

Sustainable tourism development in Liminal Spaces

keywords / tourism development, liminality, liminal places, entrepreneurial ecosystem

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Abstract

A reported 5.9 million foreign citizens visited Albania in 2018 alone (INSTAT, 2019), marking an increase of 15.8% compared to the previous year. These figures show that the importance of tourism in Albania is growing, as have the number of communities adopting tourism development initiatives as a strategy for local economic development, including "liminal places".

This paper focuses on exploring the concept of liminality, and how the latter can be reversed through tourism development initiatives. A number of specific cases ranging from local to national are researched and used to illustrate the relationship established between this state of in-between-ness and the entrepreneurial ecosystem within a tourism development context. The case studies at the focus of this research paper are two distinctively liminal places, namely: the village of Fishtë in the north-western municipality of Lezhë, and the south-eastern municipality of Gramsh.

The aim of this paper is to explore how tourism development can serve to reverse liminality (social, economic), centred around two key questions: What is liminality in a tourism development context? Can liminality be reversed?

Introduction

Progressively increasing numbers have shown that tourism, has become one the world's most profitable industries, constituting a lucrative sector in terms of its job creation potential, with 1 in 10 jobs related to tourism. In 2018, as reported by the World Travel and Tourism Council (2019), tourism contributed a record \$8.8 trillion to the world economy. More specifically, that means that the travel and tourism sector has been growing at a rate of 3.9%, has generated 10.4% of all global economic activity and is responsible for one in ten jobs globally.

Similarly, the importance of tourism in Albania has also grown in recent years, marking the highest growth in the region as shown by the graph. A reported 5.9 million foreign citizens visited Albania in 2018 alone (INSTAT, 2019), marking an increase of 15.8% compared to the previous year. This data shows that the importance of tourism in Albania is growing, as have the

number of destinations and operators in the sector. Increasing numbers of incoming tourists, be it domestic or international, have contributed to both state and other non-state actors, to recognizing the potential tourism sector has to drive economic development.

This direct correlation between tourism development and the local economic growth has meant that many places, regardless of how the concept of a 'place' is geographically defined, be it cities, regions, nations or otherwise (O'Connor, Stam, Sussan, and Audretsch, 2018), have explored and developed tourism ambitions. Because of place-specific traits, limitations, and varying natural-historical-cultural profiles, it is important that any places wishing to link their local economic development around tourism activities, adopt bespoke models that make optimal use of existing local assets, actors and decrease dependency

from inhibiting/restrictive conditions. This becomes particularly important for places that are by nature caught in an “in-between-ness”, or in a state of liminality, such as cross-border areas, due to the associated challenges, be them territorial, economic, social and political.

This paper focuses on exploring the concept of liminality and how the latter can be reversed through tourism development initiatives. A number of specific cases ranging from local to national are researched and used to illustrate the relationship established between this state of in-between-ness and the entrepreneurial ecosystem (model?) within a tourism development context. The case studies at the focus of this research paper are two distinctively liminal places, namely: the village of Fishtë in the north-western municipality of Lezhë, and the south-eastern municipality of Gramsh. The aim is to explore how tourism development can serve to reverse liminality (social, economic), centred around the following research questions: What is liminality in a tourism development context? Can liminality be reversed?

What is liminality in the tourism development context?

The concept of Liminality

Through means of systems, be them social, political, economic, cultural, or religious, humans have imposed upon themselves numerous constraints and boundaries as a means to prevent and manage the chaos. In some cultures, such structural constraints are more pressing. Yet-in-order to live, to breathe as Turner

