

Festa: celebration, religion and the people

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ABSTRACT

During the summer months, each town holds an annual religious celebration known as the Festa. This celebration is one of the most important celebrations of the year for many and preparations begin as soon as the previous Festa is over. It is a time for religious and secular celebration with great importance placed on the particular patron saint of the town. The Festa is also a visual representation of the competition between villages. This paper presents observations of Festas from Qala, San Lawrenze, and Victoria, Gozo, as well as traditional meaning and how the Festa has changed in regards to youth culture and tourism. Attention will also be paid to the possibility of staged authenticity for the sake of tourists expecting some sort of “authentic experience”.

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Introduction

Malta is a small island county located in the Mediterranean Sea, between Italy and North Africa. The country of Malta consists of three islands: Malta, Gozo, and Comino. The capitol, Valletta, is located on the Island of Malta. Comino is almost uninhabited except during the summer when the island is inundated with tourists. Gozo is often considered the most rural of the three, with many small villages and terrace farms covering the landscape. This paper concentrates predominantly on these three towns and the preparation, organization, and commencement of the festas as well as meanings attributed to the festa. The “Festa” or religious feast is one of the most important celebrations of the year for Gozitans. The festa is an opportunity for both religious and social bonding as well as a recreational event. This paper also discusses various social and cultural changes, concentrating mostly on tourism, that have occurred in Gozo and what, if any, affect this has had on Gozitan festas. Due to limit time in which to do fieldwork this paper is meant as an overview of the Gozitan festa and is in no way an attempt to cover every aspect of the Gozitan festa.

Methods

The following article is based on almost a month of fieldwork in Gozo. I lived in the town of Xlendi as part of an anthropological field school organized by the University of Leuven. The data gathered centers around three main villages in Gozo that were holding festas: Qala, pronounced "alla", San Lawrence, and the capitol of Gozo, Victoria. I interviewed several people about the festa including a retired translator, an oil painter who spends all year producing paper stars as confetti for the next fest, and a employee of the local international school. In addition to the interviews, the research results were obtained through personal observations while living in Gozo. I was able to visit the Qala, San Lawrence, and Victoria on the eve of their festas, as well as spending the week preceding the San Lawrence and Victoria festas observing the preparations and set up.

Background

The literal and figurative centers of the community in Gozitan towns are the local parish churches. Geographically, each town is based around the church and the central square, with the rest of the town radiating from it (Boissevain 31). This spatial distribution graphically demonstrates the importance of religion in Gozitan society.

Catholicism is the main religion in Malta and plays a central aspect in Gozitan everyday life. Mass is celebrated several times a day, with the first starting at five o'clock in the morning. This centrality of religious life is shown by Jeremy Boissevain in his book "Saints and Fireworks: Religion and Politics in Rural Malta" when he stated, "most Maltese regulate their lives by the daily and monthly cycle of religious activities (Boissevain 55)." Such annual religious feasts and processions divide most of the principle divisions of the year, such as the end of winter. It is because of this ingrained piety and religious pride that the Festa plays such an important role in Gozitan life.

Organization and preparation

The annual religious feast or "Festa" is an occasion for the community to honor their villages' patron saint, which varies between towns. Each village has their own Festa each summer and the celebrations are organized in such a way that during the summer months it is possible to visit a festa celebration every weekend. The festas are put together by a community effort and they receive almost no help from the government.

The community leaders such as the parish church and the leaders of the band clubs organize and raise funds for the events. (Boissevain 45) The procurator supervises the maintenance and decoration of the altar and statue that represent the patron saint. Depending on the village, he will also make the arrangements for the decorations and funding for the festa. In other towns, the leaders of the local band club, a social group often holds brass band concerts, will organize this as well as erecting the street decorations and inviting priests to conduct services (Boissevain 47). The festa consists of both an internal and external celebration, with the internal being the more religious celebration that takes place within the church and the external features the social gathering and celebratory fireworks. The parish church is predominantly in charge of the internal celebration while the band club organizes the external festivities (Boissevain 45).

The band club plays a large part in the festa celebrations. The brass band is one of the central entertainments at the festa and their work represents their community pride. Each festa the streets are lined with brightly colored streamers and flags. Ornate, lighted decorations that have been passed down through the years span the streets leading to the town square and the church is covered in bright lights.

The band club is also a point of rivalry between factions in the community. These clubs often have fierce competitions regarding who has the best band, the biggest decorations, and the most ornate fireworks. While in Victoria for the preparations of the festa I observed a truck filled with statues and members of the band club. They were getting ready to erect the statues around the town square. It was surprising at first, in that at a first look, it appeared that the men themselves were statues.

