

# When God Pulls Your Card: Fate and Risk Taking Behavior in Malta

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## S U M M A R Y

The following piece of ethnographic work explores the nuanced ideologies of risk taking behavior at play within the Maltese, mainly Gozitan, community. Specifically, the common occurrence of drunk driving is analyzed and understood as a possible result of shared Maltese social facts and notions of cultural faith or religious devotion. Other contributing factors are explored, such as an analysis of the impacts of tourism on local identity and the sheer size of Malta as a nation. Through the use of ethnographic interviews, I was introduced to a situated and diverse understanding of fate, which provided possible explanations on the driving force behind particular risk-taking behaviors. This notion of fate purports that death is predetermined by God and there is little one can do to change how mortality transpires. Thus, risky behavior is not seen as potentially dangerous because the threat of death is generally removed from the control of the individual. My research involves an extensive juxtaposition between North American narratives that one can save their own life by abstaining from risky behavior, versus the Maltese notion that behavioral policing as a form of self-preservation misses the fundamental ideology underpinning the social fact that it is God, or the universe, who has the power to dictate death. God and fate are used by some in a religious context, while others describe fate as a cultural understanding of the life.

## A R T I C L E I N F O

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*fate, risk, drunk driving, religious devotion, cultural perceptions, health and safety, tourism*

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## ***Introduction***

Landing in Luqa International Airport was a personally uncommon experience in that, unlike my other anthropological travels, I had no idea what to expect. I arrived as a clean slate, without prepossessed expectations, implanted images, or stereotypes about what awaited me. Our descent into Malta's tiny airport was an initial foreshadowing of things to come. Malta, ranked the 9th smallest country in the world (World Atlas), is a Mediterranean microstate which boasts some of the oldest histories in the world. Upon arriving, I was greeted by a driver who was sent by my Maltese host to deliver me to temporary accommodations. While the driver shared the excitement of my arrival, I could not ignore the overwhelming aroma of beer when he leaned forward to relieve me of my bags. Leading me out front to the awaiting vehicle, his slurred and rambling speech created an uneasy hesitation in me. As he stumbled to lift my bags into the trunk, I couldn't help but broach the subject. "Are you alright? You seem a

little, well....drunk.” I asked shyly. “I’m excellent!” he immediately quipped back as he delved into the explanation that today was the festa of his saint and that he was celebrating all day. A quick glance at passerbys showed that no one seemed to be the least bit alarmed by an obviously drunk man preparing to get in the driver’s seat. When I politely articulated my reservation about riding with him, I noticed a change in his demeanor. He clearly took a slight offense to my questioning his abilities. As he continued to try and convince me that it was no big deal to drive drunk, I was struck his redundant defense; “It’s okay. This is Malta!”

Resorting back to my “when in Rome” travel philosophy, I reluctantly gathered myself into the front seat. Clutching the hanging grip handle, I tried to keep up with his conversation as he gracefully weaved in and out of traffic. Apart from being unfamiliar with driving on the left side of the road, the general chaos of Maltese roads coupled with the realization that a drunk man was manning the vehicle spawned a bit of anxiety inside me. When we finally arrived at my destination at St. Paul’s Bay, I quickly recounted my ordeal to my host after we made our initial introduction. As I awaited his shock, I was met with only blank looks, as if he was waiting for the punch line of the joke which I thought was an obvious delivery. Despite his confusion of my concern, he echoed the same response as the driver; “It’s not really that unsafe. Not in Malta. And the festas are going on so everyone is generally a bit liquored up.” This, my first dose of Maltese culture shock, was also my first glimpse into the collective reality of life in Malta. The concept of safe drunk driving offered an opportunity to reflect on the culturally derived aspects of all the campaigns against drunk driving that bombarded my American youth.

Although issues of health and safety have become overwhelmingly medicalized due to beliefs on the universality of the human body, my fieldwork illuminated the compartmentalization of drunk driving as being another phenomenon that was somehow exempt from culture. Culturally comprised notions of risk assessment become regarded as biological facts based on statistical mortality outcomes as opposed to variances of cultural understandings that bare different relationships to cause and effect.

