

## Of Collectivity and Conflict in a Gozitan Festival

by *Nathalie Vellky*

*“There is a bus that will take you directly to the ferry, but that will not be here for another thirty minutes. You should take this bus and get off at Valetta,” the bus driver replied. “But once I get to Valetta, where do I go?” I asked. “You take this bus to Valetta and then grab another bus that will take you Bugibba. From there you get on another bus in Bugibba that will take you to Cirkewwa,” the bus driver told me.*

The moment I arrived in Malta I decided to take a bus to take me to the ferry. The complications of finding the bus were interesting enough. Later on I realized I could have simply taken a taxi, but as stubborn as I am, I decided to be a little adventurous and take a bus. The moments of trying to find the bus consisted of me running around the airport for about forty-five minutes before I found the bus stop. Seeing one of the drivers of the bus, I asked which bus should I take to take me to the Cirkewwa ferry terminal. After talking to the bus driver, I was hesitant. Do I really want to take so many different buses to get to the ferry with chances that I will get completely lost instead of taking one bus to take me there directly? As much as I hesitated, I made my decision to get to Cirkewwa the hard way.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

After paying the bus driver, I settled myself in the front of the bus. As we took off towards Valetta I felt that this was not as bad as I thought it was. For the better first half of the ride I spent the time looking out the window. The trip to Valetta took longer than I thought it was supposed to be since we hit traffic on the way there. The bus driver explained to me that nobody in this country knows how to drive and that traffic was always this bad. When we finally were arriving in Valetta I had asked the bus driver where I should get off and what bus. He explained to me to look at the board signs and that he would drop me off past the bus stop, a little closer to the bus terminal. Thanking him, I stepped out of the bus and tried to make myself to the bus terminal. It was really crowded and as I tried to understand the bus routes, I found myself confused. Looking around I tried chasing down a worker at the bus terminal. I found myself trailing after him for at least fifteen minutes before I was able to push myself past people and ask him which bus to take to Bugibba. Directing me towards the end of the bus line, I sprinted towards there as fast as I could with my luggage.

I had arrived just in time at the bus before they were about to head out. Thanking the driver, I settled myself at the front of the bus and was finally on my way. On this route, what stood out to me the most was that some of the villages we were passing through seemed to be set up for some type of celebration of some sort. The villages were decorated with lights, banners, and the colors of them stood out completely against the sand-washed buildings. Curious about them, I stood up and walking towards the bus driver, I asked him about them.

*"Every year the villages celebrate the life of the saint their church is dedicated to," he replied.*

*"What happens during the celebrations?" I asked.*

*"We have fireworks, food, and drinks. We also have music that is played by bands. Right now my village is setting ours up for next week, you should come visit. It is spectacular," the bus driver said.*

Sitting back down, I continued my journey to Buggiba. It would not be for until 3 hours until I would finally arrive in Gozo and the entire time was spent trying to understand the culture from my discussions with the many bus drivers and people I encountered on the busses. Although the trip to Gozo was exhausting, unbearably hot, and long, it was completely worthwhile in the end since it was during this trip that I learned about the annual festivities, which was to become the focus of my research.

The Constitution of Malta declares Roman Catholicism as the state religion, and it has been reported that over 98%

of the population is Roman Catholic. It is believed that Catholicism was brought to Malta by Saint Paul, who was a Christian missionary and lived around A.D. 60. Saint Paul was shipwrecked at, what is now known as St. Paul's Bay and converted then the pagan population of Malta.

Throughout the islands of Malta, Gozo, and Comino, each village has a main focal point and its main source of civic pride: the parish church. The civic pride manifests itself though local village festas, which mark the day of the patron saint of each parish during the summer months with marching bands, religious processions, special masses, fireworks, and many other festivities. Religion can be defined as "...a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things (that is to say, things apart and forbidden)-beliefs and practices which united into one single moral community called a church all those adhere to them." (Giddens, 1978:92) It is in this way, as Durkheim believes, that religion is collective rather than individual. A religion can consist of many different kinds of ceremonies, rites, and festivities; all of which can play an important role in the religion itself.

The moment I started conducting the research was when I first stepped off the bus in Victoria, Gozo on the first day of the festivities. In Gozo, I spent most of my time in the city of Victoria, where I ended up doing my research. Victoria has parishes dedicated to two saints: Saint Mary and Saint George. A festa in dedication to a saint generally takes place over three weeks if the preparations for the festa are included. The festivities themselves, however, take place over a period of five days; they start on Tuesday and end on Sunday.