This competition is nationwide as well, as each town thinks that their village, parish church, or band club is the best. This competition results in each town trying to outdo each other in fireworks and celebratory events. Because everyone knows what to look for and how things "should" be, the festa is carefully analyzed and compared with that of other towns and of those festas of previous years. According to interviews, the competition between band clubs is concentrated more in Malta but village competition is still present in Gozo.

Even the individual decorations have specific meanings. Large statues depicting the patron saint and other religious figures decorate the streets surrounding the town square. Large lights are erected on top of buildings with the color corresponding to the particular saint. According to interviews, if the lights are red, the patron saint was martyred.

If the lights are blue than they died a natural death. The streamers, banners and flags are always a corresponding color as well. During the celebrations members of the band club can be seen walking and celebrating wearing bright red or blue clothing, often with shirts depicting a painting of the patron saint.

The festas have an organized procession of three parts, from the beginning to the final celebration on Sunday. The first, Novena, is three to nine days of spiritual preparation usually starting the Wednesday before the main celebration (Boissevain 59). This celebration consists of High Mass and public sermons, usually related to the patron saint. Novena is also the time when the street decorations and lights are erected.

On the last day of Novena the band club marches through the street in a large procession followed by devotees. The devotees often sing and dance and often shout their loyalty to the band club. As this period is not as well known as the main celebration, there are rarely tourists or visitors (Boissevain 59).

In San Lawrenze I was observing the preparations I observed an impromptu dance rehearsal made up of young children and later, women of the town. This was enacted on the band club stage and appeared to be some sort of traditional dance. This dance would later be performed during the festivities.

Saturday is the eve of the feast, Te Deon. Aerial fireworks and petards are shot into the air starting early in the morning and going until late at night. There are dances and band marches throughout the day, which then culminates with the titular statue, carried though town for a short procession (Boissevain 62).

This is the day that most people come and visit because of the ground fireworks. During the eve of the feast there are also community events such as agricultural shows and horse racing down the main street. During the Festa of St. Marija in Victoria the community held an agricultural exhibition where farmers showed their prize turkeys, chickens and other birds as well as a crafts fair where lace and other crafts could be sold. Another popular entertainment on this day is horse racing, which includes adults and children racing up the main street on two-wheeled chariots.

The ground fireworks of Gozitan festas are the most visible and powerful representation of the celebration. The fireworks are large, intricate contraptions covered in small charges that, when lit, move in decorative patterns and

colors. There is no regulations concerning these fireworks and they are often created by the townspeople. The men in charge of designing and creating the fireworks are held in high esteem after a successful festa (Boissevain 59).

Fireworks however, are very dangerous to make and reportedly people die while creating fireworks for the celebration. Several interviewees stated that the fireworks are such an important part of the festa that if a person was to die while making the fireworks, they are unofficially canonized within their parish church.

After the ground fireworks the eve of the festa is concluded and many will go home to prepare for the day of the feast. Increasingly however many young people retreat to bars and clubs and continue to celebrate until early in the morning.

Sunday is the last day of the feast. This day usually consists of masses and sermons throughout the day. Most families will go to a mass in the morning or early afternoon and then go home to have a family lunch. This is a time for religious celebration and the external festa is not as apparent. Families will spend the day with each other or visit friends and relatives (Boissevain 60). In the late afternoon a long procession will be held with the titular statue being led throughout the town preceded by a brass band and often-black clad penitents.

Observations

During my time in Gozo I was able to observe festas in Qala and San Lawrenze and Victoria. Each of the towns has their own identity and each festa was unique and separate from the others. San Lawrenze is unique in the fact that it is the only village in Gozo to be named after its patron saint (Festa of St. Lawrence Martyr - San Lawrenz, 2004).

The first festa I witnessed was in Qala, a small town on the east end of the island. I arrived on the eve of the feast and the fireworks had been going off overheard since early that morning. They restaurant owners were preparing for later that night and had set up outdoor bars and seating. Street vendors selling traditional foods such as donuts, nougats, snow cones, crepes, and "pastizzi" a local pastry filled with cheese or peas, as well as American style foods such as hot-dogs and hamburgers.

The meshing of two different cultures, Gozitan and western, has been a new occurrence in Gozo, as well as Malta as a whole. Edwin, a retired teacher, remembers when the bread sellers would walk around the festa and fresh pastizzi was

easily available. He stated "Now during festa, pastizzi isn't fresh...its frozen from days before and cooked during festa." Now it is more likely to see people eating hamburgers and drinking import beers. The Gozitan nougat however has remained and is still a popular snack during festa.

