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Evolving to stay relevant:

an ethnographic study of ritual Festi, Fireworks and socio-cultural transformations in contemporary Malta

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- **Methodology**

1. Research Design

Once I selected the topic I was interested in exploring, to properly conduct my research, I decided to extend my stay on the island. By living and working here, I got a special chance to immerse myself in the everyday life of the society, meeting and, sometimes clashing, with the current complex situation. Being in the environment, I could explore the phenomena of festi from multiple perspectives listening to stories and opinions from people with different backgrounds and relations to the celebrations.

In my idea, I wanted to be like a proper anthropologist conducting field research, however it took me some time to warm up to the task that I had in mind for myself. I often felt shy approaching the organization committee of the different festi since I was warned that they usually don't fancy strangers who are not engaged with supporting their particular festa. However, gathering my strength and using some connections that I had developed by living on the island, I managed to organize exchanges and interviews.

This thesis adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach grounded in participant observation, informal conversations, and fieldnote analysis. My focus was not only to observe but to participate, embodying the spirit of immersive anthropology. Through lived experience and personal engagement, I aimed to generate insights that would not be available through purely external observation.

2. Fieldwork Logistics

I arrived in Malta in May 2024. During my first summer here I started my research, however I stayed in an exploratory phase. I started systematic documentation keeping a regular field diary to constantly note my observations starting from August 2024 till August 2025. I conducted field research across several villages, including Birkirkara, Naxxar, Marsaskala, and Sliema. During these months I had the chance to experience a variety of festa types: smaller, more intimate celebrations and larger, more public spectacles. My interactions included attending band marches, interviewing festa organizers, and informally speaking with residents. Festi are popular events which people enjoy chatting and sharing their general opinion on. I often walked

through celebrations, joined events just by myself or was invited by the local people who would help me integrate more in the merry atmosphere.

Even though I spoke with countless people regarding this topic, I also organized specific meetings with some key figures to get different perspectives. My first exchange has been with a retired Maltese policeman who was working as a receptionist at my workplace. With him I had the first exchanges regarding Maltese culture and the meaning of Festi. He is a middle aged man from Mgarr who proudly supports the Labour Party. He cherishes Maltese heritage; however he is very critical of the current situation. I will be referring to the multiple exchanges that I had with him as "Retired policemen experience of Festi and Maltese politics, Summer 2024". Since my first residence was in the central village of Qormi, one of the most populated ones, I joined the Festa in honour of Saint George on Saturday night's merry procession. In this way, I could observe and experience the events my Maltese colleagues were describing. I will refer to this part of my field notes as "Impression of a newcomer of Qormi titular Festa, June 2024". When I then moved to Balluta Bay, a walk away from the area of Sliema, I went to the Festa in honour of Our Lady of the Sea, Stella Maris, to see the evening religious procession along the coastal road. In this occasion, I had the chance to observe how an expat, a woman in her thirties in remote working residing in Swieqi, could consider the Festa as a weird, and comical event in a similar way as Boissevain (1965) observed the tourists from Netherlands mocking the procession in Naxxar. I refer to my field notes on this as "Walking with an expat at Sliema Festa procession, August 2024".

The summer of 2024 has been more of an exploratory phase. I explored the region and joined the visitors observing the processions and fireworks displays in different villages, checking the calendars and approaching the culture. Even navigating changes of perspectives from my side. I wanted to investigate the phenomenon from an anthropological point of view therefore I contacted the Anthropological Society of Malta linked to the University of Malta. Some members, researchers at the University, agreed to meet me for an interview so I could gather their informed opinions. I gained more insights regarding the role of fireworks and the commodification of Festi. I will refer to my field notes on this regard as "Meeting with the Anthropological Society of Malta, November 2024". Thanks to the meeting, I followed their suggestion of contacting Festa's organizers during the winter time as in summer they are usually very busy and less prone to sharing.

Through acquaintances, I got to meet the former secretary of the Band Club of Marsaskala. The secretary is the head of the Band Club which reunites the different committees who organize the annual Festa in honour of the patron Saint. Marsaskala is a village located on the South-East coast of the island and it is now a popular residence spot where changes are affecting the celebration. This informal interview, to which I refer to as "A talk with the former secretary of Marsaskala Band Club, February 2025", gave me key information regarding all aspects of Festa, from the difficulties regarding funding, the differences among villages, the effects of contemporary life schedules and change in values on the sense of community, to technical knowledge regarding the organization aspect of the celebration.

An important formal interview I collected was with Professor Alfred Vella, the head of the University of Malta, who conducted research on the impact of fireworks on the environment, with a special focus on the chemical components and their concentration on the islands. The scientific perspective of Alfred Vella and his ongoing research helped me in balancing the different information I got from my different interlocutors and gave me objective data on the actual environmental impact of fireworks which are a fundamental part of Festi. I refer to the content of this meeting as "Interview with Professor Alfred Vella, head of the University of Malta, about fireworks, the environment and changes in Maltese society, March 2025"

I am currently residing in Birkirkara therefore I wanted to experience the local Festa and observe with new eyes thanks to all the information, insights and perspective I gather during the year. It has been an interesting experience to observe the way people interacted with me as an external presence. On this occasion, I immersed myself to enjoy the fireworks display and appreciate the effort put into the spectacle. I forced myself to overcome the fear of loud noises and sit throughout the launch. I refer to the collected observation as "Thoughts at Birkirkara band march and fireworks display during the annual Festa, April 2025".

It took me some time and networking to finally get into direct contact with a pyrotechnician working in a firework factory. This interview worked as a counterpart to the one with Professor Alfred Vella. If on one side I had the information regarding the chemical components used and the environmental impact of fireworks, on the other, I had a passionate precise account on how to mix these components to obtain the desired effects and how this tradition must continue. On

this occasion, I got the chance to appreciate the work, dedication and knowledge behind the Maltese pyrotechnic art. I refer to my notes taken during this conversation as “Exchange with a pyrotechnician from Zurrieq fireworks factory, June 2025”.

One of the latest encounters had been with a Maltese scholar and musician who studied the tradition of Festa in Malta. Joining the Festa with someone who, not only joined, but also studied the phenomenon in each of its cultural and peculiar details, has been enriching. Xandru is able to transmit his enthusiasm for this tradition in a way that highlights the reason why the ritual celebration is so important for the construction of the community. I refer to my field notes taken during our exchanges as “Joining Festi with Xandru Maltese culture scholar, July 2025”.

At last, I wanted to mention that I kept my diary throughout the year of research and I noted exchanges I had with friends, acquaintances and colleagues from different nationalities and backgrounds. Each time the topic of Festi was brought up, I listened attentively to capture new perspectives and hear different opinions. These insights contributed to shape my analysis of the celebrations, and I refer to my field notes taken on these occasions as “Exchanges and opinion from acquaintances, colleagues and friends, May 2024 - August 2025”.

3. Positionality and Ethics

The fact that I am not Maltese determined my access to qualitative data. Malta is a touristic destination with literally millions of visitors coming every year. What’s more, the recent census calculates that 30% of the population is made up of foreign residents working here like me (NSO, 2024). This amount of visitors, passengers and foreigners coming here to work creates many different bubbles. It can bring openness to change and, at the same time, make Maltese people more diffident as one becomes yet another worker who is only here to gain some money without any interest in getting acquainted with the local habits. Therefore, it took me time to get closer to Maltese nationals and find the right connections that brought me to experience the Festi differently. I believe that if I properly spoke the language, I would have gained even more insights and trust as people would have seen me as part of the community or at least felt closer to me. I got multiple surprised reactions when I explained that I was interested in Festi and writing about them as if it was hard for people to believe that a non-Maltese could be genuinely invested in the topic. However, generally, once I understood that my intentions were coming

from a place of curiosity and not judgement, people would talk extensively about Festi sometimes in a critical way, sometimes in a proud way, and mostly a mixture of both.

From my side, I wanted to remain open to all different perspectives without formulating judgment on the phenomenon of Festi per se. I admit that my curiosity was initially captured by the fireworks and the displays that I considered just excessive. Once I delved deeper into the culture of Festa, I learned how to appreciate all connected events as an expression of unity, and even resistance, from the community. Even though I found myself rooting for Festi, I wanted to keep an open mind and still consider their environmental and social impact to explore viable solutions that would both preserve the integrity of the Festa and the human and non-human environment at the same time. When discussing with people, I would try to remain in a neutral, curious position as giving away my opinion could have affected how open they would be with me. I did not refrain from asking also harder questions that would perhaps reveal their political inclinations or a level of disregard for the non-human element of the community.

4. Interview Approach

When I was meeting somebody who had, or still has, a role in the organization of festi or a researcher on the environmental and social aspects of the phenomena, I would organize a series of questions and ask them permission to take notes while carrying on with our conversation. I chose to not register record an interview in a formal way as I wanted the conversation to be like flowing. I would note down the most important points of the conversational interview and only write a more detailed report of it at the end, after parting from my source of information. While talking with the people I mentioned above, in the different chapter of my field diary, I asked for their consent to refer to them with their real name to which they agreed.

To these more formal conversational interviews, I also added a very disorganized field diary noting my own observations of phenomena linked to Festi and of opinion, thoughts, declarations that friends, acquaintances and even strangers would give me regarding all aspects of Festi. The conversations on the topic would generally start once I mentioned that I wanted to research on the topic since that was what I was writing my thesis about. On most occasions, people have been informed that I kept a diary noting my journey. In other situations, I just find myself in a conversation regarding Festi and I tried to collect the perspectives heard without

the need of mentioning the specific person expressing them. Therefore, the qualitative data that I collected mostly comes from a place of informed consent as the person I was interacting with was aware of the way I was conducting my research. When information gathered comes from not informed sources, I avoided mentioning specific details and the insights would be put together with more general observations. In all these cases, personal identifiers have been anonymized, and sensitive data were treated with discretion to uphold the privacy of participants.

5. Theoretical Framing of Method

My aim was to compare people's opinion and perception also with the anthropological theories linked to phenomena similar to Festi and to the research that has been carried out on them before me. In particular, the most prominent voice when it comes to the study of festi from an anthropological perspective, is the one of Jeremy Boissevain. Jeremy Boissevain conducted his research over decades observing closely the celebrations and witnessing changes and transformations in Maltese society. Following Boissevain's (1965, 1992, 2006, 2011, 2013, 2014) longstanding field immersion and interpretive anthropology traditions, I aimed to have a similar experience focusing also on the environmental factor.

My other source of inspiration has been Geertz (1973) who intended culture as a system of symbols and meanings and field work as a reading exercise. Following his framework of "Thick description" (Geertz, 1973), I interpreted festa not merely as a sequence of public events but as a layered symbolic performance. Every detail, from the choice of fireworks to the public rivalries between band clubs, can be seen as part of a wider cultural text, embedded in Maltese history, religion, and politics. I sought to understand not only what people do during festi, but what these actions signify to them and how they relate to broader narratives of tradition, belonging, and resistance. In order to propose changes in a feasible and respectful way, finding a middle ground between tradition and the need of ecological awareness, I wanted to explore the deeper symbolic meaning of Festa, and in particular, of the use of fireworks.

- **Literature review**

The existing literature explores Festa from different perspectives from the social aspect to the environmental one Starting from Cassar (2015) who highlights the cultural importance of the Maltese Festa while accounting for the effects of gentrification and tourism on tradition. To dive deeper into the anthropological aspect of the Maltese Festa and understand the historical and social reason of its adaptability to change, it is fundamental to refer to Boissevain (1965, 1992, 2006, 2011, 2013, 2014) multiple field studies. Once explored the anthropological and social aspect of this tradition, it is important to have an overview on existent environmental data exploring the impact of the feasts season on the archipelago following the research of Vella (2010, 2015). By integrating the literature from experts in different fields focusing on the dynamics of Maltese Festa, it is possible to take a step more and explore if and how it would be possible to find a compromise between environmental sustainability and the continuation of a socially relevant tradition.

Cassar (2015) analyses Maltese Festa as a meeting point and a crossover of various, and, at times, contrasting elements and forces. He follows the history of Festi highlighting the turning points during its constant evolution. The Maltese Festa is a cultural tradition that evolved through time as a reflection of the society that generates it. Originally one of the rituals of the Catholic Church, Festa is a religious ceremony that changed through the integration of paraliturgical and nonliturgical elements. Popular religion rituals and secular trends turned the Festa into a rich village celebration lasting days with street decorations, fireworks and band marches. Cassar (2015) states that, nowadays "Festa is the product of the meeting of religious and secular, traditional and contemporary, elite and popular, older and younger generations (...) local and foreign, authenticity and commoditization, the resident and the tourist" (Cassar, 2015, p.2). The changes happened gradually transforming the Festa from a solemn religious celebration to a mundane, and also commoditized, recreation savoured with religious elements.

According to Cassar (2015) the Maltese Festa is a clear expression of the need to find reasons to celebrate together as community forming and tightening bonds between each other. The collective celebration is a manifestation of the community's values, beliefs and what they considered as sacred and important. All elements of the Festa are dear to the community who wish to showcase itself and, in the Maltese case, outstand the other neighbouring factions. The

Festa is also subject to the phenomenon of glocalization that brings up the question of what “local” or “authentic” means in this hyper connected society.