(1991) writes, and generate novelty, human beings have had to create—by structural means—spaces and times in the calendar or, in the cultural cycles of their most cherished – groups which cannot be captured in the classificatory nets of their quotidian, routinized spheres of action, otherwise referred to as liminal spaces/experiences. (Turner, 1991, p.vii). Coined initially in 1909 by Arnold van Gennep in the “*Les Rites de Passage*”, liminality refers to moments or periods of transition, otherwise referred to as rites of passage. The concept originates from the Latin (root) word “*limen*”, and it refers to a state, as Thomassen (2014) defines it as “being in a threshold or in an intermediate condition, also implying a sense of unlimited freedom from any kind of structure, sparking creativity and innovation”. Liminality, as a state, refers to any ‘betwixt and between’ situation or object, any in-between place or moment, a state of suspense, a moment of freedom between two structured world-views or institutional arrangements. (Thomassen, 2014, pp.7) Liminality also implies a sense of relaxation of the limits of the current reality or state, a state of freedom of being able to choose, be it on a thought, conscience or behavioural level. With the destruction of such limits, comes novelty and imagination and the construction of new (however temporary) states and realities. Some examples of liminal (or liminoidal state), or “the middle stage of transition in a rite of passage” as Currie (in Pearce 2012) defines it, include: airports, states and experiences caused by travelling, spaces between two different

typologies, non-functioning structures (such as lighthouses, schools during summer breaks), empty parking spaces/lots, etc. In spatial terms, liminality could be explained as being "between" or belonging to two different places; such could be the case of cross-border areas, or, areas divided by the presence of a strong natural element, such as rivers, lakes, mountain ranges, or even strong infrastructural elements such as national road segments, ring-roads, etc. Because of this perpetual liminal state, such areas, particularly in the case of cross-border areas, represent an interesting case of a natural in-between-ness be it in terms of natural, cultural, historical, language and spatial traits shared in common. Interestingly, such places, although often marginalised and associated with "placed that do not matter" or "lagging regions", can "evoke both nostalgia and fascination" as Shields (1991) puts it.

According to Van Gennep (1909), all rites of passage or transition, are marked by three distinctive phases, namely: separation, limen (or margin) and aggregation. The passage and the passenger are two important concepts in the discourse of liminality. Through each phase, the passenger or the ritual object undergoes visible changes in characteristics and in the relation vis-à-vis the place, state, social position, or age. During the separation (first phase), the passenger has to detach or break from a fixed point or state in the structure where he exists (social, cultural, etc.), or previous practices and routines. Such detachment or pre-liminal rite marks a metaphorical "death" of the existing state, which then leads the passenger, towards the second phase, referred to as limen or liminal period. During this transitory phase, the passenger is encountered with a structure that has very few, if any, of the traits of the previous reality or the upcoming one. In the third stage, the re-aggregation, the passage as Turner (1991) puts it, is consummated. The passenger has reached a new structure with clearly distinctive attributes, rights and obligations, by which the passenger is expected to abide.

Liminality attributes: time, space and subject.

Liminality is a far-reaching concept when it comes to the factors of subject-hood, space, and time. Liminal refers to anything in the spectrum between a single moment and a historical period, a single individual and entire societies, and a specific place and entire regions. Thomassen's grid

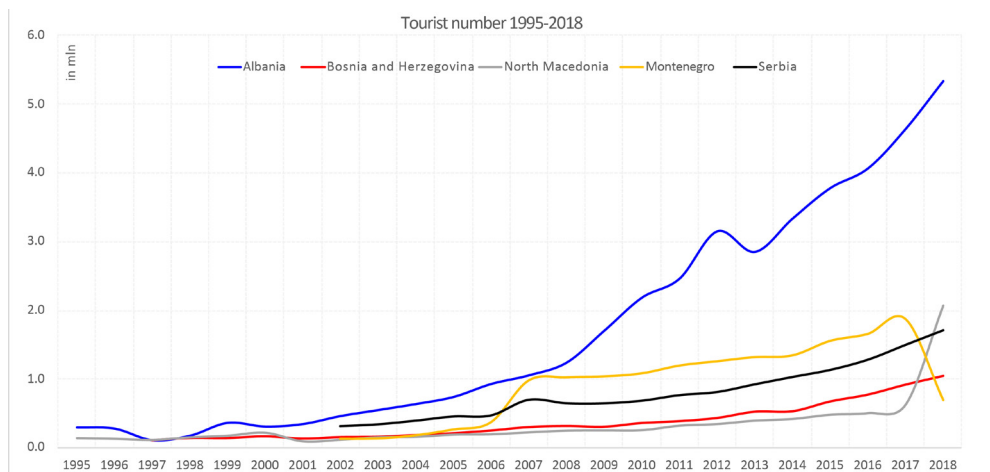
(2014) below provides an example of the multitude of combinations between the dimensions of time and subject, particularly helpful in understanding the two-fold link between liminality and tourism: (a) tourism as a liminal experience, as is the case of individual or group travels, ritualized passage within a cosmological event-calendar, such as New Year, Harvest, Solstice, or other hallmark events, in a place or region ; (b) or tourism as a means to reverse/shift liminality that affects sizeable subjects over lengthy periods (group, society vs. period, epoch) in clearly defined settings, such could be the case of "placed that do not matter" or "lagging regions", with limited socio-economic, cultural activities, and prolonged periods of 'betwixt and between', failing to complete the passage from a current impasse state to a more favourable one.

