

LOCAL COMMUNITY, IDENTITY AND PROBLEMS OF ULTIMATE MEANING

MARIO VASSALLO

Abstract - Modernisation and globalisation are deeply affecting the social fabric of traditional village societies. The opening up of traditional societies is at times perceived as a gain; at other times as a loss. Increasingly it is being realised however that problems of ultimate meaning can only be solved in the private sphere, and in this context the local community has a lot to offer as it provides, even in an environment which has gradually developed eclectic accretions, a unitary metacode for its members. This paper examines the extent to which this is true in small village communities in Malta, a small island state in the Mediterranean, whose villages are now completely open to change and modernisation, and in which globalisation has affected the lives of the villagers in all its aspects.

Introduction

The Maltese archipelago covers an area of 317.2 square kilometres and is situated in the centre of the Mediterranean, 93 kilometres south of Sicily and 288 kilometres north of Africa. The population of Malta stands at one third of a million.

Before Malta acquired its Independence, a long list of colonisers had dominated the archipelago, and these included the Arabs (870-1090); the Normans (1090-1266); the Angevins (1266-1283); the Aragonese (1283 - 1410); the Castilians (1412-1530); the Order of St John (1530-1798); the French (1798-1800) and the British (1800-1964).

Up to a few decades ago, life in Malta was all of-a-piece, with barely any structural differentiation in the way society was organised. Even before the advent of the British, a number of attempts to push Maltese autonomy had taken place by audacious nationalists, but these were repeatedly squashed one way or another. Especially during the British period, the affairs of Malta depended extensively, if not exclusively, on the needs of the British Empire. The islands were considered strategically important for the maintenance of military power especially in times of war, and economic activity reflected such needs. In fact, war in the region meant prosperity on the island because it was then given importance, but the opposite was equally true in peacetime. Contrary to the expectations of the Maltese, the British presence had spread its tentacles on all aspects of life, rather than providing assistance to help the Maltese in their predicament when Napoleon Bonaparte ousted the Knights of St John from ruling Malta. The famous Maltese Declaration of Rights had been accepted by the British only to the extent that it was convenient for them to do so and merely to the extent that it allowed them to get a secure foothold on the island.

The population at large was cushioned from being completely acculturated by the British colonisers by two very important processes that had served them well at other times of the island's chequered history. Religion and Maltese, the indigenous language of the islanders, effectively acted as surrogates for national identity for the Maltese throughout the successive experiences of foreign domination. The Maltese at large managed to keep their communities integrated and distant from the colonisers through their constant use of an indigenous language, Maltese, a variety of Arabic and by religion itself. Maltese, an underdeveloped Semitic language was effectively the language of the people, used in their daily discourse and even if without any literary history, was practically the only effective means of communication among them. Very few Maltese had gone through formal education and only these had become conversant in Italian, then the language of culture in Malta. As such, Italian had developed locally in parallel to its development in Italy, and was used in Malta in the courts, by the clerics and even in the few newspapers and other publications that existed. To this group of *litterati*, as they were known, the use of Italian was the way in which they distinguished themselves as cultured, but at the same time, as *different* from the colonisers. Maltese, the language of the locals, was strong at the level of interpersonal communication, even though it was held low in esteem by foreigners, a good number of *litterati* themselves and by professionals who did not want to be associated with, except by extending patronage, to the common folk.

The other important mechanism that traditionally bound the Maltese together was their belief structures. Practically all the Maltese profess Catholicism even today. Christianity is believed to go back to the times of the shipwreck of the apostle Paul, as described in the Acts of the Apostles, even though it is very likely that it was actually lost during the Arab rule. But the Arab period was followed by a new foreign power, and Catholicism established its presence at every stem of Maltese roots and eventually became indeed pervasive. To each Maltese, for many centuries religion had provided the framework for a local system of organising their affairs at all levels, namely civil and religious. Indeed one could barely talk of a distinction of social spheres: the dividing lines between politics and religion, the economy and the Church, leisure and religious practice, family life and the Church were indeed thin, and hardly discernible.