During my time in Malta, I found that the commonplace, if not quotidian, occurrence of drunk driving was related to four predominant factors: The impact of tourism, the size and infrastructure of mainland Malta and neighbor-

ing Gozo, shared cultural concepts of destiny and religious fate, and community relations with law enforcement. It is important to note that while drunk driving in no way pervades every member of society, it stood out as a pervasive trend deserving of anthropological inquiry. Although I interviewed a number of locals from varying ages, the majority of my informants whose drinking behavior I experienced first-hand were men and women who fell between the ages of 18 to 30. While men were more frequently documented as the driver, female informants seemed to show no reservations with riding along which hinted at drunk driving as a practiced embedded in the deeper dynamics of gender and masculinity. The behaviors and attitudes highlighted in this piece reflect the personalities of only those whom I encountered and developed relationships with. These participants are only a small percentage of the overall Maltese population, but it does not disqualify the implication that their insights could reflect larger portions of the population as samples of cultural tendencies.

### ***Visit Malta: Mini “Mediterranean Paradise”***

For a nation that is five times smaller than the city of London and split into three islands, intimate community relations are an integral component of Maltese social fabric. With tourism as one of its main sources of Gross Domestic Production (GDP), the country hosts three times the amount of tourists than there are residents on a yearly basis (Mangion and Vella 2000). Malta is generally polarized into two demographics: locals and visitors. Resident Maltese people take a great amount of pride abstaining from what is thought of as “touristic” activities and behavior. This includes taking taxis. During the many encounters observing Maltese drinking behavior, I never once saw a local opt to take a taxi when they were intoxicated. When I asked inebriated locals how they got to the bar and how they planned to get home, the majority of responses I received expressed a degree of laughability that they would call a taxi. One man responded, “This is my island. I know it like the back of my hand. I can drive here drunk, high or blind, and still get home safe.” Although this may come off as hubris, it is important to note that Malta has the lowest number of per capita alcohol-related deaths in the EU 27 (World Life Expectancy, 2015) despite the liberal rate of drunk driving. Thus, I sensed that informants were definitely onto something when they divulged that the size of the country made it

feel as though there was no risk involved. In fact, sentiments of familiarity and ownership of the island were recurring themes which further justified local ideas that taxis were for people who hadn't grown up there, didn't know the island, and didn't have the navigational skills that only a local could possess.

Fortunately, this local pride made meeting people very easy, as the Maltese feel responsible for showing non-tourist foreigners a taste of 'real' Malta. This welcoming, open attitude afforded me a window into local quotidian life, but also challenged my boundaries of comfort, since I could not avoid researching drunk driving without actually getting in a car with an intoxicated driver. While being a foreign passenger in Malta can be scary regardless of whether the driver is intoxicated or sober, the only time I encountered a close-call during my time there was when a non-local was driving. Blind corners, unstable ground, and narrow thoroughfares are a common component of Malta's many ancient roads whose construction predate the invention of the automobile. In fact, the biggest safety and security warning issued to tourists by the British Foreign Office cautioned travelers about the driving culture. "Take care while driving as some roads are in poor condition. Local standards of driving are poor."

Maltese driving culture may seem chaotic and lawless to outsiders, but is actually very intricate and guided through the experience of living or growing up in Malta. Thus, the feelings of confidence that underpinned the willingness to drive drunk were integrally linked to Malta's status as a touristic landing place. The prevalence of tourism develops Maltese identity as being apart from this industry; that is, Maltese people are recognized as such because they are not tourists. Local culture exists within the absence of tourism. Mastery over the land, which is exercised by driving without limitations, is an example of local displays of Maltese culture. Since taking taxis is regarded as "what tourists do," being at home in Malta affords locals the convenience of self-sufficiency and independence from broader regulation.