In fact, most notable authors in the realm of liminality, Van Gennep, Turner, and Thomassen all distinguish the spatial dimension of liminality as a defining one, particularly relevant to the tourism development discourse. Thomassen (2014) views liminal places as specific thresholds, extended areas, or 'borderlands' or, arguably, whole countries, placed in important in-between positions between larger civilizations.

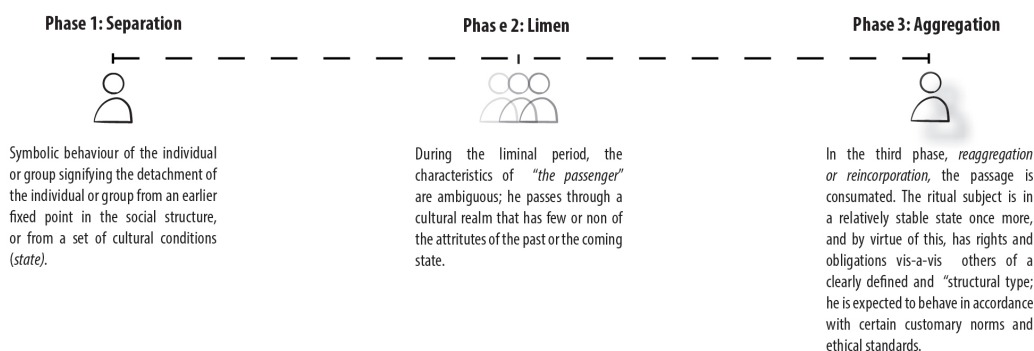
In tourism development terms, this could be understood as groups of people or societies, living in places that are "stuck" in adverse contexts and circumstances, unable to tap into the potential that comes with the proximity to larger civilizations. Such realities are very common for societies in most small-medium sized places in Albania (the subject), that for historical, or socio-political reasons have had to shift away from their existing state, submerging into what started as moments, then-turned- periods, of mass migration, natural resource depletion, collapse of former industries, and mass informal development.

In liminal terms, this means that these societies, once structured and hierarchically differentiated, have transited towards a liminal period, unstructured and undifferentiated, and unable to complete their passage towards a stable, clearly structured state, often identified through socio-economic stability.

Such dormant, under-developed places, including cities, municipalities and sometimes entire regions, are nested between more developed places or in-between borders.