The first thing I noticed as I stepped off the bus was the lights. They were everywhere and lit up the city in such a vivid way that they brightened up every dark corner during the night. At this time, I was with a group of people from my photography class. Together, the group and I walked down a couple walks, on our way noticing all the seller stands and the people gathering around the street ahead of us. We had known the general area where the festivities were taking place, but not sure exactly where it was located. The street ahead was blocked to our view because of the many people crowding the sides of it. Either way, I headed up to it and pushed past the people. What caught my attention the most was the many men with horses that galloped past me, some of which barely missed me by a couple feet. At this time, I decided to take pictures of the horses by finding a location that was situated higher and, most importantly, safer.

I ended up on a platform connected to one of the buildings that was near the corner of the street. From there, I was better able to catch images of the horse racing because



Figure 3.

of my height advantage over the many people in the area. Standing there, I noticed that there were so many people that were standing in the middle of the road to see the incoming horses. As dangerous as it was, I found it surprising that there was no type of boundary to keep the people back. When the horses came close enough, usually it was only at the last minute that people would step away in order not to get trampled. This went on for an about thirty minutes before I decided that I was satisfied with my photos and I should start doing some data collection.

To my right were a few peers of my own who were talking to a couple young girls, probably no older than fourteen. They spoke English well enough and were carrying small note pads. I asked them what they were doing; they said they were taking notes on the horse racing. I ended up talking to them about what happens on the first day of the external festivities. They informed me that the horse racing usually take place during the day on Saturday. The only reason they are doing it Tuesday night was because it was too hot during the day. I didn't blame them at all, because Gozo is hot during this summer, even for someone from Texas. It didn't help that the festivities for Saint George take place in the hottest week of the year.

I spent an hour or two walking around and getting a feel for the atmosphere. There were times when no horses would pass by for a period of fifteen minutes or more. During this time I noticed that people would be standing and talking with each other and drinking a lot of beer. A little later I met up with a peer of mine and we ended up grabbing some dinner at a restaurant together. We wanted to be able to catch the last bus to Xlendi, where we were staying, and so we ended up heading back to the bus station around ten at night.

Stepping out of that restaurant was a complete turn around from what had taken place earlier. At the restaurant we had heard music playing, but on the streets we could finally see the band procession, the La Stella, marching up the main street in the direction of the church of Saint George. We took some back streets since the main street was absolutely filled with people. We ended up on the main street, right where the band was. The first time hearing the music was something I will never forget. Even now I can feel the thrumming of the drums and the trumpets. The band made the atmosphere much livelier in such a way that it was like an electric current passing through my body, the beats humming its way under my skin and building up the excitement.

It made me want to celebrate more than anything else, even if I did not know what I would be celebrating. Looking around me there were people, old and young, following the procession at every step. Once in a while the procession

would take a five-minute break, but they would once again continue and walk on until they reached the square of Saint George.

Looking at my peer, we decided to head out. We walked back to the bus station and, as we waited on the curb, all I could see in the air was the fireworks in the sky. Even as far away as I was, I could still feel the rhythm of the band thrumming through my body; I could still feel the excitement, and it was only the first day of festivities.

Each parish church is dedicated to a saint. Some villages, depending on the size, have multiple parishes. A specific case would be that of Victoria, Gozo. Victoria has two parishes dedicated to two different saints: Saint Mary and Saint George. The introduction of the cult of Saint George can be traced back to Byzantine Empire, around the nineteenth-century, where it was first introduced. This can be traced down to the similar introduction of Catholicism by Saint Paul around A.D. 60. In the beginning, the people had used the saint as means for asking for aid during hard times, such as plagues, war, or even famine. The festivities existed at this point, but they were limited to internal festivities (*il-festi ta' gewwa*) only, which consists of devotional actions, masses, and liturgical ritual.

The transformation of these festas cannot be traced completely, but it is believed that the external festivities (*il-festi ta' barra*) became popular during British rule, around the nineteenth-century. It is generally accepted about the local people that when people could not attend the internal festivities that took place inside the church, they began to complain and, over a period of time, the statue of the saint was brought outside of the church after the masses that took place inside. From here on, the external festivities themselves, underwent transformations.

At first, the external festivities were more modest. Those who organized the external festivities worked for the parish. There were no grand processions, but rather simple gatherings of local people, waiting to be blessed by their saint. Over many years, the external festivities became more externalized, with the increasing influx of money and popularity. There are other causes that could be investigated, as some believe it is natural for the people of a Mediterranean country to want to express their joy of their saints through festivities. No matter the causes of these increasing externalizations of the festivities, it brought along changes to the handling and the organization of the festivities.