One of the first questions I would ask newly introduced Maltese people was "What was it like growing up in Malta?" Time and time again I heard the same general response, "Boring!" This was intriguing since Malta is a popular tourist destination and celebrated as a beautiful, exciting, and magical paradise. Thus, behind the stage curtain of exoticism rests the ennui of monotony. Tourism operates under manufactured constructs that

present culture as a commodity (Reid, 2003). Local people become the display agents of Maltese culture through an industry which aggrandizes their home country as an attraction exempt from the minutia of daily life. Local life takes place in the circadian spaces on the margins of popular beaches and restaurants. Thus, the Maltese are always on the outside looking in to tourism despite their role in its production because they have a different relationship to the land. There is a certain degree of knowledge and command of the tiny country which is required to call oneself Maltese. Homegrown locals have generally explored every corner of the three islands; many like to boast that there is nowhere in Malta they hadn't been. This overexposure combined with a lack of environmental novelty was conducive to a hyperawareness of the locale. The level of comfort some locals feel over the roads and terrain is not diminished by the effects of alcohol or any fear of punishment through breaking the law because of the degree of social normalcy that embodies the behavior. While it is said that the effects of alcohol-use contribute to uninhibited feelings and conduct, it is important to mention that what I am investigating is not the result of the biological effects of drinking, but instead a shared social reality in which drinking and driving is not held with the same stigmatization as it does in other cultures.

Another important factor to include in this analysis is the general infrastructure and environment of Malta. Most roads are rural and rocky, and as one local put it, "there's only one road to anywhere." With a lack of high-speed roads and alternate routes, traffic continues to be a huge problem on the condensed islands. Winding, narrow, and blind curves are common and often require the driver to honk as a warning that they are approaching a potentially oncoming car. Coupled with this, the quality of roads hinder many drivers from achieving high acceleration. Therefore, it would be erroneous to assume that driving while intoxicated always translates to the American portrayals of disorderly and reckless vehicular conduct because this depiction is not only culturally entrenched, but locally specific to terrain and infrastructure. For this purpose, drunk driving should not be seen as synonymous with careless, rampageous driving.

This misleading trope gives the false impression that anyone over the legal limit is not within their own personal, self-determined, or culturally derived means to drive, or that they are always doing so imprudently. Given that there are rarely pedestrians on rural roads, and that bikers are still very scarce in Malta, the environment of the

terrain and cultural makeup help explain why global, generalized ideas of safe or unsafe behaviors are not exempt from cultural particulars. While it would be untrue to say that everyone in Malta believes drunk driving is safe, I can attest to the loose statement that most Maltese people would say that it is safer to execute in Malta as opposed to in San Francisco, or at least incomparable.

### ***Religion in Malta: Accidents as Divine Interventions***

Malta, by constitutional decree, is Roman Catholic with 95% of its inhabitants identifying as religious; the highest in all of the European Union (Ayling, n.d.). While my main informants were reluctant to discuss their religious beliefs and expressed that the new generation of Maltese youth is growing up culturally religious and not necessarily devout, they shared a collective positivity about the idea that God does exist, or at least verbalized in a recurring fashion the viewpoint that “everything happens for a reason.” This ideology seemed to be integrally tied to the legitimization of accepting risk when participating, or whether choosing to participate in what would otherwise be deemed “risky behavior” by Americans. That is, behavior in which one would generally be counseled to avoid due to its hazardous, precarious or generally unhealthy nature as outlined by American and Western European campaigns of safety. This in no way means that Maltese culture disregards good judgment- it merely unpacks a view in which individuals do not try to feign control over that which they ultimately have no authority. In fact, it is a testament to the nuanced and culturally derived meanings of judgment itself.

I initially started my fieldwork in search of families who had lost a loved one in a drinking related accident. While I did meet two families, I was struck by the way they did not blame alcohol for the death but instead digested it as God’s calling. In one particular conversation, my informant discussed candidly the loss of her cousin who she described as “a wild heart” who loved partying. I insensitively responded, “Is that what finally took him from you?” She looked back at me with confusion. “No...God just pulled his card.” Coming from a culture in which alcohol or the decision to drink is given a great deal of culpability when it results in a death, I was very intrigued by the whole-hearted acceptance of death in Maltese culture as something that happens, but that none of us can control. She continued, “An accident is just that- an accident.

I mean, think of how many times you did something stupid or crazy and should be dead right now but you’re not. Or all the people who did nothing wrong and still were killed. My uncle ate right and exercised his whole life and died of cancer at 45. It’s not a matter of following the correct rules to live long, it’s just a matter of when it’s your time it’s your time.”