Graph. 1 / Tourist numbers in the Western Balkan region.
Source / World Bank data and Author's own calculations



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Fig. 1 / The three phases of liminality as defined by Van Gennep and Turner.
Source / Turner, 1977 and Author's visualisations)

Time	Subject		
	Individual	Group	Society
Moment	Sudden event affecting one's life, such as death, divorce, and/or illness; or individualized ritual passage such as baptism, ritual passage to womanhood, etc.	Ritual passage to manhood (almost always in cohorts); graduation ceremonies, etc. Ritualized passage within a cosmological event-calendar, such as New Year, Harvest, Solstice, or other hallmark events.	A whole society facing a sudden event such as a sudden invasion, natural disaster or a plague, where social distinctions and normal hierarchy disappear; Carnivals; Revolutionary moments;
Period	Critical life-stages; Puberty or teenage;	Ritual passage to manhood, which may extend into weeks or more in some societies; Group travels;	Wars; Revolutionary periods;
Epoch (life-span duration)	Individuals standing outside society, by choice or designated Monkhood; In some tribal societies, individuals remain 'dangerous' because of a failed ritual passage; Twins are permanently liminal in some societies;	Religious Fraternities; Ethnic minorities; Social minorities; Transgender Immigrant groups; betwixt and between old and new culture; Groups that live at the edge of 'normal structures', often perceived as both dangerous and 'holy';	Prolonged wars, enduring political instability, prolonged intellectual confusion (example: the Thirty Years' War) Incorporation and reproduction of liminality into social and political structures; Modernity as 'permanent liminality'?

Tab. 1 / Types of Liminal Experiences: Temporal Dimensions. Source / Thomassen, 2014

Liminality Dimensions	Small scale	Medium scale	Large scale
Time	Moment	Period	Epoch
Subject	Individual	Group	Society
Space	Place	Area, zone.	Country, region.

Tab.2 / Convergence between Liminality and Tourism

Can liminality be reversed?

With one in five new jobs created, owing to tourism (WTTC, 2019), and tourists' increasing demand for new unexplored destinations and new forms of tourism, places with strong liminal attributes, stand a real chance at reversing its (negative) effects. Whether in the form of social media initiated promotional campaigns, private sector-led initiatives, or policy-making at the central level, it has been observed that liminality responds to tourism development processes. Findings from the following interesting case studies¹ show the relationship between liminality and tourism development processes, and the type of effects the latter can have on the large scale liminal subject, i.e. society, and medium-large scale space, i.e. area, zone or region.

Mrizi i Zanave of Fishtë

"Mrizi i Zanave" is an agro-tourism set in the village of Fishtë, in Municipality of Lezhë, in the north-west of Albania. Prior to the establishment, the village of Fishtë, with less than 1000 inhabitants, was only formerly known for two reasons: first, as the birth-place of At Gjergj Fishta, a notable Albanian writer and cleric; and second, as the location of a correctional facility for young offenders. Similarly to other rural areas in Albania, until the early 2000s, the village manifested liminal attributes, particularly spatial, where time seemed to have stood still, unable to transit to the post-'90s times of free-market economy completely. In June 2010, two young entrepreneurs, having just returned from migration, opened "Mrizi i Zanave", a slow-food restaurant, focusing on bringing locally produced based traditional dishes with a modern twist. The business model that "Mrizi i Zanave" introduced was that of "from farm to table", meaning cooperation with local producers was essential. In the beginning, such investment was met with scepticism and disbelief:

- the local community of Fishtë, did not approve of such initiative, and initially "refused" to cooperate, by taking their local products to the market in the city of Lezhë, instead of selling them to the restaurant;
- the banking sector did not view the village of Fishtë as an area with economic potential, hence access to crediting (external financing) was not possible;

- The community at large viewed such investment with little optimism, because of the amount of time it would require for food aficionados to travel from main urban centres to Fishtë; app. 2 hours travelling time from Tiranë and Durrës, and even more so from all other urban centres in the central or southern part of the country. Until "Mrizi i Zanave", it was unconceivable for people at that time to have to travel that long to a restaurant.