With mass education, when this became compulsory in the aftermath of World War II, things were bound to change. The presidency of the Church was forcefully shaken when a new group of indigenous leaders developed a party-system that, despite all odds, gradually led Malta to achieve Independence from Britain in the first half of the 1960s. As a result, the Church did not provide any more the only status route to power for the locals. Concomitantly, the need for a new island state to survive made the need to diversify its economy and shed its erstwhile dependence on expenditure of foreign military services stationed in Malta, even more urgent. The resultant tourist influx, now possible as Europeans discovered

cheaper and faster air travel, swiftly transformed the Mediterranean into the Europeans' holiday resort, and brought many more Maltese in direct contact with foreigners of a different kind from those they were used to before. The massive military presence in Malta in time of war especially, had put many Maltese in contact with outsiders, especially British. Tourism had not only diversified the culture of origin of these outsiders, but the context in which they had visited the island. Now they were on holiday, and therefore keen to shed the inhibitions that are normal in daily living, but which are often perceived to spoil the fun of a holiday. The new social mores quickly started to spill over to the Maltese, especially those in contact with tourists, and 'fun' acquired new meanings and new ways of being understood by the locals. Many Maltese, young and old, unconsciously started to compare their own rather restricted traditions with those of the seemingly more liberated and 'modern' visitors. Erstwhile taboo areas like sexual activity, family life, religious practices, and socialisation patterns began to be looked at differently. The novel outlooks on life naturally influenced all spheres of life and the value system traditionally upheld by the Maltese.

Tourism, education and national politics were of course not the only agents that produced such changes. Television and the new media, continued to contribute to the gradual melting of traditional values and modes of behaviour. The Maltese started to venture abroad in increasing numbers as tourism became more popular and group travel started to be organised and priced within the reach of the average Maltese. Secularisation soon became a very visible phenomenon, and one that was deeply felt in both clerical and outside circles. At the same times, enforced secularisation became a not-so-hidden agenda of one of the main local political parties which, especially through its hot debates with the Church both when in government and outside, had introduced some novel notions of the role of conscience, of the distinction between religion and the Church, of secular and religious spheres, which had been completely alien to previous generations of Maltese (Vassallo 1977).

In the early 1980s Malta experienced a massive rallying around the Church when the Labour administration undertook measures to take over control of Church schools and a strong de-secularisation trend developed. But this trend was secular and instrumental. The process of secularised secularisation is documented in Vassallo (1981b). The rallying around the Church against the Labour government was a classical case that resulted from the need which many parents felt: they had to affront a strong national government that was seemingly eroding what was perceived a natural right. In these circumstances, established religion met all the conditions for it to be instrumentalised by the Maltese to require surrogate functions. But once this necessity did not exist any more, the broader pattern of secularisation continued, and still continues.

The private sphere

Contemporary Malta is heavily affected by the globalisation process. Its economy is open to the winds of the international markets, its culture wide open to the influences of the modern media. What happens in cyberspace is at least as real as what happens in the local village square. Politically and economically Malta sees itself as a full member of the European Union, socially its citizens consider themselves citizens of the world, equal in rights and obligations to those of any other developed nation.

Given that life in the contemporary local community in Malta has had to shrink to make room for the global village what are the issues of identity that are latent in the mind of the individual Maltese? What is the role of the local community? What function if any do local events, local festivities and local concerns play? In other words, how is the globalisation process affecting the individual Maltese at a moment when the traditional social structures do not seem to be relevant to success any more in the open global market place.

This paper seeks to map some answers to these loaded questions. The role of local festivities and folklore, including that which derived from religion, acquired a new meaning with the growth of mass tourism. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, when the first wave of tourists in search of sun and sand started to subside as other 'spots in the sun' came to be discovered at the height of mass tourism in Europe, the Maltese had to look inward for cultural artefacts which could be sold as wares to inquisitive tourists. An unconscious soul-searching exercise was undertaken and what had been often criticised as traditional and old-fashioned suddenly became to be better appreciated as a cultural artefact worth showing to visitors. Thus village festas, and all the craftsmanship associated with them, suddenly transformed themselves from being activities engaged for their own sake into marketable commodities. What, in the 1960s, scholars like Jeremy Boissevain had prophesised to be on the way out as a result of rapid social change, acquired a new leash of life.

The decline forecast was based on four main arguments:

- socio-economic development was bound to undermine the legitimating power of religion in the local community, and with the demise of a local power base, traditional festas would decline;
- secularisation brought about by education, widespread exposure to outside values etc. would relativise traditional structures, including the local community and its festivals;
- extended socialisation would reconfigure the interests of the local community as that of each individual extends towards infinity through the novel means of communication and information; and
- the Vatican Council itself was bound to purify popular religiosity out of its traditional piety and make it more knowledge-based on modern theological insights.

Instead, the opposite appears to be taking place. Traditional festas not only did not decline but, external manifestations of joy and celebration have now increased extensively on what was the case a number of years ago. They increased also in those communities where there was practically no tradition of internal competition and strife between two opposing groups, respectively organised in support of different saints, as was the case in a number of the smaller communities. (Vassallo 1979 and 1981a in which Boissevain 1965 and 1969 are referred to). Despite the advent of Internet and cyberspace, the aspirations and pressures from the global market, the village festas continue to increase even today. A case study of Siggiewi illustrates why the villagers continue to participate in these festivities.

