

Festa Horse Racing

A reflection of gender roles, secularization and tourism on the island of Gozo

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A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this thesis is to reflect on the intersections of gender, secularization and tourism on the inclusion of horse racing during festas in the Republic of Malta. Observations and interviews suggested these were three key influences in this cultural practice. This researcher concludes, that while there are some religious objections to marketing festa horse racing for tourists, horse racing is a natural extension of historical and cultural components of Maltese life.

Methodology

This study was conducted during July 2011 at the applied anthropological field school, "Off the Beaten Track," hosted by Expeditions and the University of Leuven, Belgium. As a recent graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, studying anthropology, women studies and European studies, the topic of horse racing during festas offered the opportunity to combine my interests. Using an anthropologist's toolbox of observation and interview, I was able to learn more about the roles of gender, European history and tourism in affecting a contemporary Maltese cultural practice.

Prologue

As the sweltering heat and rays of the afternoon sun faded away to allow for the emergence of dusk's balmy shadows, I found myself anxiously peering past the rows of spectators lining the brightly lit streets of Victoria at a crowd who had ventured past the roped-off curb to the center of the street. This crowd, giddy with excitement, was staring further down the street that was embellished with Christian saint statues and decorative awnings of bright red and gold. These onlookers were waiting for a noise that would deafen the blasting carnival music and would be sure to send those curious spectators dashing back to the curb as soon as it was heard. Sure enough, just as the pick-up truck filled with adult men sped by, blaring its horn in warning, the noise of a horse race fast approaching was unmistakable. The cadence of hooves pounding pavement, the sulky wheels spinning rapidly and the shouts of competitive riders encouraging their steeds to quicken their pace came to life. This spectacle of the horse races and the energy felt by all who watched and participated would be the lasting memory of my experience attending Maltese festas on the island of Gozo.

Introduction

Horse racing as a spectacle during festas in Maltese culture has only recently, in the past century, become a popular activity during the summer religious festivals. The history of its induction into a centuries-old religious practice, the various reasons as to why this event has been incorporated into the religious festivals and the manner in which its inclusion has changed the perception of the festivals themselves makes horse racing during festas a phenomenon worthy of study. By considering the community's gender-differentiated involvement in horse racing during these religious events and the use of horse racing as a tourist lure on the island of Gozo, a conversation describing horse racing as an instigator for the secularization of festas, as a promoter of tourism and as a cultural symbol to the community can be discussed.

History and Purpose of Festa

A Maltese festa, or literally 'feast', is a religious celebration in the Catholic tradition that is organized by the local parish during the summer months. A festa is held in honor of a local patron saint and includes the procession of a heavy, life-size statute of the patron saint being carried through the streets towards the parish church that is in festival. The façade of this church, as well as the main

streets leading up to the church, are lavishly decorated with colorful awnings and are covered in hundreds of light bulbs. Festas have traditionally been held for religious purposes; they are decorated with Christian imagery, involve attending church mass and include the ringing of church bells and the singing of hymns.

Uniting a community by means of its religious make-up, festas are celebrated in hopes of creating solidarity and instilling pride within a community. These communities are made up of all those in attendance; they are composed of local Maltese, visiting family members, spectators from other villages and tourists. Jeremy Boissevain describes in his article the creation of these communities according to the term 'communitas,' a concept given by the late anthropologist, Victor Turner,

To my mind, the increase in certain celebrations- the festas of parish and neighborhood patron saints... is a manifestation of a desire to celebrate the community. People who have grown up together in poverty and are now separated by prosperity wish to achieve, for a few moments, the feeling of what Turner has called 'communitas': the direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities which tends to make those experiencing it think of mankind as a homogeneous unstructured and free community (Turner 1974:16). They achieve this by doing something together, by celebrating- watching fireworks, dancing in the street, drinking, praying, visiting, walking behind the band, listening to music in the square. During these community celebrations kin meet, but so do neighbors and more distant acquaintances. Tourists can also participate in these celebrations, which accounts in part for their popularity among these visitors. Thus for a few, often fleeting, moments these events generate a Turnerian sense of communitas. (Boissevain, 1992: 70-71)