In nine years, the mastermind behind the "Mrizi i Zanave" concept, Chef A. Prenga, defied all odds and used all the village of Fishtë had to offer, including its setbacks, to his advantage. He strengthened the cooperation with the local community on two levels: (a) by purchasing all his produce locally, from as many as 300 rural families/producers in 2018 (Besra, 2018), compared to 40 in 2013 (FAO, 2013), therefore creating a microcosm of agro-business entrepreneurship; (b) by employing only local staff, currently 65, from Fishtë and the surrounding villages within a 10km range. The restaurant and the hotel count an average of 100,000 visitors per year, or close to one million since first opening in 2010, of which 30-50% foreign visitors (Prenga, personal communication, May, and October 2019). In addition to tasting the local culinary tradition, the visitors are also exposed to local produce and handicrafts, as well as the landscape Fishtë has to offer, transforming their visit into a touristic experience. In addition to the promotion of the Fishtë as an all-year-round (culinary) tourist destination through direct exposure, "forcing it outside of its liminal state", Mrizi i Zanave has secured Fishtë a consolidated place in the international slow-food scene, through numerous publications, participation to international fairs, exchange experiences and major media coverage.

#EjaNeGramsh

The Municipality of Gramsh, situated in the central part of Albania, represents a typical case of spatial, temporal and subject liminality. Nested between 7 municipalities, of which 4 constitute important urban centres by Albanian standards, Gramsh was at least 3.5 hours travelling time away (by car) from most of them. The local community was

¹ / For the case study focused on "Mrizi i Zanave", the research methods employed were: field observation (6 visits) and 1 interview with its founder, Chef Altin Prenga; For the case study focused on "#EjaNeGramsh", the research methods employed were numerous, including: field observations, interviews, questionnaires, piloting work – for more see "Ciro A., Toska M., Nienten P. (2019) Social Innovation and Sustainable Economic Development: Participatory Tourism Destination Management. In: Finka M., Jaššo M., Husár M. (eds) The Role of Public Sector in Local Economic and Territorial Development. EAI/Springer Innovations in Communication and Computing. Springer, Cham."



Fig. 2 / Mrizi i Zanave. Source / A. Rira 2019



Fig. 3 / The development model used in the case of #EjaNeGramsh. Source / the author, 2018

artificially established in Gramsh in the 1960s, to support the emergence of two key industries, battery manufacturing and arms and ammunition manufacturing. As both industries collapsed following 1992 political developments in Albania, the city was left with increasing unemployment as high as 82.9% (LDOP, 2015), no economic activity, and with the unfavourable image of a post-industrial town. The stable state of the community, initially established in support of the industrial activity, was questioned, and forced into a period of transition (limen), towards a very unclear aggregation phase.

In 2014, the territorial coverage of the municipality grew by 300 fold, as the Territorial Administrative Reform consolidated the administrative units in the country, from 373 local administrative units to 61 municipalities. In addition to the

challenges, the newly added territory and resources, although challenging in terms of access and connectivity, represented an opportunity for economic development. It was not until 2016, that the Municipality was presented with the prospect of economic development through touristic activities, initially through the establishment of the Banja Hydropower Plant and the improved infrastructure accessing the city. In cooperation with a university specialised in matters of spatial planning and development (POLIS University, Albania), and a civil society actor experienced in matters of development and governance (Co-PLAN, Institute for Habitat Development, Albania), in 2016 Gramsh embarked in a process of reinventing itself, shifting from the liminal post-industrial state towards a sustainable tourism destination. This partnership, all in all, served to streamline

the local economic development assessment and planning process (Ciro, Toska and Nientied, 2018), orienting the development priorities of the municipality towards tourism development. The planning process, which later resulted in a number of strategic documents including the Local General Territorial Plan and the Tourism Development Strategy, was complemented by a dynamic branding campaign under the #EjaNëGramsh hashtag.

The campaign was aimed at reversing the poor perception of Gramsh, whilst simultaneously introducing it to the potential domestic demand, in a number of ways: (i) provide support to the community mobilization process by increasing local pride and self-identification; (ii) engage domestic demand particularly among tour operators and domestic tourists; (iii) to document the initiative in a way that is traceable, replicable, and very importantly open to all sceptics to view the progress of the process incrementally (Ciro, Toska and Nientied, 2018).

