

Tixxowja and its motivations: ‘Showing off’ amongst male Gozitan adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The ritualistic performance of Gozitan Tixxowja is “staged to achieve an end, so there is always something at stake in performances.”¹ With ethnography concentrating on young males in Gozo, this paper will explore various kinds of showing off, and discover what it is that they are willing to risk, and for whom or what they are showing off, or performing.

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Introduction

Upon arrival in Gozo, time was spent exploring the small village of Xlendi and recovering from the journey on the rocks surrounding the bay. It was here that I clambered over a rock and into my fieldwork: the local adolescent males and their Tixxowja – ‘showing off’ in their play, particularly by (and in!) the water on the rocks.

The majority of my fieldwork took place around a small pier used as a diving platform, which some middle aged British tourists told me had been there “forever”. Having visited every year since they were children, they remember watching both locals and tourists enjoying their summer days jumping and diving from the pier into the shimmering, turquoise waters. With two benches and a raised walkway behind the platform, it provided an ideal ‘observation’ space for me and my fellow onlookers.



Figure 1: Pier used as a diving platform.

The kind of Tixxowja in Xlendi Bay is specific to its unique location, stemming from the surroundings the Gozitan youths are presented with. The accessibility of the steep cliffs via the walkway means the area is an ideal playground for Gozitans and tourists to show off in their play. However, along with the opportunity for fun and excitement come dangers and annoyances in abundance: jellyfish stings, jagged rocks, sunburn, dehydration, risk of drowning etc. The local youth have overcome these problems through experience guided by older generations, but the risks are still present, and a misjudged step or dive, or careless play fighting could end up in tears. Nevertheless, they continue to use this location as a perfect vehicle for physically showing off their bodies, their styles, and their athletic abilities, generating levels of status in society, and separating themselves from the tourists.

Due to the small size of Gozo, local boys from all over the island come to play in Xlendi Bay with family members or friends, as it is arguably the best spot on the island for jumping and diving into the deep, warm water from the rocks and nearby cliffs. As one of my informants said, "I like Xlendi the best because there is no sand, so you don't get covered in it when you come out of the water – that's so annoying!"

It was these playful seaside activities that caught my attention – honestly, it looked like fun – but as I began to understand the teenagers, a desire arose in me to present them as they really are; to defend or at least rationally explain their often boisterous behaviour to older generations who seem to have lost all patience with the 'youth of today': "If he splashes me one more time I'm going to push him in!" an elderly Italian man exclaimed to me in English, clearly having forgotten his youth, as a few of the boys I would soon come to know hurled water in all directions, as they raced by to perform summersaults into the ocean. Thus, an uplifting, yet minor aim of the ethnography in this paper is to reawaken memories in others so they can empathise with the position the teenagers are in due to their age.

Methodology

At the beginning of the fieldwork, it was a matter of going on a hunt for any information to inspire and finalise my otherwise broad research ideas. I found this more difficult than I had naïvely thought, trying, and often failing, to summon the courage to talk to people to generate potential informants. Thus the first few days were frustrating and unsettling. I had also thought that I could focus on Gozitan children, but I found them difficult to speak to, perhaps due to their limited English and/or the intimidation of me as an older tourist.

When I had found a direction for my fieldwork though, it became a lot easier to talk to people with my exploding catalyst of questions. Nevertheless, it was impossible not to be reflexive on my position as a 'young blonde female tourist' – in their eyes – and I had to remain aware of the possible biases I could receive from the young males, perhaps incorporating me into their tixxowja. However, on occasion, that role did make it easy for me to meet and befriend my target group of informants.

Section One: Diving

I met my youngest informant, Jacob, 13, a few days into fieldwork, after managing to develop a light hearted friendship with his sister and her friends. The first piece of information they offered was that there were no jellyfish today – perhaps this was an attempt at enlightening the oblivious tourist or simply rejoicing the fact they could swim without fear, as the summer had been heaving with jellyfish. I enthusiastically encouraged them to jump in with me, and, taking their hands in mine, I hoped enough trust would be established for them to be relaxed about my company. To provoke some conversation on my newfound research topic, I commented on how Jacob was a "xow-off" – show off – for repeatedly performing his new tricks from the pier: diving after a run up, diving while clapping under each leg before hitting the water, bombing to create the biggest splash possible, "air-pumping" (jumping and re-enacting the sexual move of thrusting his hips forward and pulling his arms back), and diving before swimming underwater as far as he could to the buoys about 15ms away. The girls giggled and, nodding their heads at lightning-speed, agreed that he was definitely a show off.

"I'm trying to beat my record!" Jacob told me enthusiastically.

"What's your record?" I enquired.

"Just past those buoys behind the rope." He pointed to make sure I knew how far away it was.

"But how do you know how far you've gone when you're under the water?" I asked curiously.

"You don't. You just keep swimming until you have run out of air."

He kept trying to beat his personal record for the next hour, tapping me on the arm to alert me to his next attempt. When he'd fail, he'd get out of the water and compose himself saying he'd try again in five minutes "when I have more breath."