The main area of the celebration was set up at the town square in front of the parish church. Within this lay the many firework structures and a stage for the band club. Gradually, as the night progressed, more and more people trickled into the square to mingle, drink, and renew old acquaintances. The festa is not only a religious festival but on another level, it is a way of bringing the community and the church together. In addition to being a recreational event, the festa brings people together to eat and drink and celebrate and this creates a community bond. People can renew acquaintances and give opportunities for reconciliation. In addition it is a feast that encourages the celebration of the church and togetherness with the family. That being said, the festa is not without humor. While interviewing Edwin at a pasttizi shop, he told a humorous story about a man that was so farsighted that he could not see the statue in order to support it and had to be led to the statue.

The festa also strengthens the churches position. The church is central to organization and fulfillment of a successful festa and it would not be possible without the church.

People often will ask for something from the statue of the saint during festa, be that the wellbeing of a sick relative or a person has fallen on hard times. At the same time, people who had their wish granted last year often present the statue with gifts of gold or jewelry, which often decorates the statue during its march through the streets. In this way, the festa is a way to absolve person's sins or ask an offering from the patron saint. It is a celebration that brings people closer to the church and the church closer to the people.

The festa is socially important as well, in that it is often an opportunity for courtship among teenagers. It is a safe, public place where young adults and teenagers can socialize within sight of parents or guardians. Henry, a local wine bar owner, said that although he doesn't go to festa anymore, he used to as a teenager to find a woman. He stated "men and women used to always go to the festa to meet but nowadays people just go there to drink."

While observing the Qala festa it was rare to go two minutes without seeing a group of young people walking around the square. Also families were often seen walking together and talking with other families. The most impacting sight how-

ever were the elderly men and women, who had seen it all before, sitting on their stoops and just enjoying each others company while watching something they had spent their lives watching.

As night fell, the church and surrounding streets were lit with brightly colored lights and the aerial fireworks started to get bigger and brighter. During this period, mass is held inside the parish church and all are welcome to worship. Outside the church food and drink are plentiful and people often amuse themselves simply by walking around the square and talking. The Qala festa soon began the ground fireworks but I had a unique experience that took place during the festa at San Lawrence. At around 11pm, a somber procession began making its way to the town square. Priests in red and white robes began the procession, carrying large crosses and staffs. Following them were men in black robes and men and women in street clothes carrying flaming torches. Accompanied by an unseen brass band they made their way around the square until they reached the stairs of the church. The priest and his retinue gathered on the church steps with the townspeople watching from the square as a priest began a sermon, projected through the crowd with the help of a loudspeaker. After several minutes, the priest led the group into the church for prayer and the celebration continued. This procession was a vivid reminder that although the feast is a festival for the people, its central purpose is the worship and celebration of the towns' patron saint.

Starting at 1am, the ground fireworks began to be lit. As the fireworks are erected in and around the town square, most people crowded to the sides of the street in order to stay safely away. The fireworks are extremely bright and are an amazing sight with changing colors and shapes. After each firework has gone out, the people attempt to move into a better position to see the next firework, all the while trying not to breath the noxious smoke from the previous one.

In Qala, the festa concluded with a huge row of 6 poles with three pinwheels on each pole. During this climax, Gozitans, usually young men, began to dance and shout underneath the structures themselves. Often they would grab a still lit firework that had come off the structure and run and dance around with the lit explosives in their hands. This behavior was hard to believe at first but while in San Lawrence I had a similar, albeit unintentional experience. At the San Lawrence festa the fireworks were erected down the main street. As the fireworks were lit one after another, the people would walk past the old fireworks to get to the lit ones. Just as the last fireworks on

street were lit or so we thought, the biggest structure was saved for last. These fireworks happened to be directly behind the group I was in and when they were lit it was between five and ten feet away. It was quite an experience to hear how loud they were and the light was blinding. The smoke was choking and we had to cover our mouths with our clothing. It was gratifying to be immersed in an activity that Gozitans put so much importance to.

As previously stated, festa is also an opportunity for the community to show their talents and products. During the eve of the festa in Victoria, the capital of Gozo, there were agricultural shows that displayed farmers' turkeys, chickens and other prize animals. In addition there were craft shows that sold farm equipment, lace, textiles, and many other crafts.

The most anticipated entertainment of the day however, was the horse racing. Thousands of people lined the Triq ir-Repubblika, the main street of Victoria. Riders are perched on small, two wheeled chariots harnessed directly behind the horse. The race would start at the end of the road and end at the top of a long hill where the town square lay. In order to watch the whole race, people would gather in the middle of the street and look down on the riders. Because the horses ran straight through this road, people often had to run to the sides of the street to avoid being trampled by the horses. There would be a race around once every twenty minutes and would continue for several hours. In addition to simple entertainment these practices enable Gozitans to show community pride and display their wares for everyone to see.