While festas have the capability of creating tightly knit communities, they also have the effect of creating the dichotomy of 'us' versus 'them.' Festas promote strong bonds of solidarity and pride between community members, but they also counter-create rivalries between villages. These rivalries compete politically and fiscally with one another to protect their community's honor by putting on extensive and elaborate festas (Boissevain, 1992: 71). Although some rivalries between villages have arisen since the 1970's due to differences in political agendas, specifically between the Nationalist Party (PN) and the Malta Labour Party (MLP), rivalries between local parishes have existed since the early periods of the Maltese Catholic church (Boissevain, 1996: 216).

In the early history of the Maltese church, parishioners gave generously to the local church in order to build the most beautiful and rich church they could afford. Old rivalries between parishes and even between local churches and chapels within the same village were the incentives for many parishioners to donate time and money to their church. Some of these rivalries are still evident today when parishioners celebrate their parish feast. ("History of Maltese Festa Events.")

Villages have competed to outdo each other in the extravagance of their festas. The 1970's were a time in which human and financial resources were readily available in Malta. In this era, there was a favorable labor government that was able to supersede previous festa standards upheld by the Catholic Church. (Boissevain, 1992: 70). Malta's economy at that time was much better off than what it had been in the previous decades; recreational and cultural tourism was increasing in popularity on the island, emigration from the island had decreased to an almost standstill and material wealth was on the rise (Boissevain, 1992: 72). The centralization of the Maltese government in the 1970's, during the time in which the Malta Labour Party (MLP) took and solidified governmental control from the Nationalist Party (PN) in Malta, strengthened the economic and political stance of the new Republic of Malta (Boissevain, 1992: 74). With the bipartisan communal changes and an increase in cultural activities at the state level, the Maltese were given the opportunity to expand and elaborate on their festas. Ornate firework displays, street-long band processions and nonstop street partying added to the atmosphere of the local festas.

Horse Racing in Malta

One event in particular that was incorporated into festas at the start of the 20th century and continues to be an indicator of the level of grandeur and wealth of a festa, is horse racing. Although horse racing is a 20th century addition into the itinerary of those festas that are able to accommodate and afford for the event, the phenomenon of horse racing is not new to Maltese culture. Horse racing has been around for centuries on the island of Malta; the practice dates back to the reign of the Knights of St. John, specifically during the reigning periods of the Grand Masters Hugo de Verdalle in 1582 and Lascaris Castellar in 1635 (Encyclopædia Britannica). Since the 16th century, horse racing has become a popular pastime. However, it took precedence as a competitive sport during the period in which Great Britain ruled over Malta. Great Britain constitutionally controlled Malta after the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1814 up until the Maltese

claimed its independence in 1964 and established itself as a republic in 1974 (Encyclopædia Britannica). During this period, British influence and culture shaped much of the Maltese lifestyle and practices; the sport of horse racing was popularized on the island at this time.

Under British rule, much was done to legitimize horse racing as a world-renowned, competitive sport. Europe's longest racetrack, Marsa Racing Track, was built on the main island of Malta in 1968 to further attract professional riders and tourists from all over the world (Encyclopædia Britannica). During the period of Great Britain's control, foreign racehorses were imported to the island to train, and if injured, to heal and recuperate; many Maltese families began to own and care for horses. One respondent, who ended up being one of my most detailed informants, boasted of Malta's participation in healing foreign horses, "Racing is hard on their joints, but we Gozitans take good care of them and get them healthy again, even after they have been pushed to their limits by those others (their former trainers)." With more people interested in horses and the number of horses on the island also increasing, the Maltese began to breed horses on their farms. To this day, though, foreign horses continue to be used in races and make up the majority of the horses on the island. With so much attention given to a lifestyle that included horses, Malta soon became a destination and world contender for horse racing.