Like a child in need of almost constant attention he'd say my name and explain what he was going to do next, and



Figure 3: Nathan taking a run-up to the edge of the pier.

after he'd performed it, I felt obliged to encouragingly compliment his attempt, like a mother. The two girls sat in silence being entertained by him with their eyes transfixed. "Jenny, I'm going to try my new trick. Last time it didn't work, but I'll try it again. It's called...strip air to clap." He took great pride in telling me he'd invented the 'airstrip' move which consists of grabbing one leg with the opposite arm in mid-air. He demonstrated to us, before casting himself over the edge of the pier to show the girls and myself the new move in action.

With a gentle, breaking voice and thin frame, his speech is often harsh and crude which seem unsuitable for his exterior. The names of his other new moves for example are 'air fuck' and 'air pump', which he would repeat over and over again, as if emphasising the fact he is growing up and now has knowledge of such adult terminology. "I'm gonna do an airstrip and piss!" he told me, to which I frowned, again like a mother, saying it would be disgusting. Still, he went ahead to carry out the move anyway, saying afterwards, "Oh! I forgot to piss; I'll have to do it again!"

His age is clearly reflected in this harmless but attention-seeking behaviour: He is on the brink of leaving childhood and entering adolescence, the transition therefore causing him to go through huge psychological, pubertal and social changes. His showing off is to impress an older person i.e. me in this context, is in order to gain compliments which will increase his vulnerable and unstable confidence and security at this time. When he is around the older boys, he doesn't perform his tricks, but watches them closely, sitting quietly, nervously biting his lips, as if out of his comfort zone and concentrating on learning new moves. Whereas when he is with company he is used to i.e. his younger sister and her friends, he is more comfortable, being less vulnerable to judgement and intimidation from them as he practices his moves.

I asked Jacob whether he had seen the guy who dives in head first with his arms by his side, and his eyes brightened as he said, "Yeah! That guy taught me to dive!" Apparently the aforementioned 'guy' is distinguished in their social circle by his diving skills! A few minutes later, the very boy we talked of dived off a small fishing boat which had stopped in front of the platform and climbed up the steps to greet to the teenagers coolly. Jacob watched his every move, in obvious awe of his dive teacher. I was introduced to him and we exchanged formalities, both of us unaware that he would become my main informant over the next few days. He was articulate yet nonchalant, and with shoulders swung back, a perfect posture and a confident swagger, it was no wonder the younger crowd respected him.

We then watched his dive, the moment Jacob and I had been waiting for. Jacob nudged me to alert my attention,

as if it would be the most impressive dive of all. It was. Nathan looked from side to side, admiring his audience, then sprang from the platform like an antelope, and floated through the air before the water engulfed him with hardly a ripple. It was effortless. I asked Jacob how Nathan had become such a good diver to which I received the simple response: "Practice!"

Over the next few days, I spent a lot of time talking with Nathan, 17. He told me that he comes to Xlendi every day from his home village in Munxar to hang out with his friends, swim or go fishing, before working in the evening in a restaurant just behind the walkway. Having just left school a few weeks earlier, he was waiting for his exam results which would determine whether he could go to the University of Malta after summer. When his results arrived he informed me with great pride that he'd passed everything and could now relax knowing he would go to University to study pharmacy.

He was shockingly confident – his relaxed nature apparent. He would swagger up to me coolly, but couldn't hide a sheepish grin as if he was glad to see me (and my merry band of fellow tourist girl friends often with me). When we were in conversation, his eyes would flit all around him, remaining aware of who was around him; who could be watching him and his company. But underneath all this confident, cocky behaviour, could he silently be nervous and insecure? My guess, from having a brother and two step-brothers and knowing of their insecurities as teenagers, is yes.

His opening line every time we talked was "Everything ok?" as if he was his country's representative, checking we, the tourists, were having the best of times in his beloved country. With his hands on his hips, broadening his chest, he further demonstrated his external confidence, giving himself a superior look and an air of authority and responsibility. Yet, like Jacob, he made sure I watched him when he did his impressive dives by glancing in my direction a few times before he ran up to the pier, evoking only the idea that he was showing off.

The tixxowja discussed here is controlled by a set of social relationships or statuses created by respect for the ability to carry out the dives and 'moves' from the pier, in a successful and impressive manner. Thus, this activity has become a social skill amongst the young Gozitan males. Put simply, the better diver you are, the more respect you are given, and despite your personality you are feared by the young and admired by your peers.

These performances for the male teenagers are "inherently risky." As Leo Howe points out in his article about performative space, "most rituals are staged to achieve an end, so there is always something at stake in



Figure 3: Nathan performing a trick in front of a large audience of tourists.



