing a transitional period in an individual or group’s life, sacred status is attained during this time after leaving and before being re-incorporated into the profane. However, it was Victor Turner who was ultimately responsible for resurrecting the concept and highlighting its universal relevance to a much wider audience. In particular, his exploration and further development of the liminal phase.

Using structural means, liminal periods of time and space in the cyclical calendar are given to play in terms of thoughts, feelings and will (Turner 1969). In this anti-structural period, which encourages social process reflexivity, “society becomes at once subject and direct object; it represents also its subjunctive mood, where suppositions, desires, hypotheses, possibilities, and so forth, all become legitimate” (Turner 1969, vii), or what O’Grady (2012, 97) refers to as “the exploration of potentiality”. Turner (1969, vii) views individual life experiences as consisting of alternating experiences of structure and *communitas* – between fixed and “floating worlds”. *Communitas* can only be revealed when juxtaposed by structure. It is a transformative experience, rich in symbols and metaphors: “art and religion are their products rather than legal and political structures” (Turner 1969: 128). Turner analyses ritual as processual in itself and not just as a mechanism of

redress, emphasising that “ritual is not just a response to society's needs but involves humanly meaningful action” (Deflem 1991, 22). What we are seeing in Turners work is an essential dialectic in the pragmatism of structure and the philosophy of *communitas*. Wisdom is in the ability to move between the two, while not becoming overly dependent on one.

While his earlier work focussed on ritual in technologically primitive societies – ‘there are no “simpler” peoples’ (Turner 1969, 3) – Turner (1975) later extended his concept of liminality beyond rites of passage to any context which is peripheral to, or outside of, daily life. He distinguished these as liminoid or quasi-liminal with attendance in such experiences as voluntary and less official (Turner and Turner [1978] 2011). In this, Turner was making a distinction between historical and contemporary society. In the latter, such manifestations seek to challenge the existing social order through social critique or revolutionary re-ordering and not merely inversions within the total social order, as embodied in liminal manifestations (Deflem 1991). However, St John (2011, 2008) makes three criticisms of this latter conceptualisation. He cautions that in comparison with liminality, this notion of the liminoid is under-theorised and, secondly, there is “[an] absence of sustained ethnographic application” (St John 2011, 226). Regarding the first, Deflem (1991) relatedly stresses criticism of Turner’s inability to systematically treat his ideas, resulting in a multitude of labels to characterise his approach. Thirdly, in his critique of Victor Turner and contemporary cultural performance, St John (2008) argues that Turner’s determined focus on anti-structure led him to fail to consider liminality in formal and official contexts, for example, state-led formal ceremonies. As argued by St John (2008, 17), these liminal events are controlled and managed centre-stage through economic and political theatre, rather than as marginal and peripheral zones of resistance and: ‘a need arises to observe branded subjunctivity, normatized performance, and domesticated virtuality...How “normative” and “ideological” *communitas* assists understanding of processes of sociocultural institutionalization’. One such study is Jamieson's (2004) scathing critique of Edinburgh’s fringe festival as

a liminal space which supports and reinforces the status-quo (see also Ravenscroft and Matteucci's 2003 study of the San Fermin Fiesta, Pamplona).

Deflem (1991), while largely positive towards Turner's work, also draws attention to Turner's overestimation of both liminal and liminoid phenomena to challenge and subvert social structure while neglecting structural responses to and neutralisation of such endeavours. He also suggests that Turner's conversion and continued devotion to Catholicism renders his understanding of *communitas* as "a matter of faith than fact" (Deflem 1991, 19). Deflem (1991, 19) posits that Turner "may have ignored the symbolic dimensions, informalities, and the humanly meaningful within the realm of structured relationships". Indeed, Turner (1969, 138) did seek to differentiate *communitas* from "the pleasurable and effortless comradeship that can arise between friends, coworkers, or professional colleagues any day", arguing that the transformative experience was absent, that this lacked a root experience of "something profoundly communal and shared". Such a stance certainly acted as a barrier to investigating the subtler nuances of such structured relations.

