

Gozitan Migrant and Return Migration's Impact on the Gozitan *Festa*

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Introduction

The Gozitan *festa*, a mainly annual religious socio-cultural event, organized in every Gozitan village and in the town of Rabat, have gradually evolved over the past two centuries into a massive spectacle, considering the size of these tiny localities. The Gozitan village *festa* is by far the most awaited and grand event in the annual calendar of any locality. The flow of foreign currency, material goods of all sorts and the ingenious combination of foreign influences and local traditions have moulded the Gozitan *festa* into a unique event towards which migrants and return migrants contribute considerably. The *festa* is also Gozo's largest cultural export to Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA).

The Centrality of the *Festa* to Gozitans

The *festa* has been the main gathering of the populace of every Gozitan village/town since their inception. For most of the villagers and townspeople this annual appointment sees them congregate in the main *piazza*, wearing their best garments, where they pray, socialize, relax, conduct informal business and even find a partner for life. Despite the many events for the masses which are organized by the Catholic Church, political parties, the Ministry for Gozo, local councils and private entities, the village *festa* remains the fulcrum of Gozitan society.

The *festa* knows its religious origins primarily in church ceremony and gradually grew to encompass a far larger territory in external festivities in the streets around the church and in private houses. Migrant and return migrant financial contributions to the construction and decoration of churches are a well-known fact in Gozitan society. Scanning through local Gozitan parish financial registries testify to this fact. However, the full amount of contributions

originating from migrants and return migrants to the annual *festa* are very difficult to calculate since gifts registries in parishes only cover income in foreign currency – British Sterling, Australian, Canadian and United States Dollars to mention a few.

The Titular Statue Represents Village Identity

A traditional *festa* requires a titular statue to be paraded around the village streets. In many Gozitan villages, the history as to how Gozitan titular statues were ordered, delivered and paid for is intrinsically linked to the migration and return migration patterns of Gozitans. Table 1 shows that from the nineteen titular statues purchased in Gozo since 1839, eleven were purchased from



Our Lady of Victories paraded in the streets of London and attended by Malta's highest dignitaries. The only traditional Maltese *festa* celebrated in the United Kingdom.

TABLE 1: How Gozitan titular statues were influenced by migration and return migration

Parish	Established	Patron Saint	Statue Manufacturer/ Statuary	Contact found by	Titular Statue arrives	Major migration periods	Major return migration periods	
Rabat	1435	The Assumption – Santa Marija	Fabrica di Statue Religiose – Francesco Rosa, Roma	Priest	July 1897	1839-1870	1870-1900	
						1900-1956	1957-1970	
						1971-1986	1987-1995	
						2009-		
Rabat	Prior to 1506	Saint George	Pietro Paolo Azzopardi (1791- 1875)	Local	1839	1839-1870	1870-1900	
						1900-1956	1957-1970	
						1971-1986	1987-1995	
						2009-		
Xewkija	1678	Saint John the Baptist	Pietro Paolo Azzopardi (1791- 1875)	Local	22 June 1845	1840-1940	1979	
						1945-1986	1987-1995	
						2009-		
Gharb	1679	Visitation of Our Lady	Giuseppe Vella (1802- 1866)	Local	June 1853	1840-1940	1987-1995	
						1945-1986		
Nadur	1688	Saints Peter and Paul	Gallard et Fils, Marseilles, France	Migrant	After 1881	1838-1940	1987-1995	
						1945-1986		
						2008-		
Sannat	1688	Saint Margaret	Carlo Darmanin (1825-1905)	Local	July 1863*	1840-1940	1987-1995	
						1945-1986		
			Gallard et Fils, Marseilles, France					
				Migrant	21 July 1891**			
Xaghra	1688	The Nativity of Our Lady – Il- Bambina	Gallard et Fils, Marseilles, France	Migrant	26 May 1878	1840-1940	1987-1995	
						1945-1986		
						2008-		
Żebbuġ	1688	The Assumption – Santa Marija	Gallard et Fils, Marseilles, France	Migrant	August 1863	1840-1940	1987-1995	
						1945-1986		
Għajnsielem	1855	Our Lady of Loreto	Gallard et Fils, Marseilles, France	Migrant	October 1866	1855-1940	1987-1995	
						1945-1986		
Qala	1872	Saint Joseph	Gallard et Fils, Marseilles, France	Migrant	27 April 1890	1872-1940	1987-1995	
						1945-1986		
			Gallard et Fils, Marseilles, France			2009-		
		Immaculate Conception		Migrant	