Linked to Cassar (2015) description of the evolutions of Festa and its survival in a diverse space such as nowadays Malta, can be linked to Geertz (1983) approach of interpretative anthropology that take into consideration the symbolic dimension of cultural phenomena to grasp their meaning in a particular context and avoid looking down to them as “primitive” or "useless". The anthropological process of “translation” is not intended to recast specific communities’ ways to frame them as “rational”, therefore understandable, in “western” terms; but rather describe why a certain cultural phenomenon, such as the extensive use of fireworks in Malta, has a deeper symbolic meaning for the community than what an external viewer might believe. By exploring how and why Festa matters for the equilibrium and relationships making in Maltese society, those who experience the phenomenon as visitors or spectators can grasp their implications in context. This understanding, which should not distort the integrity and dignity of the cultural practices, would be precious and fundamental to perhaps enhance a change in favour of environmental health without negatively impacting the society itself. Awareness and understanding of how and why a certain community performs a ritual, would also help frame environmental concerns and impact in a respectful and empathic way so that the community will not feel attacked but would, ideally, even help to make those changes happen according to its own will.

Reading Dutch anthropologist Boissevain’s (1965, 1992, 2006, 2011, 2013, 2014) work is fundamental to deepen the knowledge of Festa in Maltese society and be able to grasp their meaning. Boissevain has considered to have an anthropological legacy in Malta, as he is the first anthropologist who took an interest in the phenomenon of Festi and decided to dedicate decades of study to them tracing its evolution by constantly returning to the island fostering relationships with the different actors involved (Ginkel & Stengs, 2005). His PhD dissertation, published in 1962 titled “Saints and Fireworks”, is the beginning of a life long commitment that ended in 2013 with his last work, “ Factions, Friends, Feast”, in which he revisits some of the conclusions he had come to in his earlier publications regarding Maltese society. Boissevain’s (1965) ethnographic approach focuses on kinship making and small politics in people’s daily interactions highlighting power dynamics in small-scale contexts without trying to deduct a general theory. His ethnographic approach is case-based, and his analysis starts

from a full immersion in the society he is interested in. In his early work Boissevain (1992) traced the history of Festi and how this ritual celebration is affected by social and political changes on the Island. However, by his own admission, in his first analysis Boissevain (2013) came to faulty predictions because influenced by the political environment of that time. While recognizing the importance of Festa or Malta, he predicted that the celebrations would soon come to an end due to political changes, new national interests and transformation of power relations at the village level. However, Festi did not disappear, fifty years later Boissevain (2013) came back to admit his predictions were wrong and made an analysis to understand why the celebrations survived political and societal changes through the years. According to Boissevain (1992), Festi were interconnected and dependent on the system of patronage and favours in place before the country's independence. He predicted that the political evolution of the islands would inevitably prioritize national interests over village dynamics and patronage would become unnecessary in a bureaucratized society (Boissevain, 1992). However, he had to recognize that patronage changed actors but not nature as in Malta family and faction kinship still governs politics (Boissevain, 2013). Instead of politics losing interest in Festi, it managed to foster the celebrations in its own favour like priests and wealthy professionals used under the rules of the British Crown (Boissevain, 2013).

Boissevain focuses also in capturing how structural changes have influenced Festi, however his works unfortunately stopped in 2013 as the social anthropologist died just a couple of years later in 2015. Boissevain therefore did not get the chance to experience how Maltese society went through a still ongoing change enhanced by the economic growth started in 2013 when the Joseph Muscat, from the Malta Labor Party, became Prime Minister and radically shifted the country's economic strategy (Briguglio, 2020). From 2013, the economy grew at a high speed changing the landscape, reducing taxes, favouring the tourism and construction sector and, consequently, bringing cheap work force to serve the growing businesses (Briguglio, 2020). This new environment has proved challenging for Festi, much more compared to the changes Boissevain (2013) has observed in previous decades as, before 2010s, Malta was still characterized by a slower life pace, village-based businesses and less building complexes. Tourism was a growing industry, however before 2013, the market used to focus on mainly British tourists and numbers reached 1.58 million arrivals, however, in 2024 the courtesy registered more than double with 3.56 million visitors making this industry account for 27% of the national GDP (MTA, 2025). Malta achieves a record-breaking year in tourism in 2024

(MTA, 2024). In my research, I want to attempt to cover this gap to understand how Festi evolved from 2013 till the present day and how economic growth has influenced, and threatened, their survival.

Since the role of fireworks in Festi has been growing through the years and they are widely used for both public and private events, it is important to focus on the environmental and health impact of how the celebrations are carried on today. In this regard, more and more scientific studies have been conducted in the last decade. In particular, Professor Afred Vella (2010) focused on the environmental impact of fireworks used on the small archipelago to sensibilize inhabitants on potential side effects on human, and non-human, health. His studies have often clashed with public opinion that is in favour of the extensive use of fireworks and Vella's research has been perceived as an attack to a struggling tradition, even though it did not aim for it has it has been clarified by professor Vella himself.

The current challenge is to value the Festi, support this bonding celebration, while considering potential changes which instead of threatening their survival would help them flourish. By carrying out an ethnographic research on the current practices in the organisation of Festi, I wanted to understand how economic growth and structural transformations have changed the celebrations and how people experience them. I wanted to see if there is a way to integrate environmental awareness in its organization and learn which practices have been changed to enhance sustainability. I also wanted to explore if it would be possible to make Festi more inclusive to foster trust and participation in a diverse village community where more nationalities, religions, socio-cultural backgrounds and ethnicities are sharing spaces. As to create a solidarity and sense of belonging for the foreign work force and build trust and enriching relationships with the Maltese residents through a new collaborative participation in Festi. I believe traditional ritual practices are fundamental to maintain bonds and build relationships in this individualistic society where economic growth is set as the ultimate goal of "evolution". However, I am critical towards a conservative approach that transforms lively cultural and ritual practices into performative nostalgic events. Community celebrations are rituals that must be open to changes and adapt at the same time to the surrounding environment to remain meaningful and keep their kinship making function which is much needed to contrast capitalistic isolation.

1. Festi and community identity in Malta

1.1 Introduction: Malta in Transition

Over the last couple of decades, the island of Malta has undergone a radical transformation. One of the most common phrases heard from locals is “Ten years ago, it was completely different” (Author’s field notes, 2024-2025). Nowadays, the island is in a state of constant change, but its infrastructure has not adapted at the same pace. This has led to significant social and environmental challenges. Since the Labour Party won the election in 2013, rapid economic growth has been a primary focus of the political agenda (Briguglio, 2020). The government successfully avoided a major financial crisis and boosted the economy within a few years (Briguglio, 2020). However, this economic boom has come at a cost. The main source of wealth is the tourism industry to which the construction industry is tightly connected resulting in increasing urban pressure (Agius et al., 2025). In the recent years, a new sector emerged, the so-called iGaming (online gambling) industry which found in Malta the ideal situation to rise (Yamamura and Lassalle, 2019). The nature of these three industries has raised concerns regarding sustainability and long-term consequences.

1.2 The Maltese Festa: An Intangible Heritage

The Maltese village festa is a landmark of the archipelago’s cultural heritage. The tradition originated during the rule of the Knights of St. John, particularly under Grandmaster De Rohan, who led the Order from 1775 to 1797 (Lansink, 2025). It is also notable that since 2023, the Maltese Festa has been inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, 2025) which highlights how unique is the development and significance of this traditional celebration in a Country who experienced fast economic growth and profound changes.

Just to get an idea of how important are these celebrations for the Maltese community it is enough to look at the number of Festi hold across the country throughout the year, around 95 in Malta and 10 in Gozo (Lansink, 2025). Festi are typically celebrated from the end of April till the beginning of October with less frequent ones spread during the winter months (Lansink,

2025). The preparation of the Festa usually takes the whole year and culminates in celebrations and events lasting a week. Each Maltese and Gozitan village celebrate one or more Festa in honour of a Saint or the Holy Mary (Lansink, 2025). Some Festi are celebrated at the same time in different villages across the islands and this enhances an animated competition among the different communities which is an integral part of the dynamic of Festi (Cremona, 2016).

The Festa can be framed as the expression and representation of the community who organizes it to honour the village's patron saint and shine in the eyes of the members of other villages or districts. The Festa is organized by motivated volunteers members of the community who need to show passion and dedication as the preparations take up the whole year and culminate in the climax of one week long celebration made of religious, social and theatrical elements mixed in the different events and spaces that the Festa takes up in the village (Cremona, 2016). Despite its progressive secularisation, the Festa remains a unique landmark of both Malta and Gozo, uniting locals and foreigners in the celebration of popular religiosity and local identities (Cassar, 2015).

The importance of the Maltese Festa is reflected also in the language as in Maltese there is a specific terminology to refer to all the different aspects and organizers of the celebration. The Festa is made by different protagonists organising each event. There is a general outline that characterizes the organization of every Festi, which then can slightly vary according to the peculiarity of each village and faction. The Church, meaning the local parish, organizes the religious events such as the titular saint procession with the statue, the activities for the kwindiċina and the triduum (Cassar, 2015). The local band clubs are made of different committees in charge of the different components of the Festa. There is the Band who organizes the musical program which includes both the sit-down performance, the marċi brijużi of animated marches parading through the streets towards the Parish, and il-marċ ta' filgħodu for the morning of the last day of the Festa. There is the Grupp tal-Armar who is in charge of setting up the festive decorations, their purchase and maintenance. Finally, there is the Fireworks Committee, which can either purchase the petards or directly own the local fireworks factory. In line with the testimony I got from a firework maker, pyrotechnicians would manufacture all kind of petards to which they refer with specific terminology *tal-berqa, tal ftuħ, tal-bomba, tal-kaxxa, tal-kulur* (Cassar, 2015).

1.3 Catholicism, Saints, and the Magical Tradition

The origin of the Festa needs to be found in the way the Maltese society lived its faith based in the Roman Catholic beliefs. In fact, the rituals of the Catholic Church have deep roots in Maltese islands (Cassar, 2015). In its origins the Festi looked nothing like now and they were strictly religious celebrations. However, it is important to highlight how nowadays celebration includes religious and secular elements: religious services and processions through the streets, band music, dancing, drinking, special food and, last but not least, elaborate fireworks displays. Its constant transformation and adaptation are part of the reasons for its survival. At the same time, these transformations are the expression of the changes in Maltese society.

When it comes to the Maltese islands, it is possible to make a connection between its traditions and the religious and magical culture which De Martino (2024) analysed in the Southern Italian realities. According to De Martino (2024) it is because also the higher classes and intellectual elites, when illuminism spread, did not give up on part of the magical belief. When rationality became the new basic principle guiding the interpretation of the word and its phenomena, southern Italians intellectuals, despite being influenced and partially adapting their world vision to the illuminism dogma, did not reject the magical element and the magical interpretation of certain phenomena, especially the once linked to religious belief (De Martino, 2024).

Therefore, even if in the northern regions of Italy, the festa celebrations slowly disappeared leaving only few rare examples nowadays, in the South the celebrations kept being an important part of the social, cultural and political life of people. In a very similar way, the festi are still important for the Maltese.

The magical element characterises also Catholic worship of Saints, to which Festi are dedicated. As in Italy, the religion of Malta is Christian Catholic. In the practice of the religion, Saints are fundamental figures who are the intermediaries between God and the worshippers presented in a human way that worshippers can mirror themselves in the holy figures (Mayblin, 2014). In northern Italy we can think about an influence from the Protestant interpretation of Christianity. One of the drivers of the division between Catholics and Protestant is in fact the different weight given to Saints figures. The Catholic Church promotes the worshipping of

Saints, dedicating buildings, sermons, donation campaigns. Adding to that, there is the innumerable amounts of reliquiae related to the lives, and more important deaths, of Saints which was linked to a profitable market where anyone could claim they found a new object to be considered as a reliquiae. The feeling was that the cult of Saints had good too far and that people were devoted more to their elected Saint than God itself.

Since magic is considered a mysterious force which manifests itself in events that the people deem as unlikely or favourable (De Martino, 2024), the worshipping of Saints inserts itself perfectly. Through worshiping a Saint, dedicating the most opulent festi, good will come for the village. The Saint will be honoured by the display of devotion and being an intermediary to God, will protect the people who made such an effort to show their faith in the Saint themselves (Author's field notes, 2024-2025).