The Siggiewi case

Siggiewi is a community of around seven thousand residents. Siggiewi is a traditionally rural village and is physically located in the middle of good arable land. What life was like around fifty years is best illustrated from a short quotation from the diary of the village vice-parish priest, written soon after the Second World War:

In order not to shake the piety of the faithful or give source to idle gossip the vice-Parish priest has to surrender each time to all calls of the faithful which at times are so tiresome. And this surrender means something: it means patience, self-denial, endurance and utter prostration. It means sometimes to spend whole hours locked up in dirty and filthy rooms by the side of the dying which in most cases are sick-smelling, covered with lies [lice], ugly looking, horribly blood-bleeding (sometimes) in cases of casualties, and at times affected by infectious disease, all of them groaning under pains of an agony, which only God knows when it will end... To say, only in one month of January I have had more than 14 night calls...

What a nice thing it is to get out many a time in a hurry, on certain winter cold nights under a pouring rain splashing in water and mud... to spend long hours by the bed of the sick...

[as quoted in Vassallo, 1979: 150-151]

Since then things have changed radically. All the houses have all the amenities, sometimes running into two or three state-of-the-art bathrooms. Very few of the villagers work in the fields full-time, even though some still cultivate small plots of land as a part-time hobby. Illiteracy is practically inexistent, education is universal and a very large number of young people proceed with tertiary education. Inter-marriages with neighbouring villages are very common. Computers are to be found in practically every household, and exposure to and participation in all the aspects of globalisation and extended socialisation at work outside the village, through the media, through tourism and through foreign travel are now taken for granted. If the Boissevain prediction were to materialise, the villagers would have long relativised the importance of the village festa, and they would have long

abandoned the cult of St Nicholas, their patron saint. They have not, and the village festa is celebrated as the most important day of the community, in which everybody participates and to which natives of Siggiewi who have moved to settle elsewhere, like to return to celebrate with their kith and kin on this special day.

Village Festa

On the eve and on the day of a recent festa, a group of 103 randomly selected persons over the age of 12 were interviewed and asked about their feelings and thoughts on that day. Interviewing was conducted in the main village square and in neighbouring streets. Of this group, 3% had been born in Siggiewi but were living outside the village, whilst 5% were living in the village but had been born somewhere else. Table 1 gives other details of the sample profile.

Table 1: Sample Profile

	TOTAL	GENDER		SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUP			
		MALE	FEMALE	AB	C1	C2	DE
N=	103	55	48	13	33	35	22
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
12-17	17.5	16.4	18.8	7.7	18.2	14.3	27.3
18-25	15.5	16.4	14.6	15.4	21.2	11.4	13.6
26-35	16.5	14.5	18.8	23.1	21.2	11.4	13.6
36-50	20.4	23.6	16.7	15.4	18.2	25.7	18.2
51-65	15.8	14.5	16.7	30.8	9.1	14.3	18.2
65+	14.6	14.5	14.6	7.7	12.1	22.9	9.1

(Base=All)

Through an open-ended question, respondents were first asked to list what they liked most about the Siggiewi festa. Respondents were free to list more than one item. Table 2 summarises the findings.

The breakdowns in Table 2 clearly show that the spiritual elements of the feast, though important, are not the most sought after. It is indeed very significant that as many as 43.7% spontaneously stated that what they like most about the feast is the sense of community which it generates. Band marches and decorations were repeatedly mentioned, as if they were the most necessary ingredients of the event. Very interestingly too, this orientation is found among both males and females, among all age groups, and among all the socio-economic groups. Mention of a sense of community is even higher among the younger age groups and the higher socio-economic groups.

Table 2: What is most liked in the Village Festa by gender, age and socio-economic group

	Total	GENDER		AGE					
		Male	Female	12-17	18-25	26-35	36-50	51-65	65+
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Brass Bands	59.2	54.5	64.6	83.3	62.5	64.7	42.9	18.8	86.7
Decorations	55.3	65.5	43.8	66.7	50.0	70.6	52.4	50.0	40.0
Sense of Community	43.7	49.1	37.5	50.0	43.8	70.6	23.8	56.3	20.0
Church Functions	35.9	21.8	52.1	22.2	12.5	41.2	57.1	25.0	53.5
The Statue	11.7	14.5	8.3	25.0	12.5	17.6	19.0	-	-