Figure 4: Nathan mid-air being observed by tourists.

performances.” (Howe 2000: 67) There are a few aims that the boy pursues when he performs a dive, which I argue are innate to the boy’s biology, and will be further discussed later, but primarily the reputation of the teenager is risked here. This is why rehearsal, as in any performance is key to a successful show, so that when the moment arrives along with a group of peers/tourists, the dive will be perfect and the experience for them, momentary but unforgettable: “Performances are ephemeral. They create their effects and then are gone – leaving their reverberations (fresh insights, reconstituted selves, new statuses, altered realities) behind them.” (Schieffelin 1998:198-9)

Furthermore, there is always a pressure on the boy to improve upon a ‘move’ that has been performed before, making it even bigger and better, otherwise it will be viewed as similar to what somebody else did. There is a pressure to be unique, and creative. “Any especially memorable performance (successful or otherwise) may become a bench-mark, not only for evaluating subsequent ones, but also for influencing how they are actually conducted... Performances, however improvised they may appear, are never isolated activities; they are always in relation to or against previous performances which act as remembered precedents.” (Howe 2000:67) Nathan had fulfilled this goal by improving upon a simple dive: He would run to the edge of the pier, building up speed to enable the distance he would travel through the air to be increased. Then he would move through the air like a bullet, arms tightly by his side, before either hitting the water with his head first, or quickly pulling his arms from his side and punching the water with his fists. Although there was less elegance in his version that a normal dive, he would show the audience his strong physique as he tensed his muscles, and his fearlessness over the power of the ocean.

We can then consider a first cliff jump, or indeed, a first jump from the pier as a social process; a rite of passage. First outlined by French ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep, a rite of passage is “a theory for interpreting changes of status in human society”. (Van Gennep 1994: 3) Van Gennep believed that within each society, were “several distinctly different social groupings. ...All these groups break down into still smaller societies or subgroups.” (Van Gennep 1960:1) He argued that “the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another... Progression from one group to the next is accompanied by special acts.” (Van Gennep 1977: 3) Most obviously the progression is tied to universal social traditions such as becoming an adult, marriage, child-birth, and death. They are often accompanied by people gathering to celebrate, and partaking in the phenomena of gift-giving as an obligatory act.

In relation to my research therefore, a cliff or pier jump moves a person spatially connected with a transformation of status. Van Gennep’s concept of ‘liminality’ could be considered as the mid-stage of a jump, when your body has left the platform, and in effect, has been separated from the person you used to be; the role you fulfilled and the status you kept. This is the transitional phase, which often incorporates what Van Gennep called ‘threshold’ rites, as in a betrothal before marriage. Although here however the transitional period is literally a few seconds long, before the jump has been completed and the person enters the postliminal stage. In this stage, the way the young person is viewed by others changes, thus changing his status in society. On completion of a successful jump or dive, he is reintegrated into society with an added skill, which often increases the confidence of the individual, especially at the delicately insecure time of puberty. The ‘special act’ Van Gennep discusses, accompanying the progression, within my research would be the audience’s approval (as in a performance) after a dive has been performed, whether it is a round of applause or a compliment.

I would like to suggest that within tixxowja there is a social hierarchy dependant on age, and the flexibility and strength that comes with it. As age increases thus does experience, which builds up your status as a more skilled diver, however when the prime age has peaked in a male physically, so does his status as an athlete and the respect which accompanies it.

This was true of the thirty to forty-something males who were beginning to lose their toned bodies, and full head of hair. While they were a social group, like the teenagers, they had succumbed to the fact that their bodies were now unable to move in the same way as the younger males. The group of older males however had a very obvious leader: George. Almost every day for three weeks I saw him strut up and down the walkway, parading like a model on a catwalk, flexing his arm muscles as his hands clenched, and keeping a perfectly straight posture in order to soar above everyone else.

What was most peculiar about him however was the fact that every day he wore black jeans, and only black jeans to walk and swim in. The tourist ladies were every bit as confused as me about the swimming in jeans part, so I asked the boys. Most didn’t know and hadn’t questioned it before as they were so used to it, but when I asked Jacob, he said he couldn’t tell me. A few seconds later he did tell me but thought it was a secret: “His legs are covered in tattoos – maybe he doesn’t want people to see them”. I was puzzled by this until two days later when George turned up at the bay, wearing shorts, and he did not have any tattoos. Jacob wasn’t there that day.



Figure 5: Pre-liminal stage of a jump.



Figure 6: The liminal stage.

Despite his strong, authoritative appearance, the younger teenagers aren't threatened by this exterior, seeing him as "old" carrying the universally understood connotations of being less than you used to be, i.e. less agile, strong, fertile. George is still trying to evoke this exterior of a strong man who can protect a partner in order to, as some tourist women told me, "be young again and impress the ladies". His dive is perfect and effortless, and he maintains an unquenchable thirst to hunt for jellyfish in the most infested of jellyfish waters, continuing this show of masculinity which could be called a mating ritual.