Because horse racing was so highly regarded in Great Britain, and because it found a popular niche among the Maltese, the idea of including horse racing into festa celebrations was suggested and introduced. Whether it was the local Maltese or the British who first discussed the involvement of horse racing into the festas, and whether or not all the Maltese willingly accepted horse racing at their parish feasts, horses racing as an event during Maltese festas was underway by the middle-half of the 20th century. One respondent I talked with, who was an owner of two racing horses and was from a family who had raced horses for a few generations, believed that horse racing during the festas had been around as early as the 1930's. Using sulkies, or the chariot-style seating that was the most popular for horse racing at the start of the 20th century by British and other international equestrians, riders would race their horses on the streets leading up to the parish church that was celebrating its festa. This same style of racing continues to be practiced today.

What Sparked My Interest

I first became interested in horse racing during the festa celebrations one Friday afternoon while walking through

Fontana, right outside of Victoria on the island of Gozo. I came across a middle-aged, graying Australian man having a smoke in his garage. He was enjoying the shade with his two puppies and his pony, Paris Gold, and had welcomed me to join him. After visiting several minutes with him and having a friendly, introductory conversation, I took a closer inspection of the room in which I stood. A wooden box holding horse brushes lay on a built-in work table on one side of the garage. Framed pictures of horses racing decorated the room and a red chariot-looking wagon stood propped up against the wall in the corner. After inquiring about the wagon, I was given one man's history of horse racing on Gozo and was offered an invitation to attend the horse-trotting races for Victoria's festa. It was during this conversation that my initial interest in horse racing during festas was sparked.

Festa Horse Racing

I began my research by inquiring about the logistics and specific guidelines of the horse races during the festas. While at a race, I was introduced to a middle-aged Maltese man, Richard, and his British girlfriend who were there to enjoy the evening and watch the races. Richard, a horse owner and horseracing enthusiast, provided the logistical information about the races. He said those who enter a race during a festa either do so free of charge or for a 5-euro flat rate. Each horse entered has the opportunity to race twice. The horse will, at most, race twice and only if it has won its first heat and has proceeded to the next round. Horses usually race in groups of three to five and are paired together based on their size in 'hands', or literally, the number of times a person's hand is placed in a repeating order from wrist to fingertip on top of the opposite hand from the hoof of a horse up until the horse's shoulder blade. Horses are also paired together based on the style of racing they are competing in. For example, the specific races at Victoria's festa were of four different styles of racing: Shetland pony races, pony races, thoroughbred races, and harness trotting races, or a race that requires the horse to move at a specific gait or pace. There were twenty-nine races total, and there was a winning horse and rider from each of the four styles of racing. The distance of the races varied depending on the type of horse being raced. For example, the Shetland pony races were half the distance of the other races taking place because Shetland ponies are a lot smaller in size compared to the horses in the other racing categories. The ponies and horses raced in ascending order according to their size, meaning the Shetland ponies raced first, followed by the pony races and ending with the thoroughbred races.

A race begins after a horn is signaled and the steeds advance directly after the horn's blow. Throughout a race, a pickup truck with an open back filled with adult men drives ahead of the horses, blaring its horn warning the spectators to clear the streets from the oncoming horses and riders. A bookkeeper and the men enforcing the regulations make up those on the back of the truck who are watching and making sure none of the rules are being violated. If a horse advances before the horn has been blown a 'false-start' has occurred. If a 'false-start' occurs, the race is restarted until all the horses take off directly after the horn's signal. 'False-starts' are very common at the races, especially as the night wears on and the horses became more restless; the horses skirmish more easily due to the multiple restart attempts and because the spectators become rowdier as the night wears on. After the races, the riders return their horses and trailers back to their stables and come back to enjoy the rest of the evening at the festa, drinking Cisk lager and jokingly discussing the races with one another.

Gender Observations at Festa

As I surrounded myself in the racing atmosphere, I became aware of the secular perceptions held by the community towards the horse races. All those I asked agreed the races were solely for the enjoyment of the community and were added to the festas as a light-spirited activity that increased the number of attendees. I was told that those spectators that were in attendance at the horse races were not necessarily the same attendees of the festa's mass and statue procession. The attendees for the races were, for the majority, Maltese males or tourists, whereas the attendees of the religious events during the festas were locals of both sexes.