In fact, the village feast was a one-day event held in the Parish to show the community's religious fervour and devotion to either the Patron Saint of the Holy Mary (Cassar, 2015). Therefore, the Festa was indeed an expression of the values shared by the community of those times. During the sixteenth and seventeenth century the annual village festa was among the many celebrations held by the parish to which the entire community would participate and had a clear spiritual connotation. Thanks to the testimony of Mgr. Pietro Dusina (Cassar, 2015) while on an apostolic journey on the island it is possible to understand how formative and fundamental religion and Catholic rituals were for the society at that time. Besides the annual feast in honour of the patron saint, Christmas, St Stephen, St John the Evangelist, the Holy Innocents, St Sylvester, New Year's Day, the Epiphany, Candlemas, the Annunciation, St Mary, Our Lady of Victory, the two days after Easter, Corpus Domini, the feasts dedicated to the twelve Apostles, the feast of the Holy Cross, St John the Baptist, St Lawrence, St Michael, St Martin, All Saints, and each Sundays, were celebrated with the same passionate participation in the different villages. Even if in a few villages, food and beverages such as hazelnuts or baked wheat would be distributed to those who attended the Holy Mass (Cassar, 2015), it was not common practice and it depended on the willingness of some wealthy authority who funded the initiative. Therefore, until the eighteenth century, the village festi consisted of a solemn Holy Mass and vespers where the community gathered to honour and pray to the patron saint. The celebrations were initially very sober and made of few elements. Only in the course of the eighteenth century statues and processions started to appear (Cassar, 2015).

1.4 From Solemn Ritual to Popular Celebration

The first changes in Festi started from the musical element. When the Order of St John lost the Maltese islands to the French Republic who, after a couple of years rolling, lost them to the British Crown the changes that this brought to the society was expressed also by the progressive transformation of the village Festa into more mundane celebration (Cassar, 2015). This first happened through music as music is a key element of festivities and a means of celebration as it can convey both a religious and joyful message. The British fancy for military bands inspired the Maltese villages whose small band made of few musicians progressively became larger and louder during the Festi and started to march through the streets to parade in honour of the Saint. By the mid-nineteenth century, the different villages had opened their own band clubs who were in charge of the marches and attracts to the Festi all kinds of people (Cassar, 2015). Festa transformed from a religious event held by the parish to a popular celebration where the community started to act as a protagonist instead of a mere devoted spectator. These village communities found new ways to celebrate the patron saint, organizing events that expressed their devotion in a more popular down-to-earth way. However, at this point in time, the religious motivation is still the main motor behind the merrymaking and the celebration of the saint if the fundamental reason felt for the coming together of the people. In this way, the Festa was still an expression of popular religious belief and held its magical element of the communication with the Saint who will then intercede to God. As the Saint has been a human being and can better understand the way a person shows devotion for God. Therefore, a Festa can be loud, colourful and participate without losing its objective as a joyful celebration of devotion for the beloved Patron Saint who protects the village and its community. However, Festi are no longer purely religious celebrations. Their main function now is to bring together people who identify themselves as belonging to a specific community united in the worship of a particular saint. In this way, what is framed as the celebration in honour of the Saint for its glory functions as a celebration of the community itself and its importance (Cremona, 2016). The bigger and better is the Festa, the more prestige the community gains.

Because of the progressive introduction of secular elements, people developed specific linguistic terms to refer to different moments of the festa. The part of the festi taking place inside the church is called the festa *ta' gewwa* or internal feast; the colourful celebrations

outside are called *ta' barra* or external feast (Boissevain, 2013). The church rituals are organized by the clergy who still follow the early tradition, while all the external celebrations are the result of the collaboration between the parish's priests and the committees of band club members and volunteers. The secular celebration is more open to changes and improvisation (Boissevain, 2013).

After the introduction of band clubs, street parades, processions carrying heavy statues, lights and decorations, another element was added and progressively became fundamental, the Fireworks (Cassar, 2015). The Festa established itself as a loud, colourful community affair whose echo needs to reach each village and generate admiration and respect. Besides Fireworks, which are the most powerful means to attract visitors and reach neighbouring villages with their visuals and loud explosions, there is also a second means to spread rumours regarding a Festa around the islands. In fact, the Band Club usually invites musicians from other villages' Band Clubs to play the marċi brijużi along the decorated streets. In this way, the community can be known among other villages and their Festa can become notorious for its peculiarities and spectacles. This aspect might be considered as an externalisation of the local into the national dimension of the islands (Cassar, 2015). The fact that, over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Festi went from being locally circumscribed religious events happening in the intimate space of the parish to laud and colourful celebrations whose fast needs to spread the reputation of the community all around the islands-State. This is an example of how Festi are a tradition that evolves and adapts through time reflecting the changing of the society in its organization. Thanks to the progressive building of infrastructure that improved communication and the progressive importance of national identity and unity, Festi also became more of a "national affair" besides being an expression of the social needs of the local community.

Originally the Festi were mainly religious celebrations. Today the Festa has integrated diverse influences and its spectacularity can result almost comical to external observers (Author's field notes, May 2024 - August 2025). Festi has been defined even as a "pagan manifestation" (Cassar, 2015) because of the amount of seemingly non-religious events that came to be part of the celebration. However, if from an external observer it can look like an excuse and occasion to be loud, drinking and partying along the streets, if one comes a bit closer to the internal dynamics, the religious elements and the devotion for the Saint are still present. Devotion is

expressed differently but with no less passion, especially by those who spend the whole year planning for the next Festa each time. This level of dedication shows the love, devotion and care that people have for both the Saint and the community itself (Boissevain, 2011). Diversifying the Festa is also the key to keep it alive and thriving.

Today both the parish and the organizers are trying to figure out how to keep attracting people to festi. Therefore, more diverse elements have been added to appeal to the crowd. While the core needs to stay religious, the centre of the festa is the celebrated saint and with him the main political patrons of the festa, the organizers are quite creative in the ways they pay homage to the religious figure.

The different events organized are meant to appeal to the diverse public. The organisers and their families would be taking part in each event during the duration of the feast, while others might join at different times. There might be people who disregard the mundane elements of the festa and only wish to participate in the religious rituals linked to it. Others might also consider the non-religious elements as an homage worthy of the celebrated saint so they will join more events. Others might not be interested in the strictly religious aspect of it and join more for the festive mood, the drinking, and most of all, the fireworks (Author's field notes, 2024-2025).

1.5 Rivalry, Power, and Local Identity

Another fundamental element of the Festa, and of Maltese society in general, and relevant to the national identity, is the rivalry which is carried on through generations (Cassar, 2015). This strongly felt rivalry called *pika* is an integral part of the celebration and one of the main motors behind all the effort that the community puts in organizing the annual Festa. This sense of rivalry is pervasive and felt at different levels. First, as explained above, the community wants every Festi celebrated in the village to be better than any other organized in every other town on the islands. This rivalry between factions and villages is expressed even in the uneasy feelings a person belonging to one town experiences when going to the Festa of another town. The people would know right away they are "outsiders" and talk about them in the street wondering why they dare came to the festa of their village when they might support another one (Author's field notes, November 2024). The reputation of a village among others depends on how pompous, joyful and expensive the annual Festi are. Then, in the same village there are

two, if not three, Band Clubs who will organize each its own Festa, one in honour of the titular saint, the one originally established by the main village parish, the other in honour of the secondary saint, the one selected by usually a smaller parish or just upon the Band Club decision. These opposing groups are referred to as partiti (Cassar, 2015). The supporters of the secondary Saint constantly battle in every possible way to get the same rights allowed for the titular Saint, such as the right for the statue to be placed in a prominent position, permits to have more streets decorated and fireworks launched.

Occasionally fights and acts of vandalism would be carried out by one Band Club to the other, especially during the annual Festa when the accumulated tension breaks out. Invested partiti supporters, encouraged by the festive atmosphere, often coupled with a significant number of beers, will pick up a fight with the opposing faction, sometimes trying to enter the building of the Band Club where the adversaries celebrate and drink together. These fights are picked up in honour of the Saint and to establish power relations for the next celebration (Cassar, 2015). There are villages where the rivalry is more intense compared to others which require police surveillance during the Festa or even a temporary ban of the celebration ordered by the religious authority itself. Notorious for the seriousness of the *pika* and its consequences is Hamrun where everybody warns you not to go during the Festi, Żabbar, Victoria in Gozo (Cassar, 2015) Characterized by a strong *pika*, but less notorious for its violent consequences, are Żurrieq, Qrendi and Mqabba which compete even among themselves as they are located in the same Southwest area. For example, I have been told an interesting anecdote in regard to a town in the South. The Band Club supporting one Saint had spent a considerable amount to have artists work on special and massive flags for the upcoming Festa. In an act of vandalism, the opposing faction managed to set on fire the expensive flags which caused a serious rift between the villagers with even legal proceedings. To prevent further violence or similar acts in the future, the archbishop himself intervened and banned both Festi for the year (Author's field notes, May 2024 - August 2025). There is also a rivalry among the different committees in the same Band Club, as usually the band and the *grupp tal-armar* compete to have the major hand in the organization of the Festa (Cassar, 2015). The *pika* seems to be an integral part of the Festa tradition if not a tradition in itself that characterises relations in Malta. The *pika* represents a paradoxical phenomenon that both divides and unites the different villages and it is carried on with pride as a distinctive characteristic of Maltese culture (Author's field notes, May 2024 - August 2025).

The attachment to the local identity can reach even the Maltese who emigrated abroad who would travel back to Malta specifically for the village Festa of the Saint that the family traditionally supports. For example, a young Maltese woman who grew up in the UK told the story of her father: whenever they were coming back to the island to visit relatives, her father would always take her to the Festa of San Giljan because that's the village where his family is originally from. Her father would profoundly take part in the Festa, bringing his daughter along to teach her how and why that's the best Festa in Malta. Although she did not find the Festa of Saint Gjlian particularly better nor different from other Festi, she understands her father's pride and the rooted rivalry between different villages. This passionate challenge is serious but fun at the same time and, perhaps, is one of the factors that prevented the festi from disappearing (Author's field notes, May 2024 - August 2025).

1.6 Secularization, Patronage, and the Political Instrumentalization of Festi

The magical-religious layer can generate anger because it's rooted in an irrational belief (Author's field notes, May 2024 - August 2025). As I heard other people declare, the whole concept of festa is illogical. However, even if western society has been trained to reject traditions rooted in non-rational beliefs, there is beauty and power in the seemingly non logical ways people still perform collective rituals. The logic is always relative to the context that one analyses, therefore, even if apparently the permanence of Festi in Maltese society dedicated to capital growth is not completed rooted in rational and logical reasons as traditionally frames, there is a logic and there are reasons for which festi did not disappear as previously predicted. In fact, the scholar and anthropologist who dedicated his research to Maltese festi, Jeremy Boissevain, had to correct his mistaken predictions as he overlooked the profound influence of tradition in Malta and its nature of the island.

Contrary to what was generally predicted in the 1960s and early independence years, Festi in Malta kept thriving despite the changes society went through (Boissevain, 1992). It was predicted that with the independence and the growing involvement in the political scene rather than the local parish, people's interest in festa would diminish over the years. Indeed, during the 70s festi, although still drawn crowds to see, were less felt as the political division between the supporters of the Malta Labour Party and the National Party was causing splits among those who used to be supporters of the same festa and saint. Moreover, since the Church influenced

the election of 1962 and 1966 in favour of the National Party, supporter of the MLP decided to boycott all church related initiatives, festi included (Boissevain, 1992). However, despite an initial decline and loss of spark in festi, soon the celebrations started to recover, reaching an unseen number of participants and becoming increasingly spectacular. The rivalry between the supporters of the different saints increased as well, even stepping over the parishes who wanted to tone down the celebrations. As a response, new band clubs were created to ensure that the festi would keep being noisy, spectacular and participated (Boissevain, 1992).

According to Boissevain, which corresponds to what Maltese often say (Author's field notes, May 2024 - August 2025), the society started to change deeply with the growing wealth (Boissevain, 1992). Economic growth and profit brought people apart. The Maltese villages used to be characterised by a high sense of community, villagers used to come together often to celebrate different occasions such as weddings, baptism, and all sorts of parish related events. Moreover, people used to work in their village or in the proximity, used to do their daily grocery shopping at small shops nearby, meet at bars and at the band club spending a good amount of their time in the village. With the book of job opportunities linked to the growing industry of tourism followed by construction business, people started to work outside of their village and hang out in areas that offer a variety of bars, restaurants and clubs which flourished thanks to tourism. People started to focus on their growing wealth investing money in the construction industry to rent properties to tourists and newcomers attracted by the new job opportunities. Maltese generally agree that the island used to be, not too long ago, a completely different place, much more friendly and welcoming to compatriots as to foreigners. Wealth, competitiveness and political divisions made neighbours fall apart.

The reason for paradoxical growth in the importance and spectacularity of village Festi can be found in the need for a sense of community that has been lost over the years. The celebrations, the fireworks, the band brings the people together to feel a sense of belonging. Festi revitalise this sense of belonging to the community that makes people feel as if the relations were still as before the economic changes (Author's field notes, 2024-2025).
As much as bringing the community together it also reinforced the competition between the other villages and the supporters of the rivalry Festi in the same village. Festi increased in spectacularity, especially with the use of fireworks which meant to show to the rivalry band and the whole island how much the community cares about their Festi. Although the religious

element and the link with the parish are still at the vital core of the celebrations, the changes in society and politics decreased the power of the Church and "democratized" culture have made Festi more popular, also among foreign visitors (Boissevain, 1992).