The leaders of the hierarchy are the twentysomethings who, although they don't know it, are respected by everyone due to being in their prime, and having the world at their feet. Giuseppe and Joseph, both in their early twenties, showed behaviour that was playful and content, and had clear, focussed ideas of what they wanted from their life. Their lack of tixowja implies they have already reached the peak of respect and status as a good diver, and hence, a good 'man', and do not need to continue attempting to impress their peers. They are confident in themselves and it shows through their unobtrusive, low-key play. At this age and level in the diving hierarchy, they become judges of the younger teenagers admitting each teenager onto the next level of status, essentially by befriending them and allowing them to 'hang out' with themselves. They have set a standard which the teenagers must surpass if they are to impress their judges and succeed to the next level of status. Leo Howe, when writing on performance, continued this discussion by arguing that while, "It has often been pointed out that rituals are unique because they are situated in particular places and times... Any especially memorable performance (successful or otherwise) may become a bench-mark, not only for evaluating subsequent ones, but also for influencing how they are actually conducted... Performances, however improvised they may appear, are never isolated activities; they are always in relation to or against previous performances which act as remembered precedents." (Howe 2000: 67)

The youngest teenagers of the group who have to rise to the challenge over overcoming 'remembered precedent's, are controlled by their older friends. I once observed Nathan shouting at Brendan for chewing the edge of his towel, and Brendan immediately obeyed his instruction, giving Nathan the authority of a father figure. Another instance of this control was when Paul, 15, was running around after a cigarette the older boys were passing around begging for a drag. The older boys would only push him away, enjoying their authoritative position and the benefits that come with their age. Nathan, a smoker himself, told me that Paul, "doesn't smoke now so he shouldn't start!" The older males

are fostering the next generation of 'men' in the way they think they should behave.

This includes mentoring them on their diving and cliff-jumping skills. On one occasion, Brendan and some of his friends were jumping from the cliffs across the bay while the older boys focussed intently, commenting on the skill of the younger boys and reminiscing of times when they impressed their voyeurs; essentially 'becoming a man'.

At the lowest end of the hierarchical scale are the tourists, with a lack of knowledge about the local area, language and culture, we are comparable to babies in terms of this social skill the Gozitans have developed.

Section Three: Saving the Day

At some point in every day over the summer there was a loud cry of "JELLYFISH!" Like wildfire a few younger teenagers would spread the word by shouting to their peers further along the walkway. Immediately, all of the locals in the vicinity would get out of the water, followed soon after by the tourists when they realised the impending danger. The people standing around the pier would gather on its edge to get a better look at where the jellyfish were, and soon wave their arms madly pointing out the glistening purple tops.

The most memorable occasion was when a younger boy of about 10 years old gave himself the role of saviour and clambered down the steps into the sea, acting totally fearless as he dipped into the water to catch the jellyfish in a cup he'd picked up from the walkway. He was thoroughly enjoying the attention from the older crowd watching from the pier, including myself, and as the other teenagers above would shout, "Right! Left! No, it's beneath you!" to guide him, he continued the show by letting out a fake scream and pretending to cry hysterically, his face pulled taut in pretend terror, mocking the state other people get into when they've been stung. This cocky display of confidence, amusingly making a mockery of the potentially dangerous jellyfish, caused the crowd of onlookers (again, myself included!) to cackle wildly at his performance! Within a couple of minutes though he cupped the evil jellyfish and flung it onto the rocks nearby for it to dry up in the hot sun. It slithered around and nearly slipped back into the ocean, but the young boy stopped it with his cup, almost slicing it in half and slid it back onto its perch.

This scene was clearly an imitation of many others like it, usually with an older lad playing the principal role of saviour. In Figure 11, we can see just this, as Nathan attempted to catch the jellyfish in a net using a mask to see where they were. Although I witnessed another instance, when such aids were unavailable to him but he continued



Figure 7: Nathan physique being copied by a younger teenager.

to catch a jellyfish by putting his hand over the harmless surface, and tossing it onto the rocks above, where it landed on a vacant towel!

While young girls, mainly tourists or sisters of the boys, frequently come to the pier to watch and join in, it is expected that the males hunt the jellyfish, and they revel in the glory that comes with catching them. These predominantly male activities – fishing and hunting – are being carried out in this modern context, in a display of strength and fearlessness; an instinctual practice to provide protection for peers and especially women.

Section Four: The ‘Alpha Male’, and ‘Boys will be boys’

The Lonely Planet guide book to Malta and Gozo mentions that “Paceville – the nightclub zone at St Julian’s – is hectic and sometimes testosterone-fuelled”. This biological aspect of males has connotations of violent, macho and boisterous behaviour, and implies that their biology is the reason for this trouble. However, the guide book seems to contradict itself in recent editions stating that, “Young males have adopted the Mediterranean macho style, but they are not usually aggressive” (Wilson 2000: 44; Bain 2004: 173; Bain 2007: 179) and having been in their company for three weeks, I accept this to be the case. Karl Bednarik, who wrote social criticism in the 20th century, argued that aggressive behaviour on the part of the male is instinctual, yet the website www.gender.org.uk (accessed 20/11/09) states that linking testosterone with aggression and violence is a misunderstood stereotype. While behaviour of this kind was observed during my fieldwork, such as play-fighting, pushing and rowdy competitions, the same boys often communicated with each other in a calm, mature way. Male hormones are said to ‘activate’ aggressive behaviour in particular circumstances, but this does not mean that they cause it.