Because horse racing on the island of Gozo, as well as in Malta, is a male-oriented practice, the crowds at the races were primarily composed of adult men and young boys. All of the people helping out with the loading and unloading of the horses, the riders, as well as those taking care of the rules and regulations were male. This gender distinction was evident, and I can recall feeling out of place when I, a foreign woman, approached an entire crowd of males by the horse trailers where the horses that had yet to race were stationed. The females that I did see at the races were either with their families or were tourists on vacation. Unlike other nights of the festa, when there was an abundance of adult women, the horse races did not include many female spectators at its events.

I inquired about this gender difference during the races in Victoria and found that the event of horse racing is considered male-dominated. I asked several of the men

who were clustered together watching the races why they believed more men were at the races than women. Many stated that men were more interested in the sport, and it was the men who owned the horses and were the majority of participants in the races. Others said the races signified a time when the males in a family could come together to enjoy each other's company, and the races had always provided for a male-bonding experience. My observations confirmed that the races did provide opportunities for men to socialize; those few women in attendance were there for family support rather than as active participants.

Festas, because of their timing during the summer months, and because of the manner in which they unify, as well as instill pride in a village setting, attract many Maltese civilians on holiday back to the island to visit their families. One middle-aged Australian, Joseph, was one of those visiting just for the festa. Joseph said that as a boy he grew up going to the races and had seen many over the years; the races were, and continue to be, one of his favorite activities during the festas. When I asked him why it appeared more men were at the horse races than women, he responded it had always been this way and even the professional races in Marsa on the island of Malta were male-dominated. Joseph said women were not spectators during the races in the past partly because the races were usually held in the evening when the temperatures were much cooler than in the daytime; at this time of day women were usually found doing household chores and could not find the time to go. In terms of women racing, Joseph suggested that it had been only within the last decade that women had taken up professional racing and opted to participate in the festas.

During my stay on Gozo, I saw only one female rider, and even she shocked many by racing. One man I was talking to, who was with his friend visiting after having lived elsewhere for thirty-eight years, was sure there were no women riders in the festa horse races. Minutes before the female racer passed by, this man voiced his doubts about female racers having a role in festa horse racing, although he had heard there were a few who professionally raced. When the female rider passed by, though, the man looked dumbfounded. He laughed and remarked to me, "Well there you go! I guess I was wrong! There are female riders!" The future of women's participation and attendance in horse racing is a question mark, however, if Maltese women follow their counterparts around the world, one may anticipate a change in both the audience and riders in years to come.

Gambling's Impact on Horse Racing

The gender distinction at horse races during festa can also be attributed to one activity in particular. Horse

race betting in Malta appears to appeal to a largely male audience. However, the practice of gambling itself was a controversial topic for many of my respondents. It is a well-known pastime to gamble during professional horse races in Malta, but, as for gambling during festas, people were conflicted as to how much betting actually occurred and to what degree it was appropriate. Richard guessed lighthearted gambling between family members happened, but it was not the same manner of gambling that one would find at the Marsa Racing Track. Others though, like a local storekeeper named Paul, who I interviewed the following morning after a race, believed horse racing during the festas was as competitive as in the professional setting. Those in agreement with Paul believed gambling plays a major role in the greater attendance of men at races. My respondents were unanimous in their belief that men, not women, participated in festa betting.

Beyond a gender statement, gambling at the festa horse races is interesting because it speaks to the ongoing secularization of festas. The storekeeper Paul, in particular, was disgusted with the concept of betting at a religious event. He and others were convinced that unethical practices were used to give horses a competitive edge. Richard, however, viewed gambling and horse racing in an entirely different perspective. In his mind, horse racing at festas was an extension of his country's historical and abiding love for horses and their care. Richard was a Gozitan who owned a horse that was involved in flat-racing, or the type of racing where a jockey sits on the back of a horse rather than in a sulky. He commented, "People enjoy the racing because they like to be near the horses and to work with the animals." He said there was not a competitive edge, other than a lighthearted one, to the festa's horse races; there could not possibly be one because there was nothing to really be competitive about. In his opinion, the horse races during the festas were conducted as a cultural expression; if owners and riders wanted to partake in the festas they would do so for the pleasure of participating, not for any personal, monetary gain. For the people who were racing their horses, Richard believed, there was no economic interest driving their entrance into the races.