Geertz (1980) while appreciative on the whole of the Turner view of ritual theory, not unsurprisingly, was critical of its tendency to homogenous universalisms which may overlook some of the particularities of locality. One application of the Turnerian paradigm which has come under particular criticism is in the area of pilgrimage where challenges along the basis of Geertz's (1980) remarks have indeed been made (see Eade 1992; Eade and Sallnow 1991; Messerschmidt and Sharma 1981). These studies highlighted distinct interaction and differentiation along structural lines as well as highlighting a contestation of meanings during pilgrimage encounters. Coleman and Eade (2004) argue that Turner and Turner's (1978) classification of pilgrimage as being liminoid, of being extraordinary, has resulted in a lack of research by those seeking to understand everyday life, reducing pilgrimage study to the threshold of academic concern until more recently.

St John's (2001) research on contemporary pilgrimage to alternative lifestyle events also highlights the contested nature of liminoid sites, as well as drawing attention to Turner's downplaying of the sensuous and carnal which can materialise in such spaces. To address these criticisms St John (2001) argues for the concepts 'alternative cultural heterotopia' and 'liminoid embodiment'. Of the former, St John (2001) identifies three spatial qualities: 'otherness', heterogeneity and contestation which can be applied to the context of the BFF. His concept of liminoid embodiment also has relevance to BFF given its carnivalesque qualities but there is not sufficient space to explore this aspect here (see Matheson and Tinsley 2010). While this review has highlighted the main criticisms of Turner's work, it is not intended as an outright dismissal. His paradigm continues to provide insight and be used as a framework for understanding ritual in contemporary society, but the above criticisms act as a reminder for cautionary and adaptive application in (post)modern liminoid manifestations, and the need to be sensitive and reflexive to specificity.

### **Research Methods**

Studies investigating ritual and festivity have often adopted a qualitative methodology (e.g. Sherry and Kozinets 2007; Shinde 2010; St John 2011) as it provides an opportunity for a deep understanding (Bryman 2012) of a contextual situation. Eleven interviews were conducted in 2010 with a variety of BFF stakeholders which included, for example, festival founders and performers, contemporary organisers and performers as well as cultural policy and policing stakeholders.

### **Historical Development of the BFF**

The role of festivals and rituals in society is multi-faceted and, as such, they can be a means of celebration (Manning 1983), an expression of identity (Boissevain 1992) and an ephemeral period of 'deep play' (Geertz 1973), which provide a commentary about the structures of the social world. More recently, festivals have been utilised for tourism development purposes (Picard and Robinson 2006), particularly as a means to

create an 'eventful city' which is attractive to tourists (Richards and Palmer 2010). In most respects, the BFF encapsulates many of these themes, most notably those of celebration and identity; however, this is not a festival developed in response to economic and tourism agendas. Rather, it has evolved on an organic basis to celebrate the passage of the seasons and affirm community identity.

The BFF has a deep-seated history as illustrated by Frazer (1922) who argued that fire festivals occurred throughout Europe from the Middle Ages. Beltane means 'bright fire' and was a means to mark the changes in the season (BFS 2012). Beltane Fires took place in a variety of forms in different geographical locations within Scotland (Frazer 1922). Key themes in these rituals included: the timing of the fires which generally occurred in early May; the extinguishing of community fires in preparation for the ritual lighting of the Beltane fire and the actual lighting of the Beltane Fire; festive entertainment in the form of singing and dancing; the creation of a Beltane cake which was distributed among celebrants; and, in some contexts, the symbolic sacrifice of an individual (Frazer 1922). Historically, the BFS (2012) suggest that the Beltane fires were linked to '...the growing power of the sun and provide an opportunity to cleanse and renew the conditions of a community – both humans and their animals – that had spent the dark months indoors. In Scotland, the lighting of Beltane fires – round which cattle were drive[n], over which brave souls danced and leapt – would survive into modern times'. The Beltane Fires gradually declined. For example, in some Scottish regions (e.g. Highlands, Perthshire, north-east) they continued into well into the eighteenth century (Frazer 1922) and in Edinburgh the early part of the twentieth century (BFS 2012).