Festi exponentially grew during the 70s and 80s as the economic growth encouraged the families who previously emigrated to return to find employment and invest in the many expanding businesses. The returning families also brought youth back to the Country and young people were willing to engage in the organization of festi which were receiving support also by politicians, especially MLP's ones, who started to see the celebration as an occasion to spread their influence and foster a sense of loyalty in the villagers (Boissevain, 1992). The Church that previously held enough power to prevent the secular elements of the festi to increase more and more, lost its prevailing influence. The new energy brought to festi also fostered the rivalry between supporters of the opposing factions. This rivalry started to generate violence outbreaks during the celebrations which were previously discouraged and prevented by the authority of the Church (Boissevain, 1992). During the Colonial times, the Church served as intermediary between the British and the villagers as priests were the literate of the Maltese society and used to hold power on the local communities. With the independence, the increase in schooling, the economic growth and the political developments, the Church progressively lost its powerful influence also on Festi. Before, the villagers had to ask permission from the parish to decorate the town, do fireworks and have the band perform in the streets. The parishes could avoid excessive ostentation and prevent more violent episodes of rivalry between opponent groups. The MPL party instead gave this role to the police who were encouraged to grant permits more easily so that the Festa committee could then tune up the celebrations and tease the rival groups (Boissevain, 1992).

The Labour party promoted Festi also in indirect ways. The fact that some of the Festi were previously considered national holidays, while the Labour party, with the intent to secularise society, pushed the celebration to weekends, displeased the Nationalists and the supporters of the clergy who decided to start participating and promoting Festi to express their discontent. Those who previously saw Festi as an unworthy celebration felt authorised to now take part in their public celebrations. The Labour party also promoted broadcasting in the Country in order to attract more visitors. In this way, journalists and channels started to show and promote the Festi who gained visibility and popularity also among locals (Boissevain, 1992).

Interestingly, as festi did not disappear as Boissevain (1965) previously predicted), patronage made its way through societal changes. Boissevain (1992) through his observations during the 60s concluded that the independent government and bureaucracy were going to replace patronage in a way that would guarantee more equality. During colonial time and right after independence, the elites, made of doctors, lawyers and priests held their functions of intermediaries interpreting and enforcing central government's regulations on a local basis. Thanks to their wealth and political connections, they were able to distribute favours and jobs to their clientele. The elites were also patronage festi and used a particular saint to sponsor their power and bust their popularity (Boissevain, 1965). With the rise of the Labour party and the election of Dom Mintoff in 1971, on the surface and initially this patronage system linked to the sanctification of the representatives of these elites, seemed to diminish. The government developed a more complex structure to regulate those areas previously in the hands of the patrons, such as the distribution of jobs and opportunities. The level of literacy also increased so that people could understand on their own the government directives and no longer needed the priest's interpretation. The tendency seems to be one of democratisation and more equal distribution of power, wealth and opportunities (Boissevain, 1992). People seemed to view the patron-client relation as something disgraceful and ridiculous However, this was just an initial surface reaction of the society to the changes. It did not take long for the politicians, members of the Labour party, and the wealthier professionals to start to gain part of their power back. Initially, the government had created designated institutions to regulate the work market. Inserting intermediaries such as officers between the employers and the people seeking for opportunities meant to mine nepotism and client type of relation since the moral and personal aspect of the employment offer gets lost when there is an appointed civil servant regulating the relationship between client and patron. What was done before as a favour, was offered as a right. (Boissevain, 1992). However, this trend for a more egalitarian society failed as the Labour party gained more power. The affiliates, politicians and representatives turned themselves into other powerful patrons distributing opportunities in the form of favours once again. The practice of patronage embedded into politics. The Malta Labour Party had everything in hand and could distribute scholarships, grants, permits as well as creating new positions in the public sector upon request. In a small island society like the Maltese one, the MPL managed to monopolize the public sector, holding its power for years. The members of the party and ministers themselves were virtually linked to all the families on the island

therefore personal relations still overrun what was meant to be an egalitarian bureaucracy regulated by laws and impersonal organisational brokerage. Even though the party stayed firm in dismantling the old patronage system linked to professionals and clergy members, it replaced it with a new patronage system in which the patrons were the members of the party itself who instead of promoting public and national interests pursued the private ones. The old saints were now replaced by the party's ministers who were tied with the most powerful industrialists and magnates of the country who received favours in exchange for their support and resources in case of need (Boissevain, 1992). The politicians were now able to make more favours than the previous patrons could.

The reason why the bone of Maltese society remained the family despite the profound economical changes and the focus is the personal interest rather than the national one can be found in the interaction between the pre-existent structure and the way politics embraced it instead of changing it (Boissevain, 2013). The society was strongly polarized between the supporters of the MLP and the supporters of the Nationalist Party. Each family was virtually related to a member of one party or the other. Both parties relied on these interpersonal relationships to gain voters, and the families did not vote a candidate instead of the other based solely on their political agenda but mostly based on kin. Families would vote for their relative in politics since in return for the vote, once in a position of power the relative would give back to the family and community in form of favours such as building permits in restricted areas, a new vacancy for a job in the public sector etcetera. To people, following the habit of putting their trust into the family relative or prominent local community member gave them a sense of protection and stability in the disorientation created by the profound and fast economical and societal changes. Therefore, the loyalty of the individual was not to the State itself but to their family or community member in politics (Boissevain, 2013).

The reality of patronage could perhaps be one of the reasons why the festi are still important and participated in events. When a politician funds a particular festi, it reinforces the bonds with the community who will then support him in his career. The festa is an opportunity to both show and gain support and remark the loyalty between the one in power and their kin.

1.7 The Festa as Community Anchor in a Changing Society

Maltese society went through deep changes over the course of a couple of decades. It used to be characterized by close bonded and geographically defined communities belonging to specific villages. Nowadays the boundaries between villages are blurred, people marry outside of the village and move from their family house to more convenient areas in the many newly built apartment complexes. However, the village festa is holding its ground in a place transformed by mass tourism. Despite these influences, the community remains a source of well-being for people, and they try to maintain certain bonding traditions alive and make them thrive. The festa holds its function of bringing the community members together to celebrate what they hold sacred and important. These types of celebrations are a collective social act that in Malta's case, contributes to the construction of the national identity (Cassar, 2015). Festi have an important social and emotional meaning for local people.

From a certain perspective, festi can be seen as an example of resistance of the Maltese society to the general consequences of capitalism which favours individualism at the detriment of community. festi are also expressions of people's fundamental need for community. With the coming together for the celebration, the villagers foster their sense of belonging. However, for the historical reasons above explained are a fundamental contribution to the surviving of festi in the context of economic growth and deep changes in the society. Since festi are intertwined with the Maltese political system, their dimension can't be considered purely as an expression of the need of the disaggregated community to come together, but also a reiteration of the dynamics of patronage which characterized the colonial times on the island. festi functions also as political stages and display of individual wealth, however the value the wealth translates is relational instead of capital. Investments in the Festa are trades for status and reputation in the community, and level of religious devotion.

However, if from one end the festi as a community celebration appears in contrast to the individualistic tendencies of the rules of individual capital accumulation, the tradition did not survive without consumerism to spice it up. The marriage between consumerism and festi developed spontaneously. However, consumerism has also been employed consciously to attract the widest range of people possible. In a society where tourism is a pillar sector and foreigners are the labour force, the parish itself and the main organizers are aware that without

employing new strategies to make the festi more appealing, the tradition would not survive. Therefore, festi are still so participated also due to their adaptation and transformation under the rules of capitalism and consumerism. Born mostly as a religious celebration connotated by the element of the magical and community reunion in a rural contest, the Festa transformed into a popular street celebration which can be enjoyed also by external participants and those who are not interested in its religious meaning.

1.8 Field Vignette: Festa of Saint Anthony in Birkirkara

On Saturday, 17th of May 2025, I joined some of the events of the *Festa* for Saint Anthony in Birkirkara, the town where I live. I followed the *Marċ mill-Banda Sant'Elena fil-Festa ta' Sant'Antnin* (the March with Sant'Elena Band for the Festa of Saint Anthony) and the fireworks display that followed. This was not the grandest of the *festi* I attended, but precisely because of its modesty and familiar atmosphere, it offered valuable insights into how community identity and local belonging are reproduced in practice.

The audience during the band march and musical performance consisted mainly of Maltese villagers from Birkirkara and family members of those playing in the band. The band itself included around 50 people, some of them visibly invested, proud, and energetic; others understandably tired after hours of playing and marching from 7:30 pm until well past 10:30 pm. Children ran freely in the street near their parents, and a group of teenagers roamed around wearing clothing that matched the colors and symbols of the *Festa*, taking selfies, laughing, and recording short videos to post online. Their performance of identity seemed deeply hybrid: rooted in tradition yet filtered through digital culture.

The social club is located just in front of the parish celebrating Saint Anthony, which, although active, is not Birkirkara's main parish. Its relatively secondary status may explain the smaller scale of this *Festa*, which lacked the intense rivalry or "*pika*" seen in more contested locations. Still, this parish and social club operate as essential community anchors. The social club also serves as the organizing hub for the Festa's various committees, reinforcing the intertwining of religious and secular responsibilities, a theme that has emerged repeatedly in *festa* dynamics across Malta.

Most of the men gathered were enjoying their local beer and chatting while watching the band march, a relaxed mood compared to other *festi* I've attended, where competition and internal

divisions (especially between band clubs) intensified the energy. Ahead of the band procession, carrying the flag with Saint Anthony's image, marched the Festa's core organizers: the Secretary, the President of the committee, and a few other prominent members. They were approached repeatedly by townspeople thanking them or offering compliments, small but meaningful acts that confirmed their social position and the affective capital they gain from their organizational role.

The street leading to the parish was lit brightly, almost like daytime, with wide flags bearing the image of Saint Anthony hung proudly along the road. This display, while modest in scale, was rich in symbolism. It echoed what has been explored throughout this chapter: the Festa as both a religious ritual and a projection of local identity and pride. Despite the absence of strong inter-parish rivalry here, the performance still created an in-group sense of unity.

This vignette encapsulates many of the broader dynamics previously discussed. The absence of intense *pika* here highlights how rivalry is not always essential to the celebration's meaning. In this quieter context, the Festa functioned more clearly as a moment of affirmation than as a stage for competition or political influence. The inclusion of multiple generations, informal conversation, music, and collective gratitude toward organizers speaks to the communal function of *festi* as a living ritual in a society undergoing rapid transformation.

Moreover, this moment underscores the dual role of *festi* as both sacred and mundane: while the celebration is ostensibly in honour of a saint, its social significance clearly stretches far beyond religious devotion. It becomes an emotional and material space for expressing belonging in an increasingly fragmented urban landscape, a theme also echoed by Cassar (2015) and Boissevain (2013). This modest Festa, through its simplicity, revealed how deeply embedded these celebrations are in the social fabric of Maltese village life, regardless of scale or media spectacle.

2. The role of Fireworks in Festi and their environmental dilemma

2.1 Introduction: Fireworks at the Heart of the Festa

Fireworks are an iconic and fundamental feature of the Maltese village Festa. Beyond their visual impact, they also play an important role in the cultural life of the Maltese archipelago. The loud and colourful displays are fundamental protagonists in most of the religious Festi dedicated to Catholic saints and celebrated throughout the year. Fireworks are invested with a dense network of meanings linked to religious reverence, community pride and village rivalries. When analysed from an anthropological perspective, it is evident that fireworks are more than just a means of entertainment as they function as symbols of identity, craftsmanship, and status. Their importance is demonstrated by the fact that, according to official estimates, 35 fireworks factories operate on the island, which is astonishing for such a small territory (Author's field notes, June 2025).

The pervasive use of fireworks persists even if environmental and health concerns are mounting following specific assessments. As highlighted by Earth.org (2023) and echoed in the field work, firework usage in Malta has not diminished, but has in fact increased in recent years, despite rising global awareness around air pollution, climate change, and sustainable alternatives. The question remains whether Maltese society would be willing to reduce their use. At present, it seems unlikely, as economic factors rather than environmental concerns would be the main driving force behind any reduction.

Malta's fireworks history is linked to the strategic military position of the islands and its past of wars. The long tradition of fireworks dates back centuries ago when the Order of the Knights of St. John governed the country from the 16th to the 18th century. There is a reason why the village festi linked to the Church employs fireworks as a means of celebration. In fact, the Order of the Knights of St. John, who was conventional, aristocratic and military, developed the art of pyrotechnics to celebrate at the best occasions like the election of the Gran Master, the Pope and other religious festivities (Malta Fireworks Festival, n.d.). The Knights were employing pyrotechnics for both ceremonial grandeur and political messaging. Fireworks were linked to celebrative occasions as cannon shots which were used to welcome the arrival of any dignitary. In fact, to this day, in Malta beside fireworks, extremely loud petards are shot in

sequence during special days and festi. They are fired from the rooftop of churches and other large buildings. Fireworks soon became part of the culture, blending military spectacle with religious devotion.