I discussed this with a local priest from Qala, Gozo when I inquired about the religious justification of lost loved ones due to drunk driving as a perception of what “God wanted”. He expanded, “The decision to blame the drunk driving overshoots the macro view that, in the end, it was God who chose to take the life. People drive drunk every day without repercussion, then die from being struck by lightning. How can we explain that? Yet, when a life is taken through drunk driving, many Western countries tend to blame the act, which presupposes that they had control over their own deaths. God controls everything. Of course, he puts in our hands the tools to navigate the world, but he and he alone decides when to take a person from this Earth. If we can avoid death by doing certain behaviors, then explain to me why some people can smoke their whole lives and die of old age while we bury infants for unknown sudden deaths.”

While it would be inaccurate to state that this logic is shared by all Maltese people, I certainly did encounter an acceptance of death as beyond one’s control as pervasive enough to be a topic of exploration. I recall one night I went with a group of locals to a high cliff at the Xlendi Bay inlet. I initially did not take their comments seriously when they said they intended to jump off the tall bluffs into the Mediterranean Sea hundreds of feet below. When we reached the top, I soon realized how serious they were. While they initially joked at making me jump as a rite of passage, it quickly became apparent that they had no real intention of allowing me, a foreign non-Maltese person, to plunge to my death. As they playfully coaxed me “Come on! It’ll be fun!”, a disinterest in slipping and cracking my head open motivated me to politely decline. My fear of their favorite pastime was good humor to them, although they finally admitted. “No, you’d better not.” Apart from my sigh of relief upon their resurfacing, the insight that it was not risky for them, but would be potentially fatal for me was telling. When I asked why most foreigners end up dead when attempting the rocks, the veteran jumper explained. “Well, because we know the area and the water, and know when the wind is safe and when the tide is right. I wouldn’t go to some other country and do jumps

like this, because I don't know the lay of the land." Apart from being a further illustration of risk assessment guided by experiential familiarity, his response echoed what I heard so many locals say about drunk driving. That is, while no one would say it's a good idea to have 10 beers and drive around all day, one must understand that there is a different level of risk involved when there is an imbedded acquaintance with the act. The risk becomes diminished through the naturalization of normalized behavior, such as having a drink or operating a vehicle, and experientially set parameters of familiarity. In other words, when what some perceive as a risk becomes an expectation, confidence in delivery coupled with an accepting audience builds security in the behavior and diminishes the perception of danger through exposure.

### ***Risk: Challenging Cultural Notions of Safety***

Coming from a culture filled with anti-drunk-driving campaigns that include public DUI shamings, graphic imagery of crash sites made public, and the common sight of roadside shrines for drunk driving victims, my findings in Malta contradicted everything I learned about drunk driving prevention in America. Of which, this education included a presentation called "Every 15 Minutes" where beloved friends and school peers are bloodied and arranged around a crashed vehicle to simulate the emotion (and gore) of what drunk driving "really looks like."

*"The Every 15 Minutes Program [is an] emotionally charged program designed to dramatically instill teenagers with the potentially dangerous consequences of drinking alcohol while driving. During the first day events, the "Grim Reaper" calls students who have been selected from a cross-section of the entire student body out of class. One student is removed from class every 15 minutes. A police officer will immediately enter the classroom to read an obituary which has been written by the "dead" student's parent(s) - explaining the circumstances of their classmate's demise and the contributions the student has made to the school and the community. A few minutes later, the student will return to class as the "living dead," complete with white face make-up, a coroner's tag, and a black Every 15 Minutes T-shirt." (Everyfifteenminutes.org n.d.)*

From there, a simulated traffic collision is brought onto campus and police officers deliver the heartbreaking news to parents that their child was killed in an accident. Surrounding the collision scene are simulated dead bodies and doctored wounds which illustrate the bloody visual of death by blunt force. In continuance with the performance, police officers publically arrest and book the student charged with drunk driving as a symbol that it is more than just the dead who suffer in tragedy. Students are taken to the morgue, the ER, and the local jail to see how each end of the story plays out. Students are then made to write a letter to their families with the opener "Dear Mom and Dad, every fifteen minutes someone in the United States dies from an alcohol-related traffic collision. Today I died. I never had the chance to tell you...". At the end of the day, all students gather in the auditorium to watch an infamous documentary film called *Red Asphalt*.