In the late 1980s, the Edinburgh BFF was revived by a group of cultural community stakeholders and included involvement of Edinburgh University's School of Scottish Studies. While Beltane is a resurrection of a traditional agrarian festival, reflecting a calendar-based rite of passage, as with many other such festivals, the lifestyle and

seasonal dependency associated with it has disappeared (Abrahams 1983). This disconnect was a deliberate factor in the festival's contemporary purpose as it sought to reconnect a perceived loss due to modernisation (R1). While the festival has an urban setting, its location on a parkland hill commands views of nearby Holyrood Park, the Salisbury Crags and the Firth of Forth. The group of performance artists who resurrected it were seeking a release from struggles against the dominant political landscape of Thatcherism (R1). In this search for an outlet of release, there is a clear expression of the subjunctive mood which underpins Turner's (1969) theorising of ritual and *communitas*, with the BFF acting as a setting for potentiality to be explored (O'Grady 2012). While the BFF was intended as a release from the politics of the time, the aforementioned broader political context allows a framing of the ritual performance in the wider counter-cultural landscape of that period. Partridge (2006) traced the sacralisation of British counter-culture free festivals and rave scenes with the transition point from the former to the latter occurring in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the resultant UK Government crackdown through the Criminal Justice and Order Act (3 November 1994), the same period in which Beltane was formed and experienced initial growth. One respondent alludes to that time:

A lot of road protests were going on, the illegal rave scene was really kicking off... It was like a lot of DIY culture was happening, that was really kind of a different feel then than now. People quite actively engaged, and Beltane was one of those things that people also latched onto (R2).

However, by the end of the 1990s another respondent reflects, "it was no longer needed to make that statement" (R11). While BFF is not a dance music festival the after party club associated with the night reflected this broader context and overlaps with this movement help further illuminate the context and early days of the contemporary BFF's growth, including the importance of spirituality and counter-culture (Matheson, Rimmer and Tinsley forthcoming; see also St John 2004 for more on DIY tribalism and the global protest movement of that time).

In terms of production, the BFS is a community-based organisation reliant predominantly on volunteers, whether that is event management roles or performing.



Initially, the festival was non-ticketed and small-scale in terms of audience numbers and performers. As the festival evolved, audience numbers increased significantly, for example, the first BFF had an audience of approximately fifty to hundred people and by 1999 this increased to ten thousand (BFS 2013). Event costs also increased as the scale of the festival grew particularly with additional regulatory interventions in the post-9/11 world, which had financial implications for the management of the event (Matheson and Tinsley 2010). These developments had significant ramifications as the festival was cancelled for one year. Thereafter, the BFF moved from being a free to a ticketed event in order to sustain itself financially as well as manage audience numbers (Matheson and Tinsley 2010). As the festival has evolved, it has become increasingly professionalised and the Beltane Fire Society (BFS) now operates under the auspices of charitable status. The BFF is currently a mature festival contributing to the local cultural landscape in the low tourist season and approximately three hundred volunteers participate in the event.



**Figure 1:** The May Queen and Whites Procession (source: R. Tinsley)

## **Performance of the BFF Ritual**

In terms of the performance of the contemporary ritual, there are core and immutable aspects of the BFF ritual. The central component of the ritual is the procession led by the May Queen who “represents Mother Earth or the Earth itself as it were” (R9). The May Queen is followed by her attendants, the Whites who are “a physical representation of her extended spread and reach over the hill, an embodiment of her love and emotions” (BFS 2013). The procession’s path round Calton Hill is cleared by the Blues and they play a critical role in the performance of the ritual. While their role has evolved over time, the Blues are, in essence, the elders of the festival. A key aspect of their role relates to the preservation of the ritual and performance because as the festival developed and an ever greater number of volunteers sought to engage with the event, particularly on a performative basis, there was a need to ensure that the central dimensions of the ritual were understood by participants whilst simultaneously according space to the creative process, as noted by a production stakeholder: ‘the Blues became very involved in making sure [and] checking what people were doing and that it was kept to the storyline. But some of us...felt that you can’t do that too much... There’s something about Beltane that the repeat of the ritual is important... but you have to allow creativity each year otherwise you lose people or you lose energy’ (R2). Hence, while there are aspects of the ritual that are protected under the auspices of the elders of the festival, the Blues, the preservation of the ritual is not a static process; rather, that there is fluidity and creativity in the protection and development of the ritual. The role of the Blues also highlights elements of hierarchy and structuring both behind the scenes and in the ritual itself. Parallels can be drawn with the ritual elders in Turner’s (1969) work on the Ndembu with “the only remaining structural characteristic in liminality is the authority of the ritual instructors” (Deflem 1991, 14). However, the more complex organisation of the BFF ritual performance and of contemporary Western society means there is further structuring beyond the role of these elders. It is a reminder that even egalitarian and liminal spaces need some element of structuring (van Heerden 2011) because “a lot of people experience what it’s like to work in a different kind of organisation where there’s lots of discussions around hierarchy and who makes the rules, and people get