Nonetheless, I do concur with Bednarik who, when writing upon the decline of male power in modern society, argued that “fewer and fewer men can be really dominant in the present setting, while yet being to a considerable extent “programmed” for this (or at least for fight-or-flight) not only by biology but by ideologies and stereotypes operative in Society as well.” (Wilson 1989: 175) While I believe this to be true, in a society that is currently learning to give equality to the genders, the Gozitan boys I have studied have proved that there are other situations in which they can be a ‘dominant male’, and where their biology – their testosterone – mixed with their instincts as males to gain a mate and have a family which they can protect and provide for, can blend with their location-specific culture to show

a unique performance space with meaning and motivation attached to it.

Competitive social aspects of young male culture, such as ‘boy-racing’ (young males driving really fast in competition with another in an unsafe manner) and alcohol or drug consumption, may be universal amongst males, (and not to stereotype – amongst females too) but for the part of this research, they offer the perfect environment for ‘activating testosterone’ in Gozitan males, and trigger the innate competitive characteristic of wanting to become the ‘alpha male’ – similar to the ‘Big Man’ system in Marshall Sahlins’ work in Melanesia and Polynesia outlined in his *Stone Age Economics* of 1974.

My oldest informant Manuel, 22, who I met recently at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, comes from Victoria in Gozo, but has spent time in Xlendi and understands the behaviour I was studying, and due to his age he has the beauty of hindsight as well as being able to appreciate an adult perspective. Manuel provided me with the following in response to my observations, demonstrating how society nurtures each gender into a socially accepted being:

“People will show off what they have; the teenage guys usually don’t have an expensive car, money or a successful career which they can show off. So they show off by doing dangerous tricks, drugs etc. In other words they put up the traditional ‘macho’ image. When they get older, they realise they have better things which they can show off – a sports car, expensive clothes – which shows they are well off, or else they’ll talk a lot about themselves, bragging about their careers, their connections etc...”

Having looked a little into the psychology of ‘dating’, and ‘match-making’, advice is always given that a man must “have the ability to take care of themselves...If he looks like he takes care of himself they [women] will think that he has the ability to take care of them.” (SOURCE?) This requirement women have, says the website, is quite simply a need for support for when you want to raise a family. A well-groomed man with a stable career and high salary has more chance of offering this stability to a woman and her potential offspring.

Section Five: Western Influences

“There is something of a macho, devil-may-care culture among young male drivers...” (Malta and Gozo, Lonely Planet 2004:165)

As discussed, the benefits that age allows can increase your status within a society. The legal driving age in Malta is 18, as is the legal drinking age, although the latter is



Figure 8: Joel catching a Jellyfish; After I sent it to him by email he said, "Damn I look good in this pic!"



Figure 9: Jellyfish.



Figure 10: Paddling to Malta.

very relaxed. Samuel, 19, has his own car, and works as a mechanic in Ghasri. He really enjoys his job, telling me "Cars are my passion". His fingernails are lined with sticky, black oil and he has small speckled scars on his forearms from splatters of red hot metal when welding.

He invited me to the last night of Victoria's festa; "My festa" said Samuel, and I accepted in an attempt to experience it through a local's eyes. He was fifteen minutes late when he arrived in Xlendi to collect me. I could hear the roar of the engine from a few streets away, along with the thudding beats of techno music making the whole car vibrate. A friend who he went to high school with was in the car too but didn't introduce himself to me or speak to me at all for the entire evening. Instead, they talked in Maltese to each other most of the time; Samuel only stopping to translate when something was funny or I looked confused.

Before we left Xlendi, Samuel made sure his friend had his seat-belt on, but didn't check that I did. Then he revved the engine loudly and zoomed up one of the many steep hills in Xlendi – its hazardous nature marked by a black spot on a sign at the side of the road. He raced through empty villages but never went over the speed limit. Before we left Victoria at the end of the night, he checked under the bonnet and made sure the lights were working, indicating his pride in owning a car. Wanting to take care of his car dulls the desire to show off and instead showed his appreciation for the value of it, and the money he earned to buy it.

His friend, by this point had left us in Victoria, and on the way back to Xlendi, Samuel drove more carefully, cautiously checking around tight corners and always stopping at stop signs. "I don't drive fast when I'm with other people" he told me, except perhaps his best friend!

The enormous amount of tourists to the island annually – 1.16 million – (Lonely Planet 2007: 18) has also increased communication links to the small archipelago, and consequently increased travel aspirations within the younger generations. All of the boys I had spoken to, from the 13 year old Jacob to the 22 year old Giuseppe, had big dreams of travelling, to experience what they perceived as a "better" lifestyle with more job opportunities and a "better wage". In Jacob's case, he had told me that one day he will go to California "because it looks cool and is the best place for skateboarding". He continued to justify this longing to move by telling me about all the great skate parks in California, drifting into a dream as he imagined how much 'better' it would be than Gozo's one skate park. As a very young teenager, he has no concept of how he would raise the money for this fantastical trip, with the mindset that school is unimportant, with his poor grades reflecting his attitude that "I don't need school to become a skate-boarder!"