As a student who experienced this event first hand when in high school, one can understand my initial reaction upon my first encounter with the drunk chauffeur and why I erroneously deduced from this experience that Malta must suffer from a high number of drunk driving accidents and casualties. As previously stated, the statistics did not support this. In fact, Malta ranked at a very low #96 on an international scale for alcohol related deaths. The United States, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, Germany, France, Denmark and Finland all came in within the top 40, despite their heavy emphasis on drunk driving public service campaigns. Malta does, however, have the highest BAC (blood alcohol content) level with the legal limit set at 0.8. And, although the legal age for public drinking was recently raised from 16 to 17 (Xuereb 2013), the glamorization of getting drunk was not as present in Maltese culture as I experienced in the United States. This could perhaps be because drinking is not such a forbidden taboo for youth, as having a beer seemed to generally be in the same realm of having coffee or tea. The American practice of creating trauma to dissuade trauma seemed to have very little effect on actual statistics and the moderately high number of deaths which were a result of drunk driving. Thus, cultural particularities are a big factor to consider when trying to unpack data about why the cultural destigmatization of drunk driving among some Maltese does not necessarily translate into hazardous outcomes and higher drunk driving accidents.

### ***Law Enforcement: Who's watching the Watchers?***

One of the main questions I was left with when researching the ideology behind drunk driving in Malta was how has it become so destigmatized despite the fact that it was officially against the law. After all, it would be a very rare occurrence to hear that a police officer turned a blind eye from an intoxicated driver in the U.S.A. It is important to note, however, that according to a recent study by the American Census Bureau and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, an overwhelming majority of law enforcement officers do not live in the areas and neighborhoods they patrol (Silver 2014). This is not the case in Malta. While American law enforcement officers experience a degree of anonymity in the community they police and can, therefore, dissociate to some degree due to barriers of their personal identity and non-conflictive allegiance with their own community membership (Willits and Nowacki 2013), Maltese police are not afforded this separation. Given Malta's tiny size and intimate social contracts, anonymity would be a difficult feat. Plain and simple, police are members of a very close-knit locality in which, in most cases, their ties to the community must compete with the demands of their job. When I asked my Maltese host if he was ever pulled over for drunk driving he said "Yeah! A few times. But usually, they let me go. My best friend's dad is a police officer, and most people know my mother who has taught school in Mosta for over 40 years. So, it would be seen as a betrayal to her and the family if they locked her son up for something everyone does. People might say to the cop "Why didn't you just call his family if he was really that bad? Why did you have to jail him?"

Therefore, Malta's size and emphasis on community and family ties create a scenario of police being bastions of a personal community in which they are a part of, instead of apart from. This affirms the notion that drunk driving in Malta is not such a risky behavior since fear of incarceration is relatively low, and also supports the cultural ideology that drunk driving is something that happens, but is not conducive to death since death is commonly viewed as a predetermined notion of "one's time to go." As previously pondered, one must wonder why, given the degree of fervor and explicitness in campaigning, America ranks higher than Malta when it comes to drunk driving deaths. Of course, this is a very complex question and involves a plethora of factors. It does highlight, however,

the fact that the social act of drinking and driving is regarded mostly as a cultural perception, depending on what landmass you are standing on, and in no way can be regarded as a statistical, medical, or scientific universal.

### ***Conclusion***

The phenomenon of drunk driving in Malta or the United States is yet another testament to the weight of cultural particulars. While no single factor can explain how or why certain countries experience a higher or lower number of drunk driving related accidents, an undeniable factor at play has to do with the underlying grammar of the community which discerns certain behaviors as risky or not. These views are generally complemented by various secondary supports such as religious views, cultural values, experiential or collective history, and varying concepts of logical reasoning. They are also influenced by physical components, such as the quality of infrastructure and environment. While the related factors explored in this piece in no way exhaust the list of possible determinants and influences, it offers an insight into comparative understandings of cross-cultural truths in the intersection of life and death.

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