very engaged with all of that” (R2). There is hierarchical structuring manifest in the BFS’s charity status, with a board of trustees, chairs and committees, “I think it shocked us all that its become what it has and its like its own little world now that sprawls in politics, issues and the governance of it” (R2). Turner’s (1969) notion of normative *communitas* does account for this through the organising of a social system. This can be seen in the transition in the early days from a ritual organised by professional performers to the present conditions. Such experiences of structuring within a liminoid context gives exposure and experience to volunteers in the context of event management – “half of them have never acted before, half the tech crew have never been in theatre tech” (R9) – suggesting potentiality for liminal bleed. This is similar to Kim and Jamal’s (2007, 195) findings of spontaneous *communitas* developing into normative *communitas* with its own set of social structuring and some hierarchy but crucially “still maintain close and equal relationships among the members” (Kim and Jamal 2007, 195).



**Figure 2:** One of the Blues clears the way for the May Queen procession (source: R. Tinsley)



At various points in the procession, there can be a disruption of proceedings by the Reds. The Red group are quite different to other groups in that they can represent disorder and this difference can be most clearly articulated in relation to the White group, as noted by the following: ‘...the reds who represent the opposite of the white warriors so they (White Group) are all about purity and order [and] they’re (Red group) about chaos and carnality’ (R9). Such dualistic tensions are the essence of festival ritual and celebration (Grimes 1983). Additionally, Abrahams (1983, 165) highlights the contradictions of celebration, how the most challenging contrasts are incorporated for fun “though the play is often deeply serious”. The procession also contains the rebirth of the Green Man. The Green Man plays a significant role in the representation of nature (Grimassi 2001) because he ‘...represents all the living things on Earth and he tries to become her consort (May Queen) over the course of the festival and is knocked back and knocked back and is eventually killed off because he represents winter and is reborn in spring’ (R9). The part of the Green man being stripped of his winter coat, representing his death and rebirth for summer, is the culmination of the Beltane ritual and is classic symbology for the rite of passage in



**Figure 3:** The Reds (source: R. Tinsley)

that “they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life” (Turner 1969, 96). In addition to these central characters, there are also other dimensions to the ritual, such as, the Need Fire, which was also documented in Frazer’s (1922) depiction of historical Beltane events. Other aspects of the ritual that are more fluid to interpretation include the elemental groups Air, Earth, Water and Fire Point as well as the tongue-in-cheek group No Point. While there is an overt ritual story celebrating the changes of seasons, there are also personal life changes taking place amongst the performers.

### **Rites of Passage Within**

As previously illustrated, the BFF can be a rite of passage for the performer, many of whom are either students studying for a number of years – “it’s a rite of passage for students and other young people, but there’s obviously a big student contingent. A few people come back who are aficionados from the old days” (R1) – or other young people on travel experiences, who are temporarily resident in the city – “a very international scene that was sort of growing up in Edinburgh around the festival and especially in the summer months” (R3). For both of these groups they are already experiencing more traditional rites of passage and are already in a liminal state. As a result of their temporary nature, there is quite a high turnover amongst volunteers every few years, increasing the importance of experienced participants who commit over a longer period. For the appeal in taking part, “I think a lot of what Beltane does also taps into that and helps people who are questioning about their place in the world, it does give them something” (R2) with one respondent suggesting they felt very “disenchanted with western culture” (R3). This corresponds with Turner (1969, 167) view of liminal time and place “as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs”. The BFF can have appeal as part of a broader spiritual exploration at a personal level:

The whole of my time in Edinburgh was very much characterised by a sort of deepening exploration of the great mystery and spirituality, and also a deepening

awareness of ecology and the natural world, and the cycles of the natural world and also of pagan heritage... a sort of approach to being human which isn't particularly part of the dominant culture nowadays (R4)

The wider liminal space in which many of volunteers are immersed in, as well as the specific liminoid space of the BFF (see below), allows for an exploration of such concerns which if positive can bleed back into feeling more complete in everyday life. This individual quest is a common theme in research on spirituality in contemporary Western culture (see for example Fredrickson and Anderson 1999; Kale 2004; Timothy and Conover 2011; Willson 2011; Zinnbauer et al. 1997 and see also Matheson, Rimmer and Tinsley forthcoming). It is also encapsulated in Turner's (1969) identification of liminoid experiences in secular (post)modernised nations.