Whereas Nathan at seventeen years old, is aware of the cost of living, working hard to raise money for his priorities: a University education and a car for when he turns eighteen. He has plans to return to Australia where he and his parents were born, and having dual nationality with Malta, he feels it should be easy having travelled there a few times before. Australia is attractive to him again because of the better pay and more career opportunities he would have there. Hence, travel has become a large part of the Gozitan males' aspirations for the future, and while not apparent in their every day tixxowja, it is linked to the more innate desires to mate, as travel, in the boys' opinions, would result in a good job and wage, and therefore help to provide a stable environment for themselves and a family.

Nevertheless, there is always an exception: Joseph, a twenty year-old told me that, "For me, Gozo is best" and travelling abroad to other countries simply doesn't appeal to him. Manuel, while abroad in Scotland, also told me of the importance of home: "I love Malta...there you have a strong sense of identity which is lost in here [Glasgow]; everybody knows you and everywhere you go you'll find someone you know to have a chat with. However, everything is limited in there, especially career opportunities."

Manuel has fulfilled this dream of travel and furthering his career opportunities, having travelled to Scotland to complete a Masters degree in Nutrition at the University of Glasgow: "I don't have any fixed future plans; I'm on the pursuit of happiness I guess, just trying to find out what and where makes me happy! I'm enjoying Glasgow and the whole experience because I know it will broaden my horizons and your whole way of thinking changes."

Section Six: Playing with the 'West'

In this section I would like to explore how tourism has made an impact on the local tixxowja. The local fashion and popular music scene has become westernized, the annual influx of tourists in Xlendi has influenced the play on the rocks, and altered the types of things locals can do in Gozo. For example, hanging out in the waterfront bars and cafes may not have been a regular pastime in Xlendi before it became a popular tourist destination.

During the summer months the tixxowja at the pier is spurred on by tourism, becoming a performance when tourists are around. If it weren't for the tourists, there would be fewer people to try to impress, leaving only your peer group consisting of mainly males. Spying on tourist girls and trying to chat to them has become a desirable hobby for the young boys, as their time limited holiday provides a 'no-strings-attached' potential relationship, letting the boys practice their chatting up technique time



Figure 11: Physical skills being shown off.



Figure 12: The Rubik's Cube craze.

and time again with different girls – and not getting in trouble for it! In these circumstances, around young female tourists, the tixxowja has a sexual lure attached to it, whereby the locals are trying to impress the girls enough in order to gain a potentially sexual relationship, with little pressure of commitment. In such situations, the tixxowja often incorporates the tourists, as seen when Nathan spontaneously leaped over a girl sitting at the end of the pier, causing her to get a fright but also for her to see and almost experience the full velocity and agility in his dive. Boisterous games such as whipping each other with wet towels were also acted out in front of a line of tourist girls giggling in approval. The boys were fully aware of their audience and so continued with a competitive drive to cause the other pain, and again show who is the most strong and quick thinking – the ‘alpha male’. Manuel again gave his perception on his kind of behaviour:

“I don't think that the jumping, diving, and doing tricks is only for the purpose of showing off. Its fun and we can do it just for the sake of it. Often me and my two close friends used to jump from some dangerous spots on the cliffs and we'd do it only for the adrenaline rush...there were no people around and we weren't trying to impress each other. But when you're in a large group, yes, doing dangerous tricks is a way of showing you have 'guts'. Obviously when girls are around, teenage guys will do the tricks/jumps to attract their attention to them, but it can be done just for the fun of it.”

Western toy crazes too also flood through the island, as tourists come and go. Over the past few summers, two German men in their late twenties have been visiting Xlendi for three weeks each summer, and as a consequence of hanging around near the cliffs, they have befriended the young Gozitans, and introduced the wonders of the Rubik's cube. Nathan made one of the guys, Dennis, solve the Rubik's cube in front of me so I could experience the amazement of watching him solve it within 9 seconds. It was impressive, especially when Nathan snatched it from him, told him to shut his eyes and muddled the cube up as best he could. After a minute or so, Dennis took the cube back, spun it around a few times memorizing the colour sequence, then a young boy put his hands over his eyes while he completed it without looking! Naturally the young boys were impressed and now Dennis has started a Rubik's cube craze. Both Jacob and Brendan had brought their own to the platform, practising in between dives. Brendan had one which was much bigger with smaller squares than your average 9 sided cube, and he showed it off to his peers with great pride. Jacob was also pleased

with himself having looked on the internet for the solution, and was in the middle of memorizing it. The boys were obviously in a great hurry to mimic his skills, and gain his respect and friendship by completing the puzzle. Dennis also impressed them by doing great bombas – bombs into the water – to which Jacob looked disappointed exclaiming, “I can't do that; I'm too skinny!” In return for these impressive, new skills, Brendan was teaching Dennis how to whistle through his teeth: “Keep practising” he said confidently to Dennis his student.