Taking the bus from Xlendi Bay to Victoria was always a worthy of note experience. Although any drive in Malta or Gozo as interesting itself, I found the bus drivers amazingly nice and easy to talk to and I always met such interesting people, whether locals or visitors. On more than one



Figure 4.

occasion, I usually found myself standing in front of the bus next to the bus driver, talking to them about anything that happened to be of concern the day. Then you have the escapades of watching the bus driver trying to fit a huge bus between older buildings. Every day on a bus ride was a unique experience, and I believe that is why I never ended up walking to towns like most of my peers did.

After getting off the bus in Victoria, I walked up the same way I did the previous night, right up to the main street. Looking around, I decided that I should probably get something to eat before the festivities start. I had learned earlier that day that the festivities on this night did not start until around nine. Walking up the main street was hard, even at four in the afternoon, because it was still unbearably hot. I was lucky to find even a shaded area during the day when it was almost 100 degrees outside, because apparently they do not get many clouds in the sky. Even so, I trudged up about four blocks. On my way I noticed people were putting some banners or lights up. I finally arrived in the square that I ate dinner the previous night with my peer.

The name of the square, I later learned, was called It-Tokk Square and the restaurant itself was called It-Tokk. It was called It-Tokk because that is where the many stall vendors gathered during the day and It-Tokk in Maltese means “to talk”. At the restaurant I ate at the previous night, I asked if I could sit at one the tables right outside the building. Sitting down, I ordered a Diet Coke with lemon, and settled in with my notes. Though I settled in, I didn’t really know where to go from there. I had my notebook, a pen, my camera; everything I needed to do fieldwork, but I didn’t know what to do. What should I look at? Should I talk to people? Who should I talk to? How should I take down my notes? These were the main thoughts going through my head at this moment, and as I stared at my open notebook with my pen in hand, I was stumped.

This is when that idea of “there’s a first time for everything” was made more evident to me for the first time. As a student still on my ways to earning my BA, I had studied and discussed what it means to be an anthropologist in many classes, but I never realized that your first time being an anthropologist does to you. It was at this one moment that I truly realized that you don’t know who you want to be as anthropologist unless you are actually doing anthropology, thinks and act like one. I could say all about how I would act in certain situation in my classrooms, but when I’m in the field, it changes everything. Like my professor always tells me, experience really is everything.

Sitting there for about fifteen minutes, I actually got the nerve to lift my head up and just look around. And what I saw were preparations everywhere. There was a group of

people bringing banners from a truck and setting them up on columns and there was another group of people putting together a column right near where I was sitting. As I got more comfortable sitting there, I also got the nerve to ask one of the waitresses, whom I later learned was called Vanessa, some questions. I had asked her to grab me another Coke and when she came by I asked her what was going on around in the square.

*“They are setting up for the festa,” Vanessa replied.*

*“How long does it usually take them to set up for the festa?” I asked.*

*“It really depends on the village and the size of the village. Victoria is big and has two saints, so it generally takes around 3 weeks for them to set up everything,” she replied.*

*“It takes three weeks? But it doesn’t look like that much to set up? Isn’t there a company or organization that deals with all the preparations?” I asked.*

*“It would only take a few days if there was a company, but there isn’t. The preparations for the festa are all voluntary work. People come early in the morning before they have work to set up and then leave for work. At the end of the day they come back. This is mostly because it is too hot during the day to work outside,” she replied.*

*“So there is no organization that does this all themselves at all? The local people do all of it?” I asked.*

*“They don’t do all of it. You see each parish has a band. The bands generally plan and prepare everything for the festas. They all do the work, but there are also many people around the city who help to,” she replied as she walked away.*

As Vanessa left, I sat there pondering about what she had told me. The idea that everyone dedicated to the parish that is honoring Saint George is dedicated to its preparation amazed me. And as I looked out to the volunteers I felt a feeling of commitment from them. The atmosphere didn’t feel tense in a bad way, but more in the way of knowing what they would accomplish by working this hard. The social relations in a society that bind the people to one another are a way that people can identify themselves. And what I saw here was one of the many ways the communal identity has been established.

I ordered dinner; it was early for them, since it was only around 5 in the afternoon. Generally, the people don’t eat until around 7 or 8 at night, but since I had to walk around later, I decided to eat earlier. At finishing my dinner and paying for the check, I said goodbye to Vanessa, who told me to come back and visit her. I walked around the main street and as it got darker outside, I arrived at Saint Francis Square.



Figure 5.

By the time I got there, it was almost nine in the evening and the band procession was about to begin. Leading the band was a huge statue of Saint George on a white stallion, flashing a sword to a dragon beneath him. The La Stella band, as it was called started its procession through the streets, which were filled with people everywhere. Joining the locals, it took around three hours for the procession to leave Saint Francis Square and arrive Saint George's Square, where the church is located.