For performers, the experience of participating in the ritual can be profoundly transformational. In the case of the Green Man, the role itself is often used as a pre-determined catalyst: "it was like people laying themselves bare. It is usually somebody who's going through [something] – using it as something to change, as a personal change" (R2). For others, it is more spontaneous to the evening itself when adopting the character's role: "Beltane allows you to become one with everybody else, and it also allows for a personal transformation because you're turning yourself into somebody else for the night" (R2) and "when I was Red there were times when I forgot who I was and it was the character" (R3). This transformation into character is done in two main approaches. One is through a physical threshold and is part of the overall performance – the Fire Arch – which in the Beltane ritual symbolises the May Queen and her procession entering the Underworld, resulting in a symbolic cleansing and the beginning of their journey in reuniting the elements (BFS 2012). In terms of territorial passage, van Gennep ([1908] 1975) refers to portals with rites of spatial passage becoming rites of spiritual passage. The fire arch in Beltane represents one such ritual within the broader Beltane ritual. Additionally, the process of costuming-up represents another symbolic threshold within the Beltane ritual. For the performers this is a threshold within a threshold, as in their costumes and body paint they have

transitioned over to the ritual performer:

Before we go onto the hill, you go through a change, you know, you paint yourself up but there was also the introduction of little rituals within groups, so they laid their old selves at the door and they were then... all together... you are one with this group... That whole thing of painting yourself and there are also rules about not speaking on the hill and all of those things are designed to deepen the experience for people (R2).

It represents the passing of a mental, as well as the physical threshold from off-stage to on-stage (Calton Hill), with deeper meaning and experiences beyond the broader Beltane festival. It is this deeper transcendental experience which makes Beltane truly ritualistic rather than the mere performance of a ritual story, as one respondent illustrates:

As a performer, one of the highlights for me was being a blue man... and that was an extraordinary sort of personal rite of passage being almost naked, painted blue on Calton Hill going through the intense cold of being out there... Feeling I was totally immersed in an almost like a different world view and it was almost approaching a sort of tribal, primal kind of experience, as much as a twenty first century westerner could have (R4).

This is what Grimes (1983) refers to as symbolic stripping, a deconstruction as a means of negation. It is experienced as a reconnection to something which has been lost, denied or excluded from the (post)modern secular world. This links back to one of the primary purposes of the resurrected festival, as a vehicle for reconnecting to a time lost to modernity.

For some of the people involved such ritual experiences and feelings of *communitas* can have profound and long lasting effects beyond the ritual performance on Calton Hill: "it was just this incredibly rich part of my life and had a huge kind of bearing on, you know, who I am and what I've gone on to do creatively" (R4). Another respondent speaks of how this has affected quite a broad range of volunteers:

The alumni is striking... a key player in Woodford festival in Australia which is a massive arts event out there. And there's other people who have gone on to do Burning Man and things like that so the Beltane community worldwide and the skills people

have learned are significant. It really does do what it should do in the sense it creates a group of people that can do this anywhere in the world which is wonderful. I really don't know how many folk have passed through our doors in total and what they have gone on to do but I think you'd be astounded to be honest (R9).

This exemplifies liminal bleed as experiences gained in taking part in the BFF – “being in this incredible cauldron of creativity as [a] social and cultural milieu” (R3) – have influenced future directions. This is in line with Hollands' (2010) findings of alternative festivals fostering social bonding and cultural networks for young workers and performers. Based on his own sustained research into psytrance festivals, St John (2011) argues that the re-incorporation aspect loses its importance as experiences gained only retain significance within future festivals and not in everyday society. However, a narrative analysis approach may reveal greater significance as part of an individual's life story.