Many of the owners and riders who were there to enjoy the atmosphere of the festa horse races said they had been participating since they were young. They began by racing Shetland ponies. Boys were selected and asked to ride the Shetland ponies because of their smaller body frames and lighter weight. I came across a 10 year-old boy who was going to be racing his newly owned pony that his parents had purchased for him. His father, who had once been a racer, was very excited for his son to start racing, starting

to race at the same age he had as a boy. Horse racing during the festas, as is in the case of this family, is done for the enjoyment of being a part of the horse racing culture and a family tradition.

My own observations were aligned to Richard's statements. Walking amongst the owners and riders, I was struck by the care and pride these men and boys had for their horses. As for the betting, I personally never observed any gambling outright. Perhaps because I am a woman, because I do not speak Maltese, or because there may be some community disapproval of gambling at festas, I did not witness any such activity.

Secularization of Festas Through Horse Racing

With all of the racers and owners that I conversed, none felt any sort of religious attachment to the horse races during the festa, and none viewed the festas with the religious fervor I had originally expected when I witnessed the rest of the festas' proceedings. To all I asked, the horse races were strictly a secular event that was added to the festas because it was a popular pastime that many enjoyed watching. Even if these riders and owners felt a more personal connection to the horse racing at festas compared to the other locals, tourists and general spectators, all were in agreement that the horse races were meant to provide entertainment for those attending the festa. For this reason, horse racing at festas receives both positive and negative reactions from community members. Because it does not have any religious significance, horse racing in festas is considered to have had a secularizing effect on the festivals.

The process of secularization has been controversial. To some, it has not been seen as damaging to the experiences and expectations of festas. In their eyes, community strengthening, not religious revival, is believed to be the greatest purpose of the festas. It does not matter if people are at festas to participate in watching horse racing or to attend mass; by having activities such as horse racing or fireworks, those who want to attend festas without having a religious obligation can, do so. Others, though, feel the secularization has negatively affected the festas; the activities and atmosphere are not considered appropriate for festas that pay homage to their Catholic heritage. Drinking, gambling and swearing are all reasons many, like Bishop Grech, a critic of current festas, worry that festas have lost their religious significance and are becoming simply "carnivals" ("Gozo Parish Priests Issue Festa Guidelines."). The celebration of local parishes including the traditional events of the statue procession, the singing of hymns and mass, he and others worry, are being overshadowed by secularization.

Secularization via horse racing, seemed to this observer, to be an integral part of modern day festas. However, as one who was able to observe the singing of the hymns and other religious functions of festas, the traditional elements of festas remain accessible to those who seek them. For me, there was no contradiction. The secular and the religious emphases both added to the breadth of experience available at festa. As festas are increasingly advertised for tourists, one cannot help but think this trend will continue. Being a detached outsider myself, though, I cannot begin to show my understanding for the discomfort felt by those pining for a purer tradition lost. As with all progress, for each gain, something else is lost.

The Role Tourism Plays

Tourism plays a major economic role within Malta, especially during the summer months of festa. Some believe festas have become multi-day street parties and primarily tourist attractions as party scenes for those on vacation. Ever since the country acceded to the European Union, efforts have been made to increase Malta's tourism industry. The article, *Tourism in the new Europe: the challenges and opportunities of EU enlargement?*, describes these efforts,

The Ministry for Tourism and Culture and the Malta Tourism Authority accessed LM90m (210.6million euro) between 2004 and 2006, covering four major areas of intervention concerning tourism, namely projects of assistance to tourism enterprises; projects leading to the upgrading of Malta's cultural heritage; projects for the upgrading of tourism infrastructure at key tourism areas; and human resources development programmes aimed at tourism and support services enterprises, employers and employees. (Theuma, 216)