One afternoon, none of the boys were at the pier, and instead were a group of Maltese teenage tourists on holiday. The males of the group were plunging themselves into the water shouting the names of saints such as “Maria!” and “Valentina!” and soon after the girls followed, everyone trying to outsmart the other by thinking of saints names that hadn't already been said.

Out of the 18 young adults there was a clear leader of the group, who was the ultimate stereotypical show-off. He swaggered as he walked, and displayed a cheeky grin, checking if anybody was watching as he kicked a football around, with a cigarette in mouth and beer in hand. The rest of his companions were standing around watching the sea, as he leapt around them trying to get their attention. He had a large tattoo on his back of a fierce sun, piercings in his eyebrow and ears and he began to sing loudly in English lyrics from a popular Western song: “You're my future wifey” as he grinned mischievously at any girl watching him.

Before he took his turn at jumping from the pier, he would call a girl's name demanding that they watch him. He flopped from the pier like a dead man trying to provoke laughter, and thus increase his popularity. Judging from the lack of laughter nobody found him particularly amusing but they did watch him with a weary eye, as if they were all expected to respect him as the leader. A small, very shy German boy was sitting on the rocks further up the walkway watching them, wrapped up in a towel a safe distance away from their intimidating play.

Tourist shops selling bright coloured, plastic objects like buckets and spades have also become part of the tixxowja. Two of the older boys I met, Joseph, 22, and Giuseppe, 20, had invested in a blow-up lilo one day and looked as though they were attempting to paddle their way to Malta – against the current! They were working together, trying to paddle with their arms as fast as they could, but the current was too strong and the scene resolved in harmless play, as they splashed each other wildly, pushing the other off the lilo. It was an entertaining occurrence which led a fifteen-year old French tourist to paddle over on his own lilo to join in the hilarity. Within fifteen minutes, about twenty people were



Figure 13: Tattoo Artist's Business Card.

in the water, with three people to a lilo, everybody kicking and splashing and bashing into each other like dodgems.

This act, while clearly good fun for the participants, has elements of physical tixxowja within it. The two Gozitans began by attracting the attention of all tourists along the walkway with their laughter, strength and endeavour to paddle anywhere. Their inherent aim was fulfilled when the tourists and locals all came together in a big moment of play. A similar occurrence was when one of the boys brought a football to the walkway. The boys were all skilled in football, bouncing it to one another on their knees, feet and heads. Again, while their behaviour was playful, their goal (excuse the pun!) was to attract attention around them, in order to gain, in the long run, bonds with other people which would benefit themselves as individuals.

Joel, later confessed himself to be one of the best footballers on the island, as well as being a huge fan of snooker. He boasted his encounter with the famous snooker player John Hendry, as if the celebrity's popularity would somehow relay onto himself and impress his friends, and myself.

Another amusing scene I noticed, which not many other tourists did (except for the ones unluckily involved) was of three of the boys secretly lighting firecrackers behind their hands out of the wind, before launching them rather subtly at tourists lying on the rocks far away. The boys would silently but rapidly walk away trying hard to suppress their giggles as a yell would be heard from far away. I smiled at them in an attempt at winning them over for my own benefit so as not to have a firecracker thrown at me or any of my friends! This motive of my own action – the knowing smile – highlights the theory behind their play: that of increasing your chances of getting or developing bonds with others to increase your chances of being protected should you get into trouble. The more people you have 'on your side'; as your loyal friends, the more likely you are to be looked after and successfully go through life.

The play these Gozitans experience is also integral to learning the boundaries of their own culturally defined society: "Education...is an active process of learning and teaching by which individuals gradually acquire the full outfit of culturally defined and adapted behaviour." (Fortes 1938: 475) Play is an indirect kind of education: by observing others around them, i.e. family members or teachers, or in this case, the other Gozitans at the pier, (with such play requiring a certain physical ability and sharp sense of timing) the Gozitans are essentially being educated in the acceptable ways of life, which they then copy and reproduce in their play, applying their understanding to a pretend scenario.

Figure 12 illustrates two of the three fundamental stages in learning put into action. The first stage is the concept

of Mimesis, whereby the young boys have essentially mimicked the actions of the older tourist Dennis who showed off his ability to solve a Rubik's cube within 9 seconds. Having been impressed, the boys shown here have performed the second stage: Identification, including talking to Dennis about how he does it and trying to work it out for themselves, to work towards completion and hence a raise in the respect gained from others. The third stage is Co-operation, and comes into play when the young lads as shown are allowing themselves to be 'put on view' in front of others, vulnerably showing their skills and weaknesses in front of others, letting the boy in the top of the picture look on for his own knowledge and potential gain.