This military-ritual appeared to be well suited to honour the Saints in all their glory when Festi gradually developed from religious celebrations performed inside the church, to merry popular village feasts. As historian Alexander Cassar argues, the sound and spectacle of fireworks allow the Festa to transcend the physical boundaries of the village, projecting its significance across the island (Cassar, 2015). This highlights the dimension of festa as a performative claim to space, status, sacred legitimization and reputation by the village community who organized it. The celebrative noise of *murtali* (pure explosive petards) carries a symbolic power as the sound reverberates across the landscape signifying the presence of the village and the importance of its main patron Saint, or even its secondary Saint. The sound must be heard beyond the Festa's immediate audience, the loudest the sound the greater the prestige of the village and its organizing committee. The friendly but fierce rivalry between factions and villages ignites the planning, scale and execution of fireworks displays. In this way, this competition focused on fireworks can be read as an aesthetic arms race reminiscent of the military context in which they were developed and used at the beginning.

Thanks to the passion and dedication generations of Maltese pyrotechnicians invested in this symbolic weapon and devotional display, variegated typology of fireworks was developed and refined. In fact, nowadays, in Malta they produce different types of fireworks which serve different purposes during the Festa. Generally, pyrotechnicians specialize in one particular type of fireworks as each requires distinct expertise. The main ones are: Beraq, which are the loud explosive shells; Kuluri, which are the ones giving colourful visual effects; Bombi or Murtali, which are gunpowder-based detonations (Author's field notes, June 2025).
Pyrotechnicians are often associated with specific band clubs or festa factions, adding another layer of loyalty and competition to the craft (Author's field notes, June 2025). This artisanal knowledge is jealously guarded, often learned through years of apprenticeship, and constitutes an intangible cultural heritage in its own right.

To grasp the importance of fireworks, it is necessary to see them not as a mere decoration or a visual/sonic event, but as a text in Geertz's (1973) interpretation which needs a "thick

description". In fact, the fireworks performance appears to have multiple symbolic meanings and functions: they work as ritual offerings to honour the Saints for religious celebration; they act as an identification for the community as distinct from the others through the performative spectacle which reaches beyond the village borders; they represent the labour, devotion and majesty of the artisanal volunteers and their community; finally they are also a source of debate and contestation between tradition, environment concerns and urban explanation. By analysing fireworks from multiple perspectives, it is possible to understand their significance for the identity construction and unity of the islands.

2.2 Fireworks as Performative Ritual

As reported in Chapter 1, on Saturday, 17th May 2025, I attended the Festa of Saint Anthony in Birkirkara. At around 10 p.m. more people started gathering in the street as the scheduled fireworks display approached. I found myself naturally joining the non-local crowd of people from India, Nepal and probably some other European countries who gather to watch the fireworks. Foreign residents would generally gravitate toward the fireworks rather than the other religious ritual part of the Festa. Fireworks have the capacity to draw people from different backgrounds and faith for their visual appeal and joyful memories.

The show itself could only be described as "extra." Speakers boomed an unexpected mixture of religious music and anthems mixed with rock and pop beats with the intention to modernize the devotional tone and engage younger audiences. The texts praised the Virgin Mary, Jesus and the patron Saint on disco beats resembling those of a 2010s nightclub. The effect was both comical, however effective and meaningful.

On these notes, the pyrotechnic show started. The fireworks were placed on the roof of the social club, a relatively small building surrounded by taller residential apartments. The show lasted about thirty minutes, uninterrupted. *Girandole*, spinning wheel fireworks, were fixed to the façade of the club and went off shining and popping synchronized with the music. As they finished, aerial fireworks burst into the night sky in rapid succession. Some even seemed to come close to the surrounding buildings without ever reaching them. It was an explosion of colours and sounds in honour of Saint Anthony, an expression of the dedication, creativity and virtuosity of the pyrotechnicians. The smoke lingered over the town like a post-performance curtain.

After the aerial display, for the second half, the celebration shifted to ground fireworks. This type of firework consists of medium height poles with fireworks candles attached to different shaped *girandole* on top and a dynamite barrel in the middle of the road. The wind gently turns the *girandole*, once they are lightened up through a fuse, the propulsion is given by the fireworks candles rotating the structure Despite the presence of metal barriers set up by police, people are allowed to stay quite close, around five meters. As soon as the fuses were lit, the crowd instinctively stepped back for safety.

This entire performance, while a tribute to Saint Anthony, felt also like an act of artistic virtuosity. The pyrotechnicians, often regarded as community artists in Malta, seemed to pour their passion and competitive spirit into the display, not just as a religious gesture but as an expression of pride and an occasion to show their skills.

The power of this ritual lies not only in what it shows, but in how it makes people feel. The music, the blasts, the heat of proximity, the laughter and cheers combine to produce a multisensory e that brings together people who might otherwise never share a space. For many non-Maltese residents, it is hard to become involved, integrate or even get interested in the mechanisms and organisation of Festi. Since they might therefore feel excluded from the more structured or symbolic parts of the Festa, the fireworks offer a way to participate and enjoy, even if only as spectators. In this sense, besides attracting attention to the village Festa and fostering the community reputation, fireworks also operate on a unifying element which transcend geographic, social, and symbolic boundaries (Cassar, 2015). Through fireworks the village identity becomes a public spectacle that invites even outsiders into the experience. For these reasons, fireworks also represent a means of survival for Festi in the constantly evolving landscape that characterizes the current Maltese society. Interestingly, even Maltese critics of the festa system, objecting to its political affiliations or excessive street partying, often still show up for the fireworks. As Cassar (2015) has pointed out, fireworks function as a performative act that enables the Festa to transcend not only its geographical boundaries, but also its cultural ones. The fireworks display figures as the most accessible and emotionally resonant element of the celebration, therefore holding the power to attract both Maltese and non-Maltese alike making the Festa more participated and accepted.

In this way, fireworks act as a bridge and a common ground where admiration overrides ideological or cultural reservations and differences, mediating between tradition and modernity,

insiders and outsiders, religious faith and secular awe. Their role in festi cannot be reduced to mere entertainment. They perform meaning, they produce emotion, and they assert community presence, both internally, to the village, and externally, to the rest of Malta.

2.3 The Pyrotechnicians' Perspective: Art, Risk, and Passion

As Fireworks have a long tradition in Malta, their functions are not solely religious, not merely political, nor solely as a mere means of celebration. Their meaning goes beyond their function of attracting visitors, building a village reputation and honouring religious figures. In Malta, Fireworks are considered a traditional art.

Pyrotechnicians are not seen simply as technicians or volunteers but regarded and considered as proper masters that must be respected. The art of building fireworks is considered a precious knowledge passed through generations of pyrotechnicians who are willing to risk their lives to serve the art. They are recognized as artists and custodians of a specialized, intergenerational craft. Those involved speak of it not as a hobby but as a calling, often referring to their work with a mix of pride, reverence, and thrill.

One of the most valuable insights regarding the Maltese Festa and the use of fireworks, in particular, I directly got it from a person who, out of passion, has been working with fireworks from a young age. Thanks to his anecdotes and knowledge, I had the chance to gain a deeper understanding of what fireworks mean for the Maltese community and how they are a lived experience, not just ritual display. Through his words, I came to see how deeply embedded this practice is within the local cultural fabric. Moreover, I got technical knowledge on how they are made, which chemicals are used, and which regulations have been produced to enhance public safety. In fact, despite the traditional character of the craft, Malta has implemented a detailed regulatory system to control use and production. This system has come into being following the frequent accidents linked to unsafe practices. For example, some people used to store fireworks directly in their houses until a couple of accidents happened due to the involuntary blow up of explosive material stored in basements in residential areas (Author field notes, November 2024).

To enhance safety, there is a hierarchy of licenses which determines who has the official permit to participate at each stage of production. This official list of licences corresponds to different grades of expertise and responsibilities linked to fireworks use and production. Before touching any type of firework, one must obtain license C with which one is allowed to help once in the

field only. So, a licence C holder would contribute, help and start the fireworks during the days of the feast once they are placed in the launching field. After obtaining licence C, one can then get licence D with which one is allowed to enter the firework factory and observe the experts manufacturing them but in theory can't touch them or help. After obtaining licence D, one can obtain licence B with which can help manufacturing fireworks in the factory but only with the supervision of a licence A holder. Finally, the licence A is the one that allows the person to enter the factory and manufacture the fireworks without supervision. The owner of the fireworks factory must be a licence A holder and is the ultimate responsible of the factory itself. In case, an accident happens the A licence holders present at the factory are considered responsible. For this reason, the factory can't be opened unless an A licence holder is on the spot. There is also a temporary licence that can be granted to pyrotechnicians visiting from other countries coming to Malta to learn more or simply help their friends in the launch or at the factory. These licenses are not easily obtained. Each level requires formal training, a final exam, and years of commitment. Importantly, failing a test revokes all prior licenses, meaning one must begin the process anew. Courses are only held when enough applicants gather, further emphasizing the long-term dedication required to engage in this field.

Factories themselves are bound by strict regulations. Nobody is allowed to enter the fireworks factory unless they have a licence therefore, in theory, factories are not open to the public and visits are not allowed. The law goes as far as establishing how close people should stay from the factory. However, usually during the first day of the feast, some exceptions are made, and some people do pay a visit to the factory (Author's field notes, June 2025). There are also straight quotations on the amount of kilos of every necessary product a factory can buy and store. Moreover, no electronic device is allowed inside for safety reasons. Fireworks factories used to not even have electricity as it would have been too dangerous. Nowadays, thanks to new technologies, a factory can have electricity if the system is built in a certain way and all cables are sealed perfectly. The factory should also be at a certain distance from any buildings so that in case of an accident happening there, the least amount of people could be affected from it (Author's field notes, June 2025).

The rules around licences and factories are nowadays respected and strict even though there is still a certain grade of leniency (Author's field notes, June 2025). However, despite these

precautions, accidents are still part of the collective memory, and fear, within the village communities.

The methods of production are also a tradition carried on for generations which is an interesting type of knowledge. One of the most fascinating parts of Maltese pyrotechnics is the local production of gunpowder (Author's field notes, June 2025). The process to make it even involves technical environmental knowledge. Producing gunpowder is defined as truly hard work. Maltese produced Gunpowder is made by a percentage of Potassium Nitrate, Carbon and Sulphur. The component that is produced locally is Carbon. During and after the grape harvest, vines, twigs are collected from the field. This must be a massive amount. They are then stored to dry during the summer. Once dried, only the external part of the vines should be burned, as the carbon will be made only with the internal part. This is an interesting process resulting from long experimentation and adjustments.

The manufacture requires a deep and specific knowledge in the chemistry of fireworks, a type of knowledge developed throughout centuries of experimentation, and one can imagine, quite a few accidents. The sound of the explosion of *beraq* is given by the mixture of a ratio 1 to 2 of aluminium and potassium perchlorate. In *kuluri*, different components can give the different colours: lithium and strontium give red, barium gives green, copper gives blue, sodium gives yellow, and calcium gives orange. All the other colours are created by mixing these components in different ratios to obtain the one in between. The firework to be created and to work needs different chemicals and materials. The fuel is a metal like aluminium, the oxidant is potassium perchlorate, the blinders which allow links to be formed and alcohol, to have good bright colours is chlorine and, the stabilizer is an element which will absorb the temperature. Stabilizers are fundamental otherwise the temperature of the mixture would be too high and the only colour that would come out during the explosion would be white being the highest in energy of the visible spectrum. Each mixture demands precision. Even the binder, stabilizers, and oxidizers must be calibrated to control the explosion's timing, intensity, and hue. Manufacturing fireworks requires craftsmanship, chemistry, physics, and creativity combined (Author's field notes, June 2025).

In a further step, all calibrated components are pressed in a cylindrical form. The cylinders are then put in the desired sequence then covered with both a flower glue produced in the factory

itself and a shock absorbent material. These cylinders are then put into a sequence with a string with gunpowder on top. The cylinders are kept tighter together through a complex rope structure. These cylinders would be different in length and diameter depending on the type of desired effect. The final cylinders are ready for transportation. They are usually inserted into the "canna" which is a tube structure from which they will be launched. When the first cylinder is ignited, the reaction will enhance the second one and like this the firework is created in the sky (Author's field notes, June 2025).

The expertise is not limited to the chemical composition, but also the craftsmanship in the making of the cylindrical structure. Fireworks are considered a performative art for self-expression for pyrotechnicians who can play with the myriads of opportunities offered by the chemical combinations creating colours and blasts (Sant, n.d.).

Even though great improvements have been made regarding safety, firework manufacture still remains a high-risk hobby, as the Maltese call it, and people know very well that their life is constantly in danger while dealing with fireworks as they know that, no matter the precautions taken, an accident can always happen. Every pyrotechnician knows all the stories of the accidents that happened in the past as well as the most recent ones. They say that every year, at least one among them gets caught in an accident and, sometimes, one that could cost their life as well. However, their passion is so strong that they would continue despite knowing they could potentially lose their life doing it (Author's field notes, June 2025). Even though unexpected and dangerous explosions have already happened, these incidents won't stop people from carrying on with their passion (Author's field notes, November 2024).