**Figure 4:** Being in the ritual state; silence and non-eye contact with the audience (source: R. Tinsley)



Considering further the liminoid space of the BFS which also encapsulates the BFF, encountering other like-minded people taking part can encourage feelings of *communitas*: “there’s a big social aspect to it and people who.... come to the city then feel really connected into like-minded people, people who care about something or they find soulmates and people to talk to” (R2). This confirms O’Rourke, Irwin, and Straker’s (2011) notion of a ‘community within’ which engenders belonging and shared lived experiences. In particular, the months of preparation beforehand and the bonding with the particular group the performer is a part of results in heightened moments of *communitas* which occur before as well as during the actual performance: “that strength of community going away, spending long periods of time together and developing a comradeship, ritual focus, developing their skills and the integrity of what they’re going to go – that’s so authentic and sincere” (R1). These periods draw parallels with Turner’s (1969) notion of ritual subjects being separated from everyday society; however, as these are liminoid examples these periods away are not sustained but instead interspersed with everyday life and routine. The BFS also celebrates other key periods in the Celtic calendar, whether through public or private rituals, including a fairly large-scale production for Samhain (a procession along Edinburgh’s Royal Mile, celebrating the Celtic New Year and the coming of winter, held annually on the 31<sup>st</sup> October). Additionally, there are many opportunities for social gatherings directly or indirectly related to the BFS, which altogether can result in what St John (2011) refers to as liminal culture. This also confirms Kim and Jamal’s (2007) findings of those who experienced a more permanent change (see below) having sustained continuity ‘off-site’ within the subculture. Turner (1969) identifies three stages of *communitas* development: spontaneous, normative and ideological with the BFS being normative in nature, reflecting its organisation as a social system. Similarly to Turner’s (1969) caution on communes which attempt to make the liminal state permanent which can lead to institutionalisation (ideological *communitas*) and the dualistic importance of structure vs. anti-structure, one respondent cautions:

You can kind of get hooked on it in a way. At a certain point you need to get out there and make your own friends and try and lead your own life and not let it constrict you because it takes up a lot of time and can prevent you from getting on with your life (R3).

Such extended immersion in liminoid space can become entrapping rather than liberating and can become an inhibitor to re-entering structured life. However, as will be seen below, that the liminoid space of the BFF is actually a contested space, as well as having a significant turnover, helps to avoid a more ideological formation of *communitas*, even if there can be individual appeal in sustained immersion.

While the BFS has unifying elements in a social context and in the ritual performance of the night in question as noted above, there is nevertheless marked heterogeneity and contestation. In line with criticisms within the literature of *communitas* in liminoid settings, the BFF culture demonstrates a semblance to St John's (2011) 'alternative cultural heterotopia' with conforming qualities of spatial 'otherness' in its celebration of nature and carnivalesque hedonism (see Matheson and Tinsley 2010), and, as will be seen, in its spatially marked heterogeneity and contested spaces. These atypical Turnerian characteristics of the liminoid space are present to varying degrees both in its current formation and in its evolution since its contemporary beginnings. Of the heterogeneous nature of the volunteers, one respondent comments:

You'd be astounded the cross-section of performers that take part it's not dissimilar to the cross-section of the audience but it's far from a bunch of ragged hippies. You'd be amazed how many investment bankers and lawyers, fairly clean cut professions but when you think about it it's not entirely surprising, it's exactly the same escapism the audience is trying to reach (R9)

On matters of belief, there is not "one core set of beliefs amongst those involved in Beltane" (R2) with another adding, "we've had people who just like to wear paint, people who just want to walk around naked, and people who deeply believe they are celebrating a change in seasons and are practising pagans" (R3). Regarding the last group, Manson's (2006) study highlights the significance of Beltane and Samhain rituals to contemporary neo-pagans and it is another emergent theme in respondent discussions. It also raises contested perceptions of BFS:

The organisation is perceived to be pagan. We are not pagan but people perceive it to be pagan, I think we should recall ourselves the Beltane Not Pagan Society <laughter>... We celebrate traditional Celtic festivals, a modern reinterpretation of

traditional Celtic festivals, some of our members are pagan but we as a society aren't (R10).

Another respondent suggests the actual number of practising pagans is “quite low” (R11). While the discourse does not reveal precise details it paints a general picture of the overall make-up. The following reflection on past times from a more recent volunteer tends to suggest generalisations and simplifications similar to the aforementioned external perception of the BFS, “the olden days it all used to be hippies and it all used to be pagans so there wasn't such a diversity of people who got involved” (R10). While another respondent who was there at the time describes a different terminology of these contesting groupings:

They put together a group called the Sativa Drummers who were these radical drummers from a club, with the Samba Drummers... You can't put somebody who's really kind of flaky and very hippyish and wanting to wave bits of cloth and dress in multi colours with someone who's basically got piercings (R2).