During the procession there would be people singing to the music and sometimes older people dancing with each other as children ran between people could be seen. During that time I began to feel the excitement. And I believe I understood the jubilant atmosphere that the people felt and how it encourages them to celebrate this every year.

What motivates the people to not only set up the festivities but also participate in them had mainly had to do with the devotion they had for their community and parish. There are many things that can be said about the individual beliefs and collective beliefs, nonetheless the community as a whole feel that this is an important part of their lives and through this they feel a sense of devotion in participating in it. This can have a role into the idea that the tradition of this event for years has not only bonded the community over it, but also imposes the tradition on them.

When the band procession and the statue, which depicts an older Saint George, finally arrived at Saint George's Square, the people lifted up the statue and placed it upon a pillar, which faced the basilica. The entire square was filled with people, many of them being youths. All of them were singing and jumping up and down to the music. However, by the end of this, most people had dispersed to the many bars around the area to drink beer. After sitting around for some time, watching people, as all they did was drink constantly, I decided that I should go back to Xlendi to prepare for the next night.

Over many years, instead of being organized by those who work at the parish, the organization went into the hands of those outside of the church. Eventually, the band society was first introduced around 1880, and at this time it became the handler for the organization of the external festivities. Over the years, the band society transformed itself into what it is now a cultural center for the people of each parish.

On another day out in Victoria, since I enjoyed the food and the people so much, I sat at the same restaurant again, where Vanessa happily kept me company as I took down notes. As I sat there, I noticed that there were still some preparations being done for the festa. There were some banners being put up by a group of men and another group was setting up one last pillar, which by the end of the night

would have another statue of Saint George sitting upon it. It was amusing, to say the least, to watch as a lamp or two would fall or break and how sometimes they would struggle with the machinery. Even so, the dedication that I saw as they worked tirelessly to finish the preparations before the festivities started tonight still amazed me.

After eating dinner, I walked around to take some pictures. There was an hour left before the festivities were to start, so I knew I had plenty of time. I walked back down the main street and as I walked down there I noticed that the end of that street was closed off to the cars. I saw a bench with an older couple sitting there and asked if I could sit there. After they said I could, I sat down there for a few minutes and tinkered with my camera. I left my bag on the bench and walked into the middle of the street to take a picture of all the lights and banners decorating the entire street. Walking back to the bench, I sat down and the woman sitting to my right started speaking to me.

*"You shouldn't leave your bag around so carelessly. While there are many nice people around, there are still some who will take advantage of you," she scolded me.*

*"Thank you, I will definitely keep that in mind. I was just so excited by all of the lights," I replied.*

*"You see that over there?" she pointed to my far right, "That is Saint George, do you know who he is? Are you Christian?"*

*"I have heard very little about him before I came here. I am actually studying the festivities," I replied.*

*"Oh, are you? How wonderful! My name is Marnie and this is my husband James. Are you from a school?" she asked.*

*"I am from America but I am currently in a program to do anthropology field work here in Gozo. I've been here for a couple weeks now and I should be leaving in another week or so," I replied.*

*"Well would you like to join us tonight? We wouldn't want to leave you here alone. We can show you everything about the festa," she said.*

Marnie and Joseph had gotten up from the bench and we started walking up the main street in the direction of It-Tokk square. As we walked there, I began to learn about them. Both of them, they explained, are from a village on the main island of Malta, where they had already celebrated for Saint George. The reason they were here for the week was because they wanted to celebrate once again. As we were walking the band began its procession, walking up from behind us. After taking some pictures, I joined Marnie and Joseph, walking ahead of the procession. As we reached It-Tokk Square, we stood to the side and waited. It didn't take long for the procession to catch up with us,



Figure 6.

but as we waited I began to talk to both Marnie and James about the festivities. I learned that they had family here and that some nephews of theirs were playing in the band, another reason why they came. When the band procession finally came by I started taking pictures, but I began to notice the different ages of the band members. Some of the people were older, some were teenagers, and there were even a select few small children holding on to their fathers' pants.

*"Why is there such a varied age for band members?" I asked Marnie.*

*"A lot of people grow up with the parish and become so dedicated to it at such a young age. Usually they begin in the band around the age of seven and most participate with the band until they are much older," Marnie replied. "How long does the procession tonight usually take?" I asked.*

*"It will be like this for a long time. They will go to the church and then they will return with a statue of Saint George to place on the column. But we will not follow them the entire way. Would you like to grab a drink with us?" she asked.*

Agreeing with them, I led them to the restaurant where I had eaten dinner earlier. We sat at one of the tables outside. Asking what I would like to drink, I told James to surprise me. As we waited, Marnie and I watched the procession pass right in front of us. James finally returned with a light beer for myself a cold beer for me, a cold beer for himself, and some Sprite for Marnie.