The hashtag became so popular that its use was no longer confined solely to the promotional process; tour operators and visitors would independently use it when posting or sharing images or posts related to Gramsh, or adopt it for use in other contexts, such was the case of: #EjaNëFshat, #EjaNëTepelene, #EjaNëGjirokaster, etc. Since 2017, Gramsh-based natural and historical resources feature in most tour operator touristic offers operating on a national scale, with very popular destinations, such as the Sotira Waterfall, the Holta Canyon, the recurrent hallmark event "Natyra Fest", the mountain range of Valamarë, etc. The private sector has also tuned in by increasing the number and variety of services available in the area.

Conclusions

The aim of this research was to explore how tourism development could serve to reverse liminality, or any of its attributes, including temporal, spatial and subject-related. Through the theoretical background and the case studies presented, a connection between liminality and tourism development can be established. The case studies of "Mrizi i Zanave" and "#EjaNëGramsh", although different in approach and scale, presented two clear cases of liminality, reversed through tourism development processes. Liminality is reversible – recent sophistication in tourism demand has meant that tourists are increasingly

looking for previously unexplored places or liminal destinations at the verge of the unknown. It is this interest that has unlocked the untapped potential that lies in the liminal attributes of such places, presenting them with a real opportunity to shift from the ambiguous state towards of limen towards a new structural, stable state achieved through a new purpose: that of tourism development.

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Fig. 3 / Gramsh attractive places. Source / #ejanegramsh

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TRANSPORTI PUBLIK NDËRQYTETAS GRAMSH

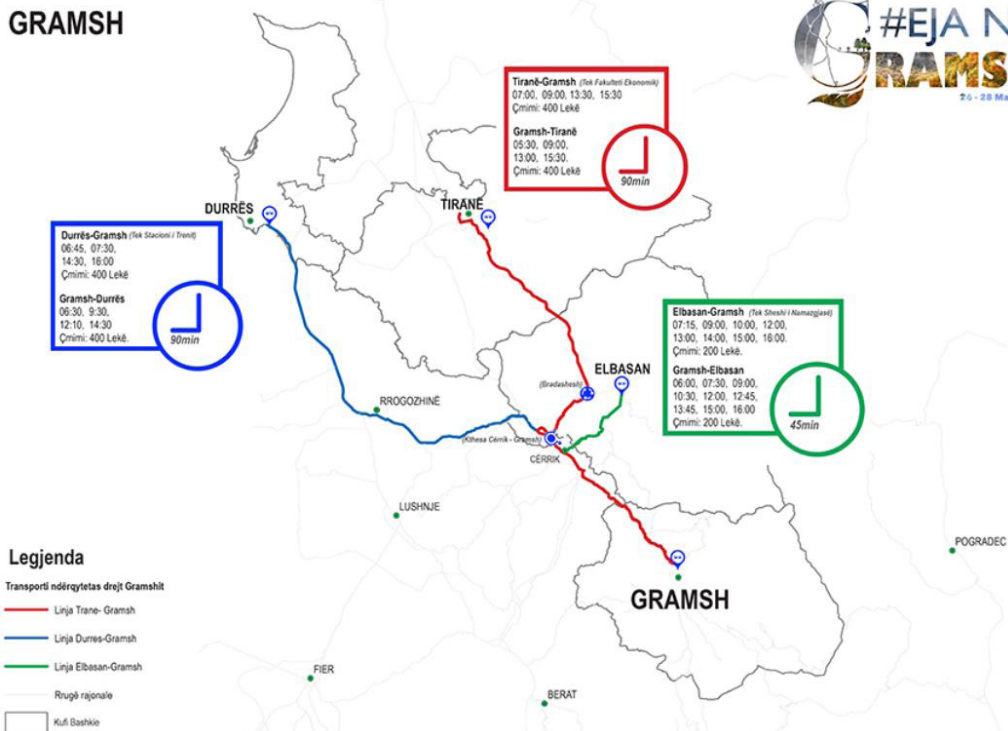


Fig. 4 / Intercity public transport. Source / #ejanegramsh