Not only is it a dangerous hobby, but also quite a time consuming one as the process to manufacture the fireworks is very long. It takes one whole year of work, more or less intense but constant, for the factory to prepare itself for the annual Festa. One needs a year of work for an explosion of a couple of seconds (Author's field notes, June 2025). The manufacture of fireworks in Malta takes passion, discipline and time. Even to get each licence people need to attend a course and pass a final test. If one fails a final test at any moment, all licences obtained up to that point will be revoked and the person shall restart from the beginning. What's more, courses are not held regularly, but only when there are enough applicants to start them. Therefore, even to obtain the licence and actively start building fireworks requires years of

dedication and careful study. Pyrotechnicians take the learning process very seriously as it depends on their own life and safety, and the one of other's.

What is more special about Malta is that this all process with a production of fireworks that is on an industrial level, is done solely on a voluntary basis. As the components of the fireworks are quite expensive and the production time consuming, factories need to fund themselves and the pyrotechnician sometimes even economically contributes to keep it running.

Maltese pyrotechnicians have a main job, families and responsibilities, however they state that they could never abandon their hobby and describe a feeling of emptiness when, for any reason, they are prevented from manufacturing fireworks. They refer to it as an addictive hobby and, one of the people I spoke with, even compared it to the addiction you experience with a drug. I would try to guess that the danger involved, the satisfaction when launched and the knowledge put into practice, creates an interesting addictive cocktail which can become the life purpose of a pyrotechnician. In this way, they spend much of their time and sometimes even money, for their shared hobby. As a saw, their motivation goes far beyond the feast or the crowd watching, it is something more intimate and personal, they could enjoy it even if they would be the only one at the launch.

2.4 Political Economy and Social Capital

To understand how the factories can fund themselves, it is important to consider the dynamics of festi. A common village scenario includes two rivalry band clubs, each supporting either the patron saint and organizing the titular feast, or the secondary saint and organizing another festa. In many cases, each band club has its own firework factory staffed by loyal pyrotechnicians. Thus, in a single village, there can be two or even three separate factories. However, in other villages, while band clubs are present, there may be no firework production at all. In this case, the firework committee, which is part of the band club and organizes the events related to fireworks during the feast, needs to purchase fireworks from other factories across the island (Author's field notes, June 2025).

Although it must be said that financial transparency is limited, the committee can receive public funds depending on connections with political figures (Author's field note, February 2025).

Generally, income is usually generated from external sales. For instance, Gozo's band clubs, typically funded by the island's wealthy patrons, order a good amount of products which the factory sells for at least double the price of the materials used as a fair amount of time and effort are put into the final work. These transactions, along with commissions for private events, allow the factory to be economically viable without overly relying on personal funds from pyrotechnicians. Factories can receive government funding usually to support safety-related infrastructure projects rather than to purchase materials (Author's field notes, June 2025).

In Malta, politics inevitably intersect with fireworks production. One of my interlocutors expressed clear discomfort with this reality, though he acknowledged it as deeply ingrained in island dynamics (Author's field notes, June 2025). He explained that a politician, or an aspiring one, would routinely visit fireworks factories. However, they would visit all factories just to promote themselves and then, once in power, give a hand only to the ones they favoured for any kind of reason. If someone in politics favours one particular band club, the factory and the committee would greatly benefit from it in form of financial support, police coordination, and roads closure permits, all vital resources for staging a large-scale festa. For example, the factory, to transport fireworks from one place to the other, needs to request permits, police escorts, and road closures, all of which has costs that can be reduced through political support (Author's field notes, June 2025).

The fireworks are at the centre of the rivalry between factions and villages as it is the most spectacular component of the Festa, the one seen and heard from afar. This competition fuels a culture of secrecy. Secrets are kept among pyrotechnicians belonging to different band clubs and knowledge is passed generationally, held tightly within families, factories, and factions. Pyrotechnicians may share stories with enthusiasm, but they tend to withhold key information. Even when speaking to someone not directly involved in the field, they seem to weigh the risk. The desire to outdo other factories leads to subtle forms of knowledge protection, both collective and individual (Author's field notes, June 2025).

Different factories work in different ways, in some the pyrotechnicians work as a team, in others they are more independent in their organization and don't all meet at the same time together. This depends more on the traditional culture of a factory than its members' mentality (Author's field notes, June 2025).

Several Maltese and especially foreign workers expressed frustration over the high cost of this amount of fireworks production. While part of the funding is donation-based, many believe that significant public funds are also involved (Author's field note, February 2025). These critiques highlight tensions between tradition and resource allocation, especially as other public services remain underfunded or dysfunctional. Fireworks, while culturally important, have become a flashpoint in wider debates about priorities and fairness in public spending.

Following the complex meaning of fireworks in Maltese culture, it is evident that their use during Festi is not only an esthetical and promotional performance, but also a symbolic one where identity, prestige, and rivalry play out in ritual form. The battle of fireworks in Malta has common elements with the Balinese cockfighting studied by Geertz (1973) where to understand why it is done, one needs to view the performance as "a story the community tells itself about itself". As the Balinese cockfighting, the Maltese fireworks performance, and production, can be defined as a "deep play", meaning a ritual where stakes are high in terms of safety, resources and environmental impact, but the symbolic meaning outweighs the risks both for the pyrotechnicians and the community. In fact, the pyrotechnicians engage themselves in a risky, time-consuming and unpaid intense activity all year-round for just a few minutes of glory. In this context, danger becomes a mark of passion and skills of which the final explosion is the proof. The firework displays are like an arena of competition among pyrotechnicians as well as their community or faction. Through fireworks, as through cockfights in Geertz (1973) Balinese experience, the community performs its status and makes a statement about their resources, tradition, craftmanship, and prestige. If the deeper meaning of fireworks is grasp, it is easier to understand why environmental impact is not being accounted for and why so many petards are launched even during the day when there is no spectacle to see (Author's field notes, May 2024 - August 2025).

2.5 Environmental and Public Health Impact

The importance of fireworks for Malta's cultural life can be highlighted even with numbers. The small densely populated archipelago hosts 35 fireworks factories, in 2023 the value of the import for materials destined for production was 89.000 dollars, while the value of export, meaning ready fireworks, was 1.5 million dollars (TrendEconomy**,** 2024). During each of the

105 Festi celebrated between Malta and Gozo, fireworks of different types are let off at intervals for several days culminating in intensity and colourful shows during the evening of the Saturday and Sunday, the principal days of the Festa (Camilleri & Vella, 2010).

Considering the frequent, and unmatched anywhere in the world in relation to the country's size (Camilleri & Vella, 2010), use of fireworks, questions started to be raised regarding their environmental impact both in terms of health and wellbeing of, mainly, human, but also non-human residents of the islands. Studies and publications started to be made to assess the environmental impact of the Festi season on the territory. The research is currently ongoing, and scientists are trying to pass the message to the public, which tends to be resistant and feel attacked even when that was not the intention (Author's field notes, March 2025).

As observed, fireworks launch leave a cloud of dark smoke and dust behind that gets slowly dispersed by the wind (Author's field notes, April 2025). The traces left by the explosions are made by metallic salts such as Cu, Ba, Sr, which are colour-generating, Sb2S3, the binder, Antimony, Aluminium and Potassium Perchlorate (Camilleri & Vella, 2010). These chemicals contained in fireworks are proved to be toxic or that become toxic through combustion (Sant, n.d.).

One of the ingredients of the fireworks formula considered traditionally fundamental is Potassium perchlorate (Author's field notes, June 2025). Potassium perchlorate is the key ingredient for a successful blast. However, according to Alfred Vella's studies, it is also quite pervasive and polluting for the surrounding environment (Author's field notes, March 2025). Before pyrotechnicians used potassium chloride instead, a less stable molecule therefore much more dangerous. Nowadays, the belief that potassium chloride would be a much better chemical is still alive. Pyrotechnicians narrate about the time when it was used in a nostalgic tone as Potassium chlorate would trigger a more efficient, therefore powerful, reaction preserving brighter colours. However, with time, it was understood that, even if slightly less spectacular, potassium perchlorate is a much more stable molecule and therefore safer as the reaction is less spontaneous and more predictable which means less chance of fatal accidents. Nowadays, the two molecules are sold for almost the same price, whether in the past, potassium chloride used to be a lot cheaper. In this case, to be safer, even with some resistance, pyrotechnicians agreed to bring a change into the traditional way

(Author's field notes, June 2025). However, after the explosion, there would be a significant amount of perchlorate unused. A consistent portion of the chemical would not be brought far by the wind and would deposit on the islands and nearby coast instead. Professor Alfred Vella is currently following research aimed at getting more clear results regarding the impact of this leftover dust which might interfere with thyroid function (Author's field notes, March 2025).

To have the explosion, all pyrotechnicians know about the fire triangle: the oxidation, the fuel and the energy. In the case of fireworks, the oxidation is given by the air and the oxidation component, the fuel is the metal, and the energy is the friction that happens once the firework is launched in the sky (Author's field notes, June 2025). All stages of the process have an impact on the environment. Following an official study by Camilleri and Vella (2010) relevant results were obtained from measuring PM10 concentration in a county side region in Gozo and an urban, not too densely populated, side in Zejtun, a town in the South of Malta. Following regular daily measurements of PM10 in the areas first during the intense Festa summer months and then during the quiet autumn/winter months, it has been found that the concentration of elements derived solely from fireworks is significantly higher than it should be according to European air quality standards and limit values (Camilleri & Vella, 2010). What's more concerning is that, according to the study, the negative effects on air quality are durable as the concentration of fireworks generated dust persists even in the months following the Festa season. In samples collected from indoor and outdoor dust samples between 2011 and 2013 in 43 different localities the medium value of potassium perchlorate was 7.8 μg g−1 and 6.2 μg g−1 (Vella et al., 2015). Persistence though re-suspension of contaminated dust is the cause of the concentration remaining permanent throughout the year. Potassium perchlorates and the other chemicals can then reach water sources and deposit on the local agricultural products which will be then consumed by the residents. These products and byproducts of fireworks are known to have a certain health impact as their inhalation carries carcinogenic, mutagenic and teratogenic risks (Camilleri & Vella, 2010).

According to Professor Vella, also rector of the University of Malta, alternatives, in particular to potassium perchlorate are already available on the market (Author's field notes, March 2025). Maltese fireworks factories are refined chemical laboratories where experiments have been made to create the best possible type of fireworks for each occasion.

Embedded in tradition, even if introducing new and less damaging chemicals could represent an occasion for the creation of innovative mixtures for less damaging fireworks, that's not the way pyrotechnicians and the public sees it. The introduction of less harming chemicals is seen as an oppressive and not necessary intervention and an outrage of the respected tradition. Both because new chemicals would be more expensive to purchase and for the belief that the fireworks would be less spectacular than they are, pyrotechnicians are not open for experimentation (Author's field notes, June 2025).

Another concern is the wellbeing of non-human residents of the island as fireworks cause a lot of noise pollution. However, as heard on multiple occasions, the sound is as important as the visual component both for the show and the Maltese society's cultural dynamics (Author's field notes, June 2025).

Generally, residents who are also pet owners, dogs in particular, tend to be concerned regarding the distress caused to their non-human companions. For example, a young woman whose family moved back to Malta in her teens, has a negative opinion of Festi due to the excessive use of fireworks which scares her pets. Seeing how her dogs get terrorised and upset anytime fireworks explode nearby, makes her sympathize with her non-human companion and feel strongly against the proximity and frequency of the explosions. However, even though she thinks fireworks are used in an excessive amount and she finds the daytime ones absurd, she acknowledges their beauty and appeal. Therefore, for her, they should reduce the amount and be more aware of non-human distress when it comes to fireworks loud noise. Her care and attention for the non-human wellbeing, more than for the environmental impact, would be the motive for moderation (Author's field notes, 2024-2025).

However, not everyone shares her level of awareness and empathy. Her sensitivity towards animals can be put in direct contrast to a painful scene witnessed during the Festa in Birkirkara; a couple insisted on staying despite their dog was desperately panicking during the ground fireworks display. This couple was in the first line of the crowd who had a medium size dog kept on a metal leash. The dog was terrified, panicking, trying to hide under the parked car nearby, jumping on the woman who could not control the strength. The dog ended up biting her leg, so the partner took over and held the dog down. Seeing the desperate animal, people tried to intervene by suggesting bringing the dog away and even offered to walk the dog

somewhere else so that they could still enjoy the show. Surprisingly, the offer was refused and people around kept gazing at the agonizing dog, powerless (Author's field notes, April 2025). The couple probably thought that the dog was safer with them, and they could not empathize with her. In their perspective they cared for her so that should have been enough to make her feel secure. This means that perhaps not every pet owner is sensitive to their non-human companion's experience of reality. However, the distress of domestic pets, more than the one of stray cats or birds, can be a feasible reason why people would consider reducing the amount of day-time fireworks and their frequency during the summer months.