Sitting down and watching the band pass by; we began to talk about many things, from American politics, to our families. They told me that I could ask them anything about the festivities, which I eventually did.

*"So all of the festivities are set up by volunteers," I asked.*

*"Yes, none of them gets paid. Everything is volunteer work and donations,"*

*James replied.*

*"You see, all of the money needed, whether for the lights or the fireworks, is all donated by people. When a banner needs replacing, some one makes a new one and donates it. When you need more fireworks, you buy them with the money from donations," Marnie said.*

*"Everything is donated? But how are they able to get so much money for such a big festival?" I asked.*

*"It depends on the size of the village or town. The bigger it is, the more donations that are needed to make it such a big festival. The bigger it is, city and festival, the more people donate," Marnie replied.*

*"It is also due, in part to dedication. Everyone wants the festival to occur and they put in much effort, whether through money or volunteer work, to make sure that the festival occurs to the best it can," James said.*

Sitting there, I was astounded by this new information. I had known about the volunteer work, but I never realized that everything that occurs during these external festivities because of volunteer work and money donations. In the transformation of the external festivities, instead of being organized by those who work at the parish, the organization went into the hands of those outside of the church. Eventually, the band society was first introduced around 1880, and at this time it became the handler for the organization of the external festivities. Over the years, the band society transformed itself into what it is now a cultural center for the people of each parish. The transformation and changes of the festivities over its history made me realize how important it has become to the local people and how dedicated they are in regards to the festivities. It made me realize importance in the meaning it had for them and why they would celebrate it every year. I asked them the one question I couldn't resist.

*"Why do you celebrate this every year?" I asked.*

*"Because it has always been this way; its tradition," James replied.*

I sat there contemplating what they had told me. I had always wanted to find the meaning behind the saints, and why certain villages had particular saints. I wanted to know why they do this, why they celebrate these saints. I always get the response of "it's always been this way" or "it's tradition". The entire time I spent in Gozo, I chased after the meaning behind the images of these saints. I was relentless, and I eventually learned my first lesson as an anthropologist: don't make assumptions. I assumed that there had to be meaning behind this festival, especially for the people to be so dedicated to it. Asking them those questions, I realized, was like asking me why I set up a tree for Christmas. And the response is the same: it's tradition. It made me think about how if Christmas was meaningful in its origins, then what about these festivities?

What is it that keeps traditions from diminishing over years? What keeps it alive? Is the church spurring on the tradition or is it a collective consciousness that has been accepted by the community? Collective consciousness generally refers to the condition of the subject within the whole of society, and how any given individual comes to view her or himself as a part of any given group. Through collective consciousness, an individual is trained in some



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

ways to be common among other people in a community. That is to say that they learn to dress, speak, and act like those in the community. A collective consciousness can be established through what Emile Durkheim calls “social facts.”

Social facts can be understood by certain properties that it holds: the externality and the constraint of facts. Facts external to us as human beings, external to our thoughts and our actions in many ways; they are independent from us. Facts are things that their nature are not dependent on what human beings might think or have ideas on them, and because of this, facts are things in which it is possible for us to be either right or wrong about them in the end. The other property, the constraint of facts, points to the idea that facts are essentially constraining to us as human beings. They have the capabilities of shaping human behavior, especially when we are not aware that they are doing so. While we may accept facts of natural instances that constrain us, for reasons beyond understanding, we cannot readily accept the idea that there are also social facts that can restrain our movement and behavior as human beings (Hughes, 1995:161). Social facts are an important part of understanding society. We can be truthful to say that we are ignorant in some ways as to why certain elements in society are the way they are. Moreover, there is also a truth to say that we are more ignorant in explaining why we as individuals, or as a community, are doing the things we do. The fourth day of the festa is Friday, and is different in many ways than the previous days. It is the night of the fireworks. I had arrived early in the afternoon to look over my notes. A peer of mine decided to join me this time, and we waited for the festivities to start. After walking around and taking pictures, we settled ourselves on a street side curb.

Looking all around us, I noticed that there were more people than before. There were more street vendors selling everything from gelato to crepes. There were families walking with children and people just enjoying the atmosphere. As the minutes went by, the sky darkened, and the lights that were displayed made the streets grow brighter. And as I looked to my left, down the street, I saw the La Stella band begin to gather.

As the band began to play and march towards us, I sat down on the street to take pictures of them. Eventually Marnie and Joseph came upon me and my peer, who I introduced to them. Together, we walked with the band for a time until we eventually had drinks at the It-Tokk restaurant. Once again, they ended up buying me a beer and after much persuasion on their part, and reluctance on my peer's part, they bought her a 7-Up. On this night I decided to focus on where we left off the previous night. I

began asking them, what the festa means to them and tried wording the question in different ways.