	Total	SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUP			
		AB	C1	C2	DE
	%	%	%	%	%
Brass Bands	59.2	53.8	66.7	51.4	63.6
Decorations	55.3	53.8	60.6	54.3	50.0
Sense of Community	43.7	61.5	57.6	34.3	27.3
Church Functions	35.9	38.5	24.2	42.9	40.9
The Statue	11.7	23.1	6.1	14.3	9.1

(Base=All)

In contrast, when respondents were asked what they did they did not like about the festa, more than one-third could not provide an answer. A long list of sundry items were mentioned, but the most common elements listed were: any quarrels which might erupt between different groups (39.8%); the extent of rubbish generated (11.7%); a mid-day carnival style band march (10.7%) which is followed by a street disco in the heat of a summer day (9.7%), especially by those over 36 years of age; too much expense on fireworks (7.8%); and excessive drinking (6.8%). Once more, it needs to be noted that elements which could mar a community feeling take priority in the list of non-desiderata summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: What is least liked in the Village Festa

<i>N=103</i>	%
Any quarrels which might erupt between different groups	39.8
Rubbish generated	11.7
A mid-day carnival style band march	10.7
A street disco in the heat of a summer day	9.7
Excessive expense on fireworks	7.8
Excessive drinking	6.8

(Base=All)

To what extent do the current residents of Siggiewi participate in the different ‘events’ that take place inside the church and outside the church? Table 4 shows that the need to celebrate is more forcefully exhibited through the more extensive participation in external festivities, rather than in the liturgical or para-liturgical ones. As was to be expected, participation in the liturgical and para-liturgical events during the week-long festivities were found to be more popular with the more mature members of the community. But the reverse is not true for participation in the external festivities, which registered a very high percentage among all age groups, except for those aged 51-65 in which only a relatively low 50% stated that they do participate in external festivities.

Table 4: Extent of Participation in Internal and External Festivities

<i>N=103</i>	Total	12-17	18-25	26-35	36-50	51-65	65+
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Participation in Internal Celebrations	59.2	55.6	43.8	61.9	75.0	75.0	73.3
Participation in External Celebrations	73.8	83.3	75.0	88.2	76.2	50.0	66.7

(Base=All)

Celebration and jollification can be ends in themselves. But they could also provide the occasion for the re-creation of group identity and the tending of damaged boundaries. Respondents in this study were tested on these aspects and specifically asked whether they would salute persons with whom they were not on speaking terms if they met during the festa. They were subsequently asked also whether they would make an attempt to stop and speak to such a person. The findings are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Extent of ‘Saluting’ and ‘Talking to’ a person with whom one is not on talking terms if this person is met during the Festa

N=103	GENDER			AGE					
	Total	Male	Female	12-17	18-25	26-35	36-50	51-65	65+
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Salute person	82.5	83.6	81.3	88.9	81.3	70.6	71.4	100.0	86.7
Stop to talk	76.7	50.6	81.3	77.8	75.0	64.7	66.7	93.8	86.7

	SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUP				
	Total	AB	C1	C2	DE
	%	%	%	%	%
Salute person	82.5	100.0	81.8	80.0	77.3
Stop to talk	76.7	92.3	72.7	77.1	72.7

(Base=All)

Interestingly enough, the percentages of those who ‘would mend their fences’ on the occasion of the festa, are larger than the percentages of those who do not. But the differences registered across gender, age groups and socio-economic groups are worth noting. Males are generally more ready than females to salute, but much more reticent to stop and talk to a person with whom they are not on talking terms if they meet him/her on festa day. On the other hand the older a person is, and the higher his or her socio-economic status, the more is it likely that the person makes an effort to make up by actually stopping to talk to the other person.

By its very nature, a village festa is a mixture of religious and civil traditions, and the increase in the external, more secularised aspects naturally prompted the question on whether respondents thought that they could still celebrate the feast without St Nicholas coming into it. This question was meant to measure the extent of ‘secularity’ that had accrued to the event. Only 21.4% instantly stated that they would still be able to celebrate the feast without the saint. Of these, the largest percentage was registered among those aged 26-35 (29.4%) and among C1 respondents (27.3%).

Of those who did not immediately agree with such a possibility, 76.7% forcefully rejected the idea, whilst the remaining 1.9% felt that they could not commit themselves. The reasons given by the 76.7% are however very revealing. Of these, 36.7% stated that the saint is indispensable for the feast; 20.3% stated that the feast was ‘his feast day’, but the remaining 39.2% gave a much more community oriented response: ‘the saint is the patron of the community and the symbol of its unity’.