Although fireworks are highly appreciated and people truly enjoy gathering to watch the spectacles, even going to different events to compare where the best fireworks of the year have been done, many are critical of the frequency. What is interesting is that it has been suggested that the use of fireworks has been increasing over the years also because of tourism. As political strategy to drove tourists' attention to Festi and add one more attraction for them to visit and enjoy the island, the use of fireworks has received incentives. It is suggested that the frequency of use of fireworks for more events is partially related to consumeristic reasons rather than an "authentic" tradition in place for decades. Despite how enjoyable it is to gather for a display, residents generally tend to agree that a reduction would be welcomed (Author's field notes, May 2024 - August 2025). This analysis would be beneficial to resonate with the argument that reducing the amount of fireworks launched would be an attack to a local passion and art.

Like many festivities and traditions of the contemporary world, before consumerism and mass tourism, it was not necessary to take an environmental approach to them because they used to be quite in harmony with the situation, free from harmful excesses. Then the global society and dynamics changed radically, affecting local traditions, promoting certain aspects and practices which could be hard to conceive with sustainability. The increase in the use of fireworks in Malta over the past years could be linked to this type of dynamic where a community practice is taken out of proportion to exploit the celebrations itself to make it more suitable for tourists who are fundamental for the country's economy.

3. Consequences of mass tourism, gentrification and commodification on Festi and cultural heritage

3.1 Introduction: Socio-Spatial Shifts and the Festa

The Festa is the celebration of the village community which is determined by the geographical circumscription of the town itself. The Fest is bound to its town, and it is influenced by both the characteristics of the community who organizes it and the space the community is located in. However, the Maltese society, and the island's geography with it, changed profoundly over the last couple of decades.

The Maltese villages used to be urban centres surrounded by fields or the sea depending on their location. There was a physical distinction between a village and the next one. The main church is located in the heart of the village on a wide square. The houses built on the edges used to belong to the less wealthy members of the community, while the villas used to be placed closer to the centre. The progressive, and ongoing, construction of more and more houses, apartment complexes, hotels, commercial and business centres modified the landscape of the island bringing the once clearly distinct towns closer as their borders were expanding. In many areas now, the boundaries of the villages are indicated by an informatorily plaque placed in between consecutive buildings. In tourist and most densely populated areas, there are still villages on paper, however, it looks like an expanded conglomerate of apartment complexes. This new urban morphology affects interpersonal relationships and limits spontaneous interactions lowering the sense of belonging to a certain circumscribed community. The replacement of interconnected village streets, central squares, and shared gathering spaces with private apartment blocks, garages, and commercial complexes reduces daily encounters that once reinforced community ties. As Low (2003) argues, the spatial layout of a neighbourhood is never neutral, and it produces specific forms of sociability or isolation.

Without space between each other, the Maltese towns are progressively losing their identities making people less engaged with the local Festa as the individuality and uniqueness of the village gets lost in the concatenation of speedy-made grey apartment blocks (Author's field notes, February 2025).

The conformation of the town determines how the Festa is because Festa is a celebration of the community and reflects the characteristics of the relationships among its members. In the past, for example in the town of Hamrum, the door of the houses used to be directly on the street and people kept it open, set outside and chatted daily with the neighbours; everyone knew each other, and everyone knew everything (Author's field notes, July 2025). Neighbourhood interactions were a daily event, and this contributed to the Festa. Everyone was participating and wanted to gain a better reputation among the other community members. Small streets, central squares, common spaces, local shops and bars, were all aggregational centres that fostered the sense of community. Nowadays in many towns, people live in these apartment complexes, some of them never even meet each other. In some cases, people directly access the garage with their car, take the lift and go inside their apartment, order food and have the groceries delivered, consequentially they have very limited interactions (Author's field notes, July 2025).

Not only urban expansion, but also gentrification radically changed the architecture, housing market and atmosphere of many villages. The Festa suffers from these changes. However, it resists because people need community events. Those who support Festa and want the tradition to stay alive put even more effort into it (Author's field notes, July 2025). Before everyone participated, now it is a challenge to find new volunteers but those who join are strongly motivated and want to keep it as alive as possible. This is why even in a place like Sliema, a primary example of gentrify area where old townhouses are replaced by apartments and gigantic hotel complexes, most spaces are targeted for tourists and local people moved out, the Festa is still alive. This is because both local people still in the area and the ones originally from there reunite to celebrate. Even though when walking through the streets of Sliema, it is hard to get the feeling of a local community living there reuniting in certain places, this community is still alive and proud of its Festa (Author's field notes, July 2025). Other villages will easily criticize the festa in Sliema over rivalry and pride however, even if not so spectacular nor participated, is still pleasant and enjoyable.

In certain areas, the seed of gentrification started to grow decades ago. The village of Naxxar is located in a central area and, unlike Sliema, is not a popular tourist destination, however it is strongly affected by gentrification. It is hard to recognize Boissevain's (1965) village in today' s town. Naxxar used to be a tightly-knit and church-cantered community, however already in

the 60s the atmosphere started to shift. As one of the central areas of Malta, it developed for residential purposes. Once, the central villages were indeed distinct entities with farmlands dividing them, now they are a conglomerate of buildings, so it is hard to point out where one ends and the other begins. As the Northern coastal areas developed to host hotels and tourists, locals prefer the more central areas as they are quieter and easier to reach at the same time. Naxxar, Mosta or Birkirkara are well connected to the rest of the island through public transport. As they turned into desirable residential areas, the relations between the people and the village inevitably changed despite the effort to keep the community together. In Naxxar original villagers have progressively moved out from the centre due to real estate speculation and rising property values, while newcomers, wealthier professionals and upwardly mobile Maltese from other areas have moved into the heart of the village. The old town houses become desirable properties that wealthier families, Maltese and foreign, would purchase to turn them into luxurious historical residences and land outside the central area are used for building spacious modern villas (Boissevain, 2014). With the rise in costs in the area, families who did not manage to capitalize on their property and take advantage of gentrification, faced rises in prices and moved to different areas. Social life is now fragmented as the residents only share geographical proximity but lack social intimacy generating a sense of alienation and demotivation which negatively impact the annual Festa.

3.2 Case Study: Marsaskala: A Festa Losing its Roots

Similarly to Naxxar, even if less affluent, is the town of Marsaskala. This is a firsthand example of how gentrification and changes in the population affected the Festa in a village located in the northeast part of the island. It is mildly touristic therefore hosts a fair number of dedicated infrastructures; however, it is still mainly a residential town. Because of its quiet atmosphere and more affordable prices, many non-Maltese residents have been moving there in the last decade making the population quite diverse. At the same time, younger Maltese are moving out to other villages.

This created a particular situation in which, even if not overpopulated nor particularly touristic, the village of Marsaskala progressively lost its original inhabitants and the new ones are not yet interested in the organisation of the traditional village Festa which happens at the end of July. In fact, in recent years, the organisational committee has been struggling to obtain sufficient funding for the festa activities (Author’s field notes, February 2025).

As mentioned before, the organisation of Festa is on a voluntary basis. For this reason, the village community needs to be invested in this tradition for the events to be organised. According to the former secretary of Marsaskala band club, being part of the organisation is far more time-consuming than one could imagine. Even if someone is familiar with the Festa, being the secretary occupies most of one's free time. Apparently, it is becoming increasingly challenging to find new people to join as volunteers, especially in Marsaskala. The former secretary of the band club happily took this difficult role as Festi are part of her life story and represent dear childhood memories. The band club Secretary implies certain responsibilities. The Secretary of the association is the one responsible for administering the finances, and the one liable in the eventuality of debts or lawsuits. However, she had to quit the position after two years as she couldn't find a balance with her actual job (Author's field notes, February 2025).

The organisational committee of Marsaskala has the same composition as most of the other villages' associations: there is a band club, the decoration committee and the fundamental fireworks association. In the case of Marsaskala, as in other villages also, the fireworks committee is part of the organisation however is separate from the others and acts independently. The budget is based on fund raising which requires organisation throughout the whole year just to reach the necessary amount to organize the Festa. Recently, band clubs were struggling to reach their financial goals (Author's field notes, February 2025). This is linked to multiple factors such as the fact that the cost of living has drastically increased over the last few years and people don't have the same budget anymore. Since prices have been increasing constantly, even organising the Festa is becoming increasingly expensive.

Economic and social change has pushed people to move to different villages weakening the ties with the family's original village. The lifestyle on the island transformed together with the social structure. People still enjoy the festi, for the Maltese it is generally linked to childhood memories, and they love to celebrate and take part in the activities, however, they are way less available to become volunteers, organising it investing energy, time and money
(Author's field notes, February 2025). Therefore, even if from the outside the Festa seems thriving, the band clubs are struggling to get new volunteers and funds. Who is participating in the organization can feel the difference compared to even a decade prior.

The destruction of the original topographic structure of the island through continuous urbanization contributed to the progressive loss of investment in the village festa, especially in particular towns such as Marsaskala whose annual celebration has never been among the most famous ones (Author's field notes, February 2025).

Even pyrotechnicians are affected by urban development and loss of open spaces. In fact, there are specific laws establishing from where fireworks can be launched depending on their diameter. Usually, the ground fireworks are made of small candles, then there are the fireworks that can be launched from a building roof, then there are the ground field ones which are more than two meters high and can be started only in open fields at a fair distance from any building. As much as from Maltese pyrotechnicians' perspective these fields are distant, from an external point are still quite close to the village and sometimes even in the middle of them. However, there are limits affecting both the launching and the activity of the factories which can't operate if too close to residential areas. Ferocious urbanization with wild construction allowed by the government handing more authorizations, is affecting the activity of pyrotechnicians who feel spaces are getting narrower year by year. Together with the lack of new volunteers, the transformation of the landscape is making the pyrotechnician pessimistic, although still hopeful, regarding the future of Festi (Author's field notes, June 2025).

An interesting demonstration on how urban conservation laws help also preserving traditional ways of community interaction is the village of Rabat. Gentrification affects Rabat since it is an historical area and a tourist attraction. In Rabat there are strict rules for urban conservation therefore the original houses must be kept, and people can't build new flats in most areas of the town. Buying a house is particularly costly since it is an historic town. There are only old Maltese houses and villas and if they need restoration and renewal, permits must be taken, application submitted; It takes time, and the materials are more expensive. For this reason, gentrification has a hard time there. It is a tourist spot, but local people still live in their old houses and hang out in the local bars and bakeries. There are enough restaurants, bars, shops and markets for the people not to go far from the town to get what they need. So, people still reunite in the squares, churches and local bars maintaining strong interactions and neighbours' relationships from which the Festa can benefit. In fact, the Festa is very participated, cherished and funded. People of all ages participate and join the celebration (Author's field notes, July

2025). There were many children, old people, parents and younger people taking part in all moments of the Festa. The streets are graciously decorated, the band well-coordinated and the atmosphere welcoming and pleasant. The morning march for children with the little statue is very participated and generally now people all over Malta are joining this part of the Festa increasingly. Generally, in the South, where distinctive villages with Maltese traditional houses still survive, the local Festi are more felt and even the younger take part in their organization. However, the general political trend is to allow more and higher contraction which could potentially affect even those villages that are, for now, less crowded.

3.3 Tourism and Misinterpretation: Cultural Dissonance at the Festa

Savage urbanization could be the consequence of economic growth. Together, and intertwined, with gentrification comes tourism. In the case of Malta, where it represents one of the first sources of revenue, it is better to refer to it as mass tourism. Festi represents a cultural pillar of Maltese tradition. However, this does not protect the celebration from exploitation and commodification. Mass tourism deeply transforms societies who base their income and structure on a rising number of visitors who, mostly, treat the region as a source of amusement. This happens with the collective participation of local and foreign businesses who thrive thanks to tourism and reshape the landscape to create suited facilities and infrastructures.

Festi, which are the symbols of traditional village life, can be reinterpreted and commodified to turn them into a tourist attraction. The tourism industry can exploit a tradition and contribute to reshape it to capitalize on cultural heritage. This comes with the risk of gradually stripping the Festi of their symbolic meanings turning them into aesthetic performances (Boissevain, 2014). The current amount of fireworks produced and used could also be considered influenced by the tourist industry as this element is what could attract external spectators the most.

When Malta was not yet such a crowded holiday destination, people would not mind curious tourists observing or even taking part in the events of the celebration (Boissevain, 1965). Outsiders were welcomed at the *ta'gewwa*, the Festa events happening inside the parish, even if very few ventured that far (Boissevain, 2013). However, these observations belong to a time when tourism looked nothing like now and the society was very different. Overtourism and economic growth reshaped social dynamics. Nowadays the villagers are feeling more

protective of their tradition and manifest their desire to exclude from festi those who they perceive as external people who, in their opinion, won't understand the meaning of the celebration (Author's field notes, May 2024 - August 2025).

On one hand the discontent is justified and linked to how tourists reacted to the Festi. Visitors often project feelings of cultural superiority and moral judgment onto the communities they spent their holidays among (Abbink, 2007).