*“The festa is in celebration to Saint George’s life, like we would celebrate the life of Jesus. And just like with Jesus, we too honor Saint George to the sin-free life he lived because we hope to be able to do the same,” Marnie explained to me.*

*“So everyone is celebrating his life? That’s what this festa means to the people?” I asked.*

*“Not everyone thinks that way. There are many who celebrate just because it has always been done. For others they have their personal reasons, and most it is just about the beer. Years ago I had stomach cancer, and even so, I continue to drink because that is what everyone does during the festivities,” James replied.*

One can wonder why the festivities are so externalized in the first place. While it did become popular during the British rule in the nineteenth-century, that doesn't explain why it became popular. Why do these festivities evoke such a feeling of excitement and wonder?

Religion can consist of things such as ceremonies, rites, and festivities; all of which play an important role. People may participate in them for many reasons, whether for belief or faith, but most importantly is the reasons that they are not conscious of. The idea of continuing a tradition like these annual festivities in celebration of patron saints can refer to the social facts that have been established in their society.

Everyday activities are made up of routine. However, ceremonies and festivities are highly intense and emotional in character. They are a manner of acting, which arise from assembled groups, and are eventually destined to excite certain mental states in these groups. It is in these ceremonial gatherings that the individual is impressed by the social collectivity. “Religions ceremonial is a source of innovation, under the stimulus of collective enthusiasm, and at the same time, it has the function of renewing faith in existing beliefs, and symbols.” (Giddens, 1978:99-100) It becomes ingrained into the members of the community throughout regular occurrences of collective ceremonies. Why it occurs can be questioned. One might think that there has to be some collective reason among individuals in the community that allows for the tradition of the annual festivities to occur. However, this is not necessarily true. There could be the possibility that there was a collective meaning and understanding in the beginning, but is no longer evident or in existence, which could be due to a variety of cultural changes. “Custom and tradition have such



Figure 9.

power and prestige as to leave no place for reasoning and questioning.” (Giddens 1978:77) Nevertheless, the tradition still continues.

The motivations for everyone to participate in the festivities are different. For some it is the love of the saint and or others it is a time to get drunk.

Either way, most people say that they do it because it has always been this way, that it's tradition. These festivities have been occurring for many decades and it continues to occur every year because the condition is repeated and imposed on the individual, although that does not necessarily mean that it is unwanted by the individuals themselves.

To understand the reason for the festivities is to investigate the reasons for participating in the festivities. While there may not be a collective meaning or understanding of the festivities themselves that does not mean that it is not collective. The social relations in a society that bind the people to one another are a way that people can identify themselves. It creates a communal identity, and more importantly, mechanical solidarity. Mechanical solidarity prevails where individual differences are minimized and the members of society are much alike in their devotion to the common weal. “The cognitive formulation of ideas is an expression pre-existing social sentiments which antedate their appearance in conscious reflection.” (Giddens, 1978:87) Like social facts, the reasons that people do certain things aren't necessarily chosen by themselves, but very much influenced by a collective consciousness in the community. In towns and villages in Malta and Gozo, people don't necessarily choose a parish, but instead grow up in the community of that parish. The members of the community, the collective consciousness, have common beliefs and ideas, which bond the individual members together. As people grow up in this community, they not only take on the beliefs and attitudes of the community, but also a sense of commitment to the community and parish they grew up in. The commitment might seem voluntary, and people may believe it to be, but in a sense it is obligatory due to the invisible social facts and rules that have been established; rules and facts that are essential to enhancing the social solidarity of the community.

Saturday, the fifth day of festivities, was the momentous day of the festivities. I had arrived in Victoria earlier and after eating dinner, I decided to walk around the streets taking pictures. Eventually I ended up sitting on the side of the curb on the main street. Across from me I watched on as I saw a man with a bunch of balloons sat on a chair, hoping for people to buy from him. Constantly there would be children staring at him and the balloons, while he would smile at them and then eventually the parents would come to take them away.

More than once, the same two children stared at the balloons for minutes on end. I was caught off guard when suddenly booming music started playing. Looking towards my left, I saw at the end of the main street a huge projection screen along with speakers being setting up. At the same time, I also saw Marnie and James.