Changes

The festa has been a staple of Gozitan religion for many years. Recently however, tourism is becoming a large part of the economy. Quiet seaside towns like Mgarr and Xlendi have become tourist centers, with resort hotels and restaurants becoming more and more prevalent. Fishermen used to be seen on these beaches fixing nets or unloading their catch, now there are boat tours and scuba diving lessons. This is even more evident in Victoria, which has recently opened the Arcadia mall, which features a modern department store and a McDonalds. This is not to say that Gozo is overrun with tourists. The tourist season is relatively short, June to August and Gozo has not become the tourist hotspot similar to Malta. While this may be a boom to the economy and may bring about many jobs and opportunities, could this and other changes have an effect on the festa?

It is not difficult to see the effect that tourists and outside influences have had on the festa. As stated above, it is common to see hamburgers and hotdogs being sold right next to traditional nougat and pastizzi. This is not just for the temporary food vendors. Inside the town square in San Lawrenze I met a man who ran an Italian restaurant and was preparing for the upcoming festa.

In both Qala and Victoria there were Chinese restaurants selling their wares on the street. The Gozitans seemed to expect an influx of tourism during festa as well. During the week of festa in Victoria, the square around the main bus station was inundated with street vendors selling t-shirts, lace, and jewelry. Farmhouses have also been converted to cater to tourists with "all the necessary comforts (Gozo, 30)." At all of the festas observed it was a common sight to see vendors selling toys that seemed to be modeled after American "G. I. Joe" and "Barbi". One of the most surprising experiences for me was in San Lawrenze. As I was watching the ground fireworks someone was playing music from a house. It took me a few minutes to recognize it but I soon realized that "Chariots of Fire" was accompanying the explosions and lights.

While based on the visual evidence it may seem that tourism and other factors have had an effect on the festa I often received conflicting opinions from Gozitans. Edwin, felt that, to a point, it has been a good thing and in the past people did not have money for the festa but now with Maltese tourists and tourists from abroad coming to see the festa there is more money to pay for the festa. On the other hand he lamented the loss of fresh pastizzi and traditional food. He also felt that Gozitans were losing their identity and stated "people used to dress like Gozitans, not like foreigners." Whether or not this is true it is a telling statement about the feelings of some Gozitans.

Henry, the wine bar owner, was also concerned about the younger generation. He worried that younger people drank too much at the festa and that many took shots in a short period of time instead of drinking beer or wine. Saviour, a teacher, took a very different view of the subject. He did not think that the festa has changed to cater to tourists but is more a cultural learning opportunity for foreigners. His thoughts were that "festa is a complete cultural program for tourists...the government publicizes it overseas and people come from all over the world. His opinion was that the festa was an opportunity for tourists to learn about Gozitan culture, a place to learn and interact with the culture.

The festa may have a detrimental aspect to it. In Steven Velas' documentary "In Our Blood," he interviews a man who is setting up the decorations for the upcoming festa. All of the men setting up are volunteers and still hold regular jobs.

This man however, stated that once it is time to prepare the decorations, he drops his tools and leaves his job for the day (Vella). During the time of festa, the loyalty to the festa could have a detrimental aspect on people's jobs or social interactions. As this is only one example and I was unable to find corroborating evidence, this question is unsubstantiated.

The question of change is still unanswerable at the moment. I did not have enough time to go as far as I would have liked with the question. I also found it difficult to find out sufficient information from interviews. Many people when asked would just say that the festa has not been changed at all from tourists and would not talk about the subject anymore or respond to further questions. Whether or not change has occurred, the festa remains an incredible cultural experience.

Further study

There are many opportunities for further study about the Gozitan festa. As my time was limited, I was unable to explore the festa as fully as much as I would have liked. The question of whether or not tourism has affected the festa has largely been unanswered. There are also openings to study the "inner festa", a subject that I was largely unable to research. The festas of Malta and Gozo are such a rich cultural tradition and experience and there is a wealth of information that has still been unresearched.

Conclusion

The festa is a central aspect of Gozitan life. Although it only happens once a year, it remains a pivotal period in which the community comes together to celebrate. Preparations, although concentrated most the week before, often begin as soon as the previous festa is over, as is the case with Anton, who hand makes confetti all year. It is a visual representation of the power and leadership of the church as well as being a time for worship. An integral part of the festa and the whole reason behind it is the worship and celebration of the village's patron saint. The festa continues to be a time for worship and a time to spend with the family.

In addition the festa is an opportunity for community bonding and interaction between the sexes. The festa is a place to see old friends and make new ones. It is a place for celebration and merrymaking as well. The exterior celebration has the feel of an American fairs in that there is food, drink, and fireworks. It is place where normally reserved people can relax and have fun. The festa is a time

for the community to work together to show the pride they have in their church and town, which in turn, brings the community and church closer together.

Although change has occurred rapidly in the last few years, the Gozitans are continuing to keep their traditions and rituals that are meaningful to them. While the festa may have adapted to this change, the value and meaning of the festa remains.

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