Section Six: Body Art

This section will concentrate on body art/modification. Having seen quite a lot of tattoos and piercings on the young males, I visited a tattoo parlour and body piercing studio in Victoria to investigate this further. The age limit for a tattoo without consent is 18, however with a parents consent you can get a tattoo as young as 16 years old. The owner and artist Charlie Azzopardi told me that he often sends away young people who say, "I want a tattoo but I don't know what" so they can think about it properly, as he doesn't want to be responsible for a young person's rash decision and potential dislike of their tattoo. Charlie laughed when I wondered if young people get tattoos to impress their friends: "Yes, one guy gets a tattoo to be cooler than the rest" he told me, thus confirming that this decorative symbol can raise status amongst his peers. He told me that the young guys often give him business by telling their friends about their tattoo and then the next day the other friends come in to get a tattoo.

Historically, the art of tattooing in Europe saw a decline with the spread of Christianity, except however for the Knights of St. John of Malta who sported tattoos to show their allegiance. Designed as a type of decorative body modification, tattoos have served as rites of passage, marks of status and rank, symbols of devotion or bravery, marks of fertility, pledges of love etc. Manuel told me that these days Gozitan males choose to get tattoos mainly to show off to their peers:

"It's a way of being a 'tough' guy. However, I'd point out that while the tattoos and piercings are quite common amongst Gozitan youngsters, if you were to sample the Gozitans who have a higher education (those at College or Uni), you'll find very, very few who have them. Maybe it's because when you know you're good at school and have a chance of having a good job, you don't feel the need to show off with the tattoos."

The types of tattoos young boys get vary depending on the crazes of the time. For example, a few years ago it was popular to get a barbed wire ring tattooed around your upper arm, and now they want large, bold tribal patterns. Charlie told me that the younger boys tend to go for something big as their first tattoo: "Pain is not so much of an issue with them; whereas the girls go for something smaller because it is not going to hurt as much." His tattoo 'flash' – folder of tattoo artwork in his studio – consisted mainly of brutal, intense images such as the one of his business card above. Tattoo artists such as Marty Holcomb and Shane Hart specialise in this type of image, showing personified dragons, evil-looking skeletons, or debasing designs of women which presumably appeal to the machismo of young males.

Charlie prices his tattoos per square inch not like other tattoo artists in Europe that price by time. Size and detail affect cost. He told me that jobs in Gozo don't pay very much and so usually people can't save for leisure activities; they just have enough to pay the bills and buy food. As a result of this, he wasn't sure if his business would be a success, but as the only tattoo artist in Gozo, and with fairly cheap prices, his business is doing really well, attracting a market of all ages.

Most of the teenagers I met in Xlendi had tattoos, and/or piercings, and like Charlie had said, they had come as soon as they turned 18. This birthday ritual is a rite of passage to becoming an official adult, as well as showing your bravery to enduring the pain. Samuel has a tattoo on his underarm of an orange and red fish with huge lips; a traditional fish sometimes known as the 'Mythical Dolphin' which is often used as the design for door knobs in Malta. "Some people say it's for luck, but I just like it" he said smiling. He had it done a year ago, when he turned 18, and it took four hours to complete. When I asked about the pain, he just shrugged and said "It hurt a little bit". He also has a spiral sun-shaped tattoo near his neck on his back, beneath his dyed blonde rattail haircut. He also has two ear-piercings with little black rings in with white spiral patterns on them, and he showed me the mark on his eyebrow where it used to be pierced.

Joel too, having recently turned 18, had got an unusual piercing on his lower stomach, which has a fluorescent green bar through it which stands out on his dark skin. Before I met him formally, I would see him playing with it a lot of the time, admiring it, clearly pleased with his new addition. Then when I met him, he took great pleasure in taking the pin out and sticking it back in only half way so it looked like he'd just stabbed himself, laughing at the disgusted look on my face!

Of course, the expense of Tixxowja can become overwhelming, in terms of expenditure and potential

physical expense: the cost of fashionable clothing, jewellery, piercings and tattoos in order to modify body image and present a certain persona, and the physical cost of showing off and potentially getting it wrong i.e. landing on the rocks, muscle cramp in the water, drowning etc. Jacob and Elena both showed me, with a hint of pride, their scars and recent grazes where they had slightly misjudged jumps from the jagged rocks. Nathan too showed me a scar from a jellyfish sting he got last week, and we compared ours, filling our stories with delicious detail of the horror of how we were stung: "It must have been big," Nathan assured me, "because I could feel it's tentacles graze all the way down my leg like barbed wire, and for a moment I thought my leg was paralysed!"

Apparently however the risk taking involved in these power-building and society-shaping activities are worth the risk of potentially limiting their future opportunities from accidents. The dream of becoming something better than you are soars high above any concerns of hurting oneself and restricting abilities.

Conclusion

Tixxowja in the Gozitan context is a vehicle for moving the male human closer towards future ambitions, both in the short and long term. These ambitions are moulded by biological aspects of the male and instinctual needs for the future i.e. gaining a mate and effectively reproducing – with the idea of travel and moving to a different country offering a more stable environment for this. The boys' ambitions are placed into this unique performance space and are influenced by cultural conventions of Gozo. The element of risk in practice and performance is worth the dream of becoming the most dominant 'alpha' male within the social group, gaining the highest status and therefore more likely to achieve these goals.

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