Walking up to them, I greeted them and asking what they wanted to do. They led me towards Saint Georges Square, where in front of the basilica a band played on the stands. We stood there for about thirty minutes, enjoying the music and the atmosphere. Not too long after that, Marnie and James told me that tonight is when the fireworks are displayed miraculously and they wanted to show them to me. We walked through the back streets until we reached It-Tokk square and then the main street, where we turned left and headed up the main street. There was a small are blocked off my gates and we sat at the side. As soon as we sat down, the fireworks started. They continued to startle me because, as far as they looked to be from our location, the booming sounds echoed everywhere and it felt like they were shaking the bones in my body. As we sat there enjoying the display, I noticed that there were not that many people around, at least in this single location. They were spread out, some at the bars, others walking around. As a community, they had gathered together, but at this moment all I saw were people milling around, not a collective, concentrated group. Religious phenomena is a about the collective, not individuals. It is a powerful tool that once a year, this religious event brings people together. They live ordinary and routine lives and this event is able to give them that overall sense of belonging that cannot be found elsewhere in their everyday lives.

Not too long afterwards, they led me towards It-Tokk again for drinks. As we sat down, we didn't discuss the festa itself, but instead politics. They talked to me about how they have relatives in America and how it is hard for them to become citizens. Over beer, we discussed topics ranging from American politics to their family members. Over the course, I was surprised to see how many people had begun to gather outside.

*“Victoria has the biggest festas in Gozo. It is the biggest village. Although the ones in Malta are even greater,” James explained to me.*

Eventually, after an hour or so of discussion, we got up and went outside. Walking around, we neared the Opera House, which is also the clubhouse for the band. Marnie and James led me there, they explained, because tonight there will be so many people that it is best to stay on the side-lines instead of being with the band itself.





Figure 10.



Figure 11.

Arriving at the band house, Marnie sat outside while James and I tried to find some chairs to for all of us. Looking around, the band house was completely barren of any chairs, mostly because of the bar on the far right side. Not finding any chairs we went back outside on the patio, where Marnie was sitting. Just as we got there, a group of people left and we were able to grab a couple of empty chairs. Sitting next to Marnie, with James on her other side, I asked them if they would like something to drink. However, they were completely insistent in buying me a drink as they have done every night since I first met them. Reluctantly, I finally agreed and James left to get us the drinks.

Marnie and I sat there for a while until James came back with the drinks. All of a sudden, we could all feel the trembling from the instruments being played. We knew that the band was getting close. I asked them what was to occur tonight.

*“First the band comes through this street and at the very end there will be a movie of images of Saint George’s life on the projection screen,” Marnie explained.*

*“And then of course you have the fireworks tonight. They are not the ones we saw earlier. Instead, they are one that are on the ground,” James told me.*

As we sat there, I reached for my beer when a man suddenly took it from me. Trying to get it back from him, I found out that he didn’t speak English. While I learned that the second language in Malta is English, there were always a few who didn’t speak it. Trying to gesture to him, he finally poured my beer into a cup, gave it to me, and walked away. Looking behind me I noticed not only Marnie and James laughing at me, but a few other people as well. Sitting back down, I was really embarrassed.

*“At a certain point beer bottles are not allowed, only cups. That is why he took it from you,” Marnie reassured me.*

*“Why are beer bottles not allowed?” I asked.*

*“There are certain times when people from other villages and parishes come to the festa of another village. They come either to just drink or to drink and cause trouble. This is because the festas are competitions between villages,” James explained.*

*“Competitions in what ways?” I asked.*

*“Villages compete with each other over who has the biggest festa, the best band, the best fireworks displays.” Marnie explained.*

*“What does the competition have to do with beer bottles though?” I asked.*

*“When people come from other villages, they can get into*

*fights. To make sure everyone is safe, beer bottles are not allowed after a certain point during the night,” James told me.*

*“What would happen if they did get into a fight?” I asked. “The people who start the fight get the penalty of having a festa taken away from their village or town from 2-5 years. But that rarely happens,” James explained.*

*“Why does it rarely happen?” I asked.*

*“Because everyone wants the festa to occur. The celebrations mean a lot to the people. They will do anything to make sure it occurs. Instead of fighting, they will continue to show their spirit and competitiveness through the festivities themselves,” Marnie explained.*

After their explanation, I was not only hit my more of the realization of the dedication people had to these festivities but also the extent this dedication brings conflict. While there is a grand sense of collectivity and harmony, which only seems natural, in the festivities, so is there a sense of conflict. While people are dedicated to their parishes and communities, they feel an obligation, a loyalty, in expressing their solidarity with other villages through opposition and competition.

*“...no group can be entirely harmonious, for it would then be devoid of process and structure. Groups require disharmony as well as harmony, dissociation as well as association; and confliction within them are by no means altogether disruptive factors. Group formation is the result of both types of processes.” (Joas, 2004:177)*

Collectivity and conflict are essential to the formation of events such as religious phenomenon, where collectivity is only natural. The relationship between each is one that is centripetal, which beings the community together, and centrifugal, that try to rip apart the collectivity, that are bearing down upon it (Bahktin, 1982:272). In the external festivities, collective consciousness is what brings the people together every year, and is reinforced every time. However, another force, competition, tries to pull these festivities apart. Those who are very competitive might get into fights with other villagers, but they know that if they were to do so, they would not be able to have the festivities for their own village for a few years. There is, therefore, this constant struggle between harmony and conflict due to the individual’s sense of obligation to the community to promote social solidarity.