By improving on these four areas, Malta has greatly increased its tourism industry. Images of festas, especially, have been used by the Malta Tourism Authority to attract cultural tourists. Unlike recreational tourists who are interested in leisure activities such as sun bathing at beaches, which Malta is exceptional at providing, cultural tourists are interested in delving into a culture's history and glimpsing its people's way of life (Boissevain, 1996: 6). Through advertisement, along with the desire to make profit off of cultural tourists, many 'cultural events' are adapted and secularized in an attempt to entertain and please tourists. The Malta Tourism Authority attempts to attract these tourists by promoting Maltese history and cultural events; one of these is its festas. One study

found that for all the brochures advertising Malta, depictions of cultural heritage images make up 22.9%, art and architecture make up 13.4%, local characteristics of Malta including pubs and people make up 8.4%, 12.7% depict local people primarily during festive celebrations, and cultural expressions including depictions of festas and other religious activities make up 5.7% (Theuma, 218). These categories often overlap with one another, and together these advertisements attract tourists from all over the world to come visit and partake in 'Maltese culture'. Firework displays, horse racing and other secular events that have recently been incorporated into festas within the last century make up some of the imagery meant to attract tourists. Tourists flocking to festas during summer months are able to connect with festas through these secular activities and through the party atmosphere they have been shown and expect as a result of Maltese marketing. As one article described, "Culture is invented, modified, and revitalized for tourists" (Boissevain, 1996: 12). As the festas continue to expand and adapt, activities meant to entertain the general public rather than just a local, religious audience will be shown and conducted for potential tourists. Regardless if one agrees with the morphing of 'traditional' festas for the sake of the tourists' enjoyment, I believe these alterations, such as the addition of horse racing, change the meaning of festas for the entire community created during the festival; the locals, the visitors, and the tourists are all affected. The effects of tourism have created a new cultural expression for the Maltese, that of horse racing during festas. Although its induction to festas is fairly new, many find horse racing during the festas to be a regular occurrence. For those who grew up racing or watching horse racing as part of the week of festa, the event seems like a standard inclusion at festas. When asked why it made sense that racing horses would be an acceptable practice to have during a religious feast that has been going on for centuries, most spectators were surprised to find that they had never actually considered the reasoning for this. Most explained that horse racing had been around at festas for a while and that they had always grown up knowing festas that included horse racing. Although it was recently added and is now promoted for the sake of tourism, horse racing has become part of the cultural heritage of festas. Originally introduced during Great Britain's control, horse racing during festas appears to have received enough positive feedback and acceptance from both the local Maltese and tourists that it has become a standard event at those festas that can accommodate for it. They continue to be among the most defining and popular events of Maltese summer months for locals, visitors and tourists.

Conclusion

In *Coping with Tourists: European Reactions to Mass Tourism*, it was noted that, "Communities have discovered themselves through the interest of tourists. This has encouraged reflection about their own traditions and cultures and stimulated the preservation of moribund crafts and rituals. This in turn has fed the more general revitalization of celebrations taking place throughout Europe" (Boissevain, 1996: 7). This phenomenon can adequately explain the changed dynamics of the festa and its inclusion of horse racing and the acceptance given to it by the community. It can be argued that popular feedback by outsiders can instill pride into one's own culture and provide an incentive for the expansion and maintenance of that cultural phenomenon.

Because many tourists began to watch these colourful events, government (and the anglicized elite, who had looked down upon such occasions) began to view parish religious pageants as an important cultural resource. This has given them added status and so encouraged their organizers. (Boissevain, 71; 1992)

Horse racing has found its niche in the 'tradition' of festas. Although it has brought in a secular component to the celebrations, horse racing itself has become a cultural expression for the Maltese people and is now a part of their collective memory of festas. Its overall acceptance by the community and by tourists has made horse racing during festas a highly anticipated and expected event during the summer months in Malta and will continue to be for years to come.

**Due to anthropological rules of confidentiality, names of people have been changed for the purpose of this thesis.*

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