Boissevain (2013) reported what he casually overheard while at Naxxar's Good Friday procession from a couple of Dutch tourists. Their comment was "Jesus! What a heathen business" while filming the Festa (Boissevain, 2013, p.191). They were looking down at the colourful march as a folkloristic manifestation of a backward Catholic mentality. Boissevain (2013) reflected on how the original anti-Catholic prejudice was reinforced rather than put into question as a result of the tourists' participation in the Maltese tradition. As Abbink (2007) observes, this type of insensitive behaviour exhibited by tourists is far from uncommon and reinforces the distance between them and the local community rather than fostering cross-cultural understanding. The tourist's gaze creates a powerful dynamic that reinforces the visitors' feeling of superiority. The advertisements encourage tourists to go to the Festa to leave a folkloristic "authentic" experience rather than to participate in a celebration dear to the community. If the pamphlets sell the Festa as a cultural commodity, the visitors willingly participate in the commodification and enforcement of stereotypes. They observe from a distance as if it was just a show rather than an expression of cultural identity and the result of a year-long preparation. Therefore, what for the participants is an event full of symbols and emotions, visitors see it as "exotic" or amusing, even loud and excessive.

By chance, a similar event to the one experienced by Boissevain (2013) that highlights this lack of cultural understanding, happened during the procession of the festa of Stella Maris in Sliema. While walking along the busy seafront together with a woman who moved to Malta four years prior, people were gathering for the procession. The person was narrating how she told me she fell in love with the warm weather and relaxed atmosphere of the island. On Sunday evening, the last day of Stella Maris Festa, the main street is busy, full of kiosks and people. While the fireworks were colouring the sky, the procession followed by the band playing was passing along the road. The participants were dressed in long white tunics and wearing a huge wooden

crucifix. This person, despite living on the island for years, had never heard about Festi and started to ask questions in a rather loud voice with a surprised but mocking tone. The people around started throwing angry glances at her and started loudly commenting on how ignorant tourists are. She perceived the Festa as an exaggerated and unnecessary celebration showing no interest in the social practices of the community she voluntarily decided to live among (Author's field notes, August 2024).

Although this entitled behaviour is quite common amongst visitors and even residents. These would not justify approaching the Festa as a secret unchangeable temple and "outsiders" only as a threat to its authenticity.

In fact, according to NSO, in Malta nearly 30% of residents are foreigners, wanted by the government for labour purposes (Balzan, 2024) It would be beneficial both for locals and newcomers to become accepting and positively interact with each other. Some efforts have been made in some towns to involve foreign communities. Some of them even share the same religious beliefs as they are Christian as well. In Malta there are many communities that share the same beliefs such as Christian South Indian from Kerala and around, Christian Nigerian and Ghanian, most Filipinos, South Americans. However, there is a lot of resistance from the local Maltese side. The government, for decades now, has been promoting Festi as a truistic attraction, a colourful example of Maltese folklore, a "local" experience. People do not appreciate the vision that tourists have of the Festa, however it seems for most the presence of a tourist is more welcomed than the one of a foreign resident even though, even thinking strategically, it would make more sense to involve the residents instead of the tourists as this would foster bonds and better relationships. It won't happen without challenges. For example, during this current year Festa of Saint George in Qormi, a black resident, after enjoying the Festa, wanted to help to carry the titular saint statue during the evening informal procession when, in this particular village, people organize an evening merry march fuelled by beers and band music. For this particular event, anyone can join to carry the statue. However, when the foreign resident tried more than one time to approach the carrying crowd, he was pushed away by the local residents. A fight was about to break out therefore other local residents took the black man to the side to explain the situation and discourage him to try as this won't have a pleasant outcome (Author's field notes, July 2025). There is a resistance from the local side to accept the foreign resident as part of the village community and a mutual feeling of distrust

fuelled by lack of communication and understanding. The Festa could be a way to foster relationships and build trust and respect between the different residents of the village. The local Festa would benefit from newcomers, potential new volunteers and better relationships could be ensured. Foreign residents would feel more welcome, comfortable and accepted therefore they would feel more responsible for the wellbeing of the community if this community makes them a part of it. Exclusion will create resentment and generate indifference, the need to stay for economic reasons while not feeling home in the village will foster frustration. On the other hand, the original inhabitants, by keeping the guard up and defending the village and traditions as if there were not so many changes occurring, will feel threatened, uncomfortable and react with dismissive superiority towards the foreign residents. Instead of a meeting opportunity, it turns into both an opportunity for exploitation and a source of frustration from the Maltese local community and a temporary opportunity to gain a higher salary to send money back home for the foreign local community. Festi could be an opportunity for connection and collaboration. In certain villages, when the parish decides to offer services also in other languages, they generally receive many criticisms. This resistance from positive transformation has been more evident with the recent changes in the society. If once more welcoming, now economic interest prevails. In fact, refusing to melt influence with other residents' cultures, however seemingly endlessly building poor quality housing and facilities for profit in disregard of the traditional morphology of the towns and marketing traditions and locations for mass tourism is accepted as it brings profit. However, the heavy labour and the "low" labour must be cheap to enable the owners to maximize gains. So other communities must stay silent, isolated and work for less, show themselves the least possible outside of working venues to be considered the "good" migrants. This to assess the paradox of protecting the tradition. Tradition needs to be preserved from certain influences but can be exploited and changed if there is a profit out of it. The will to make the Festa a meeting point needs to be promoted and fostered, instead of creating obstacles for it.

By involving different communities, the Festi will be up for changes, new elements and influences. However, new residents will also help in keeping the knowledge and tradition alive. At this point, it is worth bringing up again the reference to Robetson’s (2005) who put the definition of “local” into question. It would be misleading to rely on a concept of “hard identity” and associate what is “local” to what defines “the real we”, the “real” and original

community. The population, especially on an island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, is not stranger from external influences, especially Malta.

Pyrotechnicians would have new people willing to learn the art and young volunteers to teach to. Different backgrounds would also open a possibility of new experimentation and potentially more funding, adding some knowledge they might have gained in their home country regarding the art of fireworks. Creating different dynamics and closer relationships could be the way to both preserve the tradition and bring positive changes, even open people to the introduction of elements that would be more sustainable from

Conclusion

When I first arrived in Malta, I knew nothing about Festi and thought that the loud explosions at 7:00 am were the sounds of buildings being taken down as my flat was surrounded by construction sites. However, when I heard the same noises day after day, I figured out it must be something else. I was shocked when they told me they were fireworks. “Fireworks? During the day? Of a normal weekday? And for days in a row? Why?”. That’s how my quest started, to figure out the reason behind this seemingly illogical practice. After learning about the existence of Festa, I decided to experience the topic by living it myself. This journey brought me to meet many people, hear opinions and join celebrations with different perspectives.

Combining fieldwork with literature reading, I came to understand how the Maltese Festa could be sold off to visitors as a folkloristic religious celebration, when it is a complex social phenomenon where community, performance, politics and belonging intertwine. Festi maintained their relevance not by remaining static replication of a tradition belonging to the past, but by evolving and adapting in time of change. Despite mass tourism, rapid urbanization and changing demographics, the Festa remains a relevant social ritual publicly celebrated by the different communities. Older generations still pass down pride, knowledge and labour to younger people who can foster a sense of belonging, and sometimes of alienation as there is a growing tension between who considers the celebrations positively and who feels they are excessive, or even unnecessary nowadays. Through my research I got the chance to meet both Festi supporters and sceptics, listening to the motivations behind their position.

Fireworks emerged as a central element of the Festa, as both a form of entertainment and a symbolic discourse. The local production involves extraordinary personal investment, risk, secrecy, knowledge and dedication making fireworks expressions of individual, and community, mastery celebrated through collective spectacles. Pyrotechnics in Malta are a form of what Geertz (1973) defines as “deep play”, meaning a practice where the stakes are high but the meaning it holds for the community outweighs the risks involved. Fireworks are considered an art and source of prestige that must be carried on with passion no matter the costs and risks of production.

Yet, this devotion is not unanimous and free from contradictions. In fact, concerns related to environmental and public health are growing considering ongoing studies revealing the damaging effects of potassium perchlorate and the levels, and persistence, of heavy metals concentration in air, soil and water resources. Despite new evidence, the weight of tradition often supersedes ecological concerns as intervention is still perceived as an external threat to the authenticity and autonomy of the cultural practice. As I heard from multiple interlocutors, even the suggestion of limiting fireworks is seen as not a pragmatic choice, but a symbolic assault on what it means to be Maltese and an attack during challenging times for Festi.

Malta is still undergoing rapid changes which are reflected in the Festa. The rivalry between factions still reflects broader tensions around political affiliation and historical prestige, however the changing population dynamics such as the increasing number of foreign workers settling in Malta and younger Maltese moving away from traditional communities, is challenging the continuity of Festa organization. Fireworks seem to be one of the elements that most successfully unites people beyond these divisions helping the Festa transcend cultural and geographical boundaries as pointed out by Cassar (2015). The spectacles can create a sense of unity reaching also those who otherwise feel excluded from the Festa culture.

My research shows that there still is a strong collective emotional investment in Festi, however many people, the younger generations and the foreign residents, still keep themselves at a distance or participate with different intentions. Some attend simply for the social and festive atmosphere as an occasion to have a good time and drink with friends without getting involved in the yearly preparations. Others keep themselves at a distance either indifferent or critical

towards the structure, costs and organization of the celebrations. The multiple perspectives demonstrate that the Festa can't be a fixed tradition but must remain in continuous negotiation with all the different members of the community.
As a foreigner living in Malta, I was puzzled by the duality of inclusion and exclusion belonging to Festi's dynamics. On one side, everyone seems welcomed, on the other, you are kept at a distance as you were not born in the community. It is interesting how certain changes that are beneficial to attract tourists and promote the culture in a folkloristic way are integrated while it is harder to look at ways to involve those who actually spend their everyday lives on the islands. The Festa should not be turned into a relic of the past for viewers enjoyment but stay relevant and adapt to the world around it as it has successfully done throughout the last decades. The community needs to welcome fruitful changes that will foster bonds and belonging through a celebration that could bring all residents together once again.

In conclusion, if Festi are to continue to thrive in a sustainable and inclusive way, it is important to collectively think of solutions to support innovation without undermining the nature and tradition of the celebration. Environmental concerns cannot be ignored, but neither can the emotional and symbolic value that Festa holds for the community. Rather than framing change as a loss, perhaps it could be reimagined as a continuation of the very process that has allowed the festa to endure involving creative adaptation, collective labor, and cultural negotiation. The Festa is a meeting point, a communal space of interaction where bonds can be made. A whole year-round preparation fosters dialogs where all residents should be involved to bring new ideas together. I am sure the organization can be challenging and bring up conflicts between different factions, however this creates opportunities to interact and find out about the opinion of different community members. In this case, anthropology can be used not only to simply document a "local tradition" but to understand how collective celebrations foster communities and collectively figure out ways to keep this practice relevant in a society where capital accumulation is becoming the priority.

A tradition as well as the community who carries it on must be in constant evolution, coordinated with each other. As observed, Festa is indeed a tradition in constant evolution adapting itself to the situation of the society. However, the country is changing fast, and people are having a hard time adapting and welcoming novelties even when required by the structure of the society itself. Resistance to change, especially in times of struggle for a cultural tradition,

is common since there are a high alert and a tendency for static conservation. The past tradition is perceived as more “authentic” than the current, let alone future, one. However, this fear prevents people from accepting the truth that change is inevitable. If a cultural celebration does transform with time, it could become a performative act emptied from its original meaning and relevance to the community. If the idea of change is welcomed, one can decide in which direction modifications could go. Festi could continue to be collective celebrations fostering a sense of belonging and enhancing responsibility towards the community one is living among.

Ultimately, this anthropological exploration of Festi in Malta made me understand why these celebrations foster the sense of community while, at the same time, brought up the awareness of a need for change to keep them relevant and vibrant. Ethnographic research can help in finding feasible strategies to implement beneficial changes both towards sustainability, human and non-human wellbeing and social inclusion. I hope to have the opportunity to explore further this topic and actively participate in the flourishing of Festa as a new resident of the country.

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Field notes

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- Impression of a newcomer of Qormi titular Festa (June 2024)
- Retired policemen experience of Festi and Maltese politics (Summer 2024)
- Walking with an expat at Sliema Festa procession (August 2024)
- Meeting with the Anthropological Society of Malta (November 2024)
- A talk with the former secretary of Marsaskala Band Club (February 2025)
- Interview with professor Alfred Vella, head of the University of Malta, about fireworks, the environment and changes in Maltese society (March 225)
- Thoughts at Birkirkara band march and fireworks display during the annual Festa (April 2025)
- Exchange with a pyrotechnician from Zurrieq fireworks factory (June 2025)

- Joining Rabat Festa with Xandru Maltese culture scholar (July 2025)
- Exchanges and opinion from acquaintances, colleagues and friends (May 2024 - August 2025)