Having only harmony in society does not prove to be a good outlook because change is needed for things to improve and in order for people to learn. That is why it is important to understand that not all conflict in



Figure 12.

necessarily bad. Conflict "...can be beneficial, providing a crucial contribution to the society's very existence, a mechanism for the reinforcement of social boundaries and of social solidarity within them." (Hughes, 1995:200) Even if there are those that are not necessarily bad, there has to be a limit to conflict, just as there is with harmony. If there were to be too much conflict, there could be a disassembling of the social acts entirely. Church member is Malta have begun to fear that without any moderation in the external festivities, they could lose them entirely. Not too long after talking, we began to see the band marching down. Marnie assured me she would watch my bag and told me I should take pictures. Finding a chair, I stood on top of it, in a dress no less, and eventually climbed on top of a bar that was to the right of us. From this angle I was able to see all the of the people that had gathered tonight. The sheer numbers amazed me. Earlier in my time in Gozo, I was able to go to a festa in another village called Kerchem. I went to it on a Saturday night, but the number of people could not compare to those in Victoria this night. As I stood there taking pictures, there were masses of people everywhere. Some people had children on their shoulders. Before the band came through, there was a huge mass of people from the parish. These people were distinctive because they wore the red and white shirts with images of Saint George on them. A number of them were on the shoulders of others and as they came through the crowd they were clapping, cheering, and singing. Waving their arms in the air, they beckoned people to sing with them. The enthusiasm for this electrified the mass of people. I could feel the excitement all around me. Even as I looked around, I noticed random people jumping up and down. Just as I thought it couldn't get any more exciting, the band started to come through the street. The music started building and before they even reached the band house, balloons were everywhere. When I looked up I noticed a red and white banner, dedicated to the national flag, and from it a vast amount of red balloons fell. At that moment, the crowd got even more rowdy. Noticing a flash of red, I looked behind me and saw other parish members bringing out large sticks with balloons attached to them. Entering the cloud, they danced and sang with the band as balloons filled every inch of the street. Standing there, I could feel the excitement myself. The first night that I saw the band I had the excitement coursed through me, but this moment increased the excitement even more. All I wanted to do was to join the people myself. I didn't even know what they were singing, but I sang along with them. Eventually as the balloons disappeared, the band began to move toward the end of the street. Marnie and James explained to me that we should go down there,

the place to where the fireworks occur. Getting up, we tried our best to navigate through the crowds of sweaty people and beer on the ground. Eventually, after much pushing and shoving, we arrived past the projection screen at a crossroads. Past the road perpendicular to the main street were small gates and police to prevent people from passing through. Looking past the police you could see stands in shapes of stars and circular shapes. These were the fireworks. As we stood there waiting, masses of people tried to get closer, so people, including us, were shoved in every direction. In due course, everyone was settled and as we quieted down. We watched as the parish members began to light the first firework.

As they lit up, the lights of the fireworks brightened up the completely dark street. As we stood there, the smell of the fireworks wafted through the crowds along with the smoke. Considering the number of people this night, it was strangely quiet, and in some sense reflective as well. As I looked around, I noticed that everyone just stared at the fireworks.

As the fireworks eventually died out, people began to walk back up the main streets, where most of the bars were. As usual, Marnie explained to me that tonight people would be out drinking for a lot longer than the previous nights. Most people would not start leaving until around four in the morning. As I started to walk with them away from the main street, in the direction of the bus station, they asked me if I would like a ride. I told them that I appreciate it, because it was late at night and I would have had to walk home. They insisted that they take me home and as we walked into the parking lot, and entered the car, I couldn't help but look back at the last night of the festivities.

The external festivities have seen a transformation since they were first introduced in Malta in the early 1900s. The transformation has led to a strenuous relationship between to particular characteristics of the festivities that are most prominent: collectivity and conflict. The festivities have always been an event that have gathered communities together every year, but its transformation has also created a conflict in regards to the competition that has enveloped the communities. This struggle between collectivity and conflict illustrates the strain of keeping the traditions of the festivities at the same time that it provides insight that unless moderation is used in the celebration of the festivities, that this strenuous relationship could lead to the dispersion of the festivities as a whole. While this is a possibility, no matter the income, the acknowledgement of the strenuous relationship between collectivity and conflict could help provide new outlooks into understanding the festivities as a whole.

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