Conclusion

This limited study of the perceptions of Siggiewi of the festa celebrated in their community, and the language used by people of different age groups and social background suggests that the local community not only has not broken down, but confirms that there are new demands for it to be kept alive even at a time when it is no longer necessary as it was when life was all of-a-piece and *Gemeinschaft* existed naturally. Even though in reality the people interviewed interact very little in their day-to-day lives, they have asserted that the festa provides them with the opportunity to create, idyllically perhaps, the community that is effectively lost. The jollification and the festivities associated with the festa are providing the individual with a meta-message that he or she badly needs in a time of rapid social change. That this is so, is clearly evident from the fact that so many of the persons interviewed listed as the most important elements of the feast elements that are not strictly related to the liturgy or purely religious acts.

To the people interviewed for this study, the community has a lot to offer as it provides, even in an environment that has gradually developed eclectic accretions, a unitary metacode which allows them to rediscover their roots in a small environment where face to face relationships still matter. Even when asked about the relevance of the saint himself in whose honour the festa is held, the language used is quite revealing. For those who stated that they would still celebrate without the saint, the language is clearly monolingual and the emphasis of the whole event is unambiguously communitarian. Among those who insist that the saint is important, more than one third emphasized the communitarian dimension when they spontaneously stated that the saint is their patron as a group, and therefore the symbol of their unity.

And what most people meant when referring to community is not an idea, but an ideal which they were prepared to achieve through a special effort to re-establish good relationships with others with whom they were no longer on talking terms. This is a clear case of an accretion of *Zweckrationalität* in an area of activity that would otherwise be participated in for its own sake. (Vassallo 1996).

In summary therefore, the data from this limited study suggests that the resurgence of community feeling so manifestly evident during a village festa is not merely the result to satisfy some of the needs created by mass tourism. It can also be traced to deeper needs for recognition of oneself and of the value of belonging to a natural community as the obvious locus where such recognition can best be assured. Although individuals no longer live their whole lifetime in constant interaction with their neighbours and next of kin, they feel the need to continue to celebrate and increase the public manifestation of solidarity at least once a year. The use of traditional custom in itself is fast becoming more necessary for the community to re-affirm itself as the context where the individual can discover meaning. As a cultural artefact, the festa represents an annual event that revitalises the individual and the

community as they come to terms with the continued atomisation in civil interaction, of which more is to be expected as globalisation engulfs more areas of the individual's personal and social space. Paradoxically, as the individual's cosmology widens, the importance of the local acquires new prominence.

MARIO VASSALLO read *Philosophy, Economics and Italian* for his first degree at the Royal University of Malta. He also carried out postgraduate studies for the degree of D.Phil. in *Sociology* at the University of Oxford. Since 1975 he has been teaching *Sociology and Social Policy* at the University of Malta. He lectured for one year at the London School of Economics and Political Science between 1979-1980 and at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, West Germany, in 1981-1982. For a number of years he was the coordinator of the Action Research Project *For and On the Handicapped*. He is the author of a number of books and articles in *Sociology and Social Policy* in scientific journals.

References

- Boissevain, J. (1965). *Saints and fireworks: religion and politics in rural Malta*. London: Athlone Press.
- Boissevain, J. (1969). *Hal-Farruġ: a Village in Malta*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Vassallo, M. (1975). 'Towards a Model on when the Church can change Society'. Unpublished paper, mimeographed.
- Vassallo, M. (1975b). 'Youth and Future of the Faith in Malta' *Proceedings of the International Seminar organised by the Vatican on Youth and the Future of the Faith*.
- Vassallo, M. (1977). 'Religious Symbolism in a Changing Malta'. In Vassallo, M. (ed.), *Contributions to Mediterranean Studies*. Malta: ESB.
- Vassallo, M. (1979). *From Lordship to Stewardship: Religion and Social Change in Malta*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Vassallo, M. (1981a). 'Pageantry and Secularisation - the Malta Case'. *Melita Theologica*, Vol. XXII.
- Vassallo, M. (1981b). 'Development and Dissent - the ambivalent role of Religion in Contemporary Malta'. *Acts of the IV International Conference of the Euro-Arab Social Research Group, Rome*.
- Vassallo, M. (1994). 'Modi ta' Ghajxien'. In M. Schiavone (Ed.), *L-Identità Maltija Lejliet Seklu Ġdid*. Malta: AŻAD.
- Vassallo, M. (1996). 'Secularisation Revisited'. In H. Reimann (ed.), *Weltkultur und Weltgesellschaft - Aspected globalen Wandels*. Augsburg: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Vella, J. (1997). 'The Emergence of Secularism in Malta' URL: <http://www.aboutmalta.com/grazio/secularism.html> (3 July 2000).