It alludes to a particularly contested time in the festivals evolution when the event had to move to a more regulated, ticketed and curfew-driven model: “‘This is a festival of the people for the people. It should be a free festival’ and then other people who were saying “With all the rising costs associated with health and safety, we need it to be ticketed””(R2). While the statement is a simplification of the context, it does highlight divisional groups and contested narratives rather than unifying communities.

These divisional aspects can also be seen in the variety of different performance groups in the manifestation of competitiveness – “currently the society has this one-upmanship thing again where the torches are more important than the stewards” (R11) – and of desirability – “there's something very interesting round that dynamic and the whole aspiration to be Blue and also the difficulties of being Blue” (R2). The Blues in particular, while coveted, are also highly contested in their leading role and position, “watching the development of that as a powerhouse within the organisation and where its come into criticism, where its stepped outside its original remit” (R2). As well as inter-group there can also be intra-group tensions as one respondent reflects on being

in Earth Group, “it was such a wide diverse range of different ideas and different ways of thinking and I really liked that but the side-effect of that is when you have in one group people who are pagan, are spiritualist, are Christian, are atheist then you can't have a common ground... Every group has a different equilibrium and every group has a different feel to it” (R10). Drawing upon performance studies, Alexander (2004) argues that the affirmation of metaphysics and consensual belief of traditional ritual has seen the addition of negotiation and reflexivity in contemporary society, resulting in moments that are just as likely to lead to discord as to integration. In the context of the BFF, this dualistic tension is clearly apparent and a necessary feature of its social structuring as will become further apparent:

It's interesting this notion of tension. There are clearly tensions arise because all the different groups and I always hear talk of the tensions and arguments, and they always seem to wash out... Sometimes you'll get people who are more riding on their ego and they're driving themselves from their ego and when that manifests itself in something like Beltane that can be quite in a bad way (R1)

In the context of the BFF more dramatic discord occurs in punctuated events in the festival's evolution (Matheson and Tinsley 2010) which, given the festival's long running nature, displays a tendency of “it should be a lot more fraught than it is but actually the fact that people share their passion for the festival actually carries through an awful lot” (R9). According to Alexander (2004, 529), in such segmented and differentiated society, the successful actor needs to be able to ‘re-fuse’ such disparate elements in a convincing and effective manner – “more ritual-like” (Alexander 2004, 529) – to the intended audience. In this case the overall narrative of passion and commitment to the festival succeeding takes precedence.

### **Conclusion**

In Duffy's (2008, 102) examination of the role of music and emotion in festival dynamics, she notes the connections and sense of belonging which take place in the festival space “often spills out into our everyday spaces”. One of the key aspects of this research on the BFF has been to emphasise the significance of liminal bleed. In these liminoid as opposed to liminal experiences, it can be argued the emphasis is less externally recognised in terms of their traditional purpose of marking a new and

elevated status in structured life. However, such a stance then serves to downplay what can still be significant – at the very least as simple rejuvenation – and sometimes life changing experiences. As a research tool narrative analysis is best served as a technique for uncovering these stories, for revealing implications for moments beyond liminoid moments of potentiality. There may also be more loosely tied narratives of individual life journeys punctuated by different types of liminoid experiences. The study also revealed confirmatory findings with contemporary critiques of the liminoid suggesting a contested space with division and differentiation being just as likely to be present as the unifying features of *communitas*. While this may be at odds with Turner's, this research suggests these features contained in liminoid settings may help to avoid the negative effects of sustained *communitas* which can end in militancy and fanaticism. The key is maintaining an equilibrating tension. The BFF's membership turnover while challenging from a management and training perspective was seen as healthy in terms of avoiding sustained *communitas*, retaining freshness in the festival and as a result has played a significant role in its long running nature.

Kimball (1975) in his introduction to van Gennep's seminal work argues that there is no evidence suggesting that the secular modernised world has less need for ritualised transitions but that these have become more private, less openly acknowledged, often alone and with "private symbols" resulting in greater mental strains for the individual during difficult transition periods – individual crisis. The BFS and its rite of passage for volunteers is one such outlet, which can act as a more public and traditionally supportive rite of passage. The chapter concludes by emphasising the potentiality of liminoid space to be harnessed in a way which encourages the ideals of liminality and, in so doing, questioning the solidity of Turner's segregation of the two related concepts both in future research and for practitioners of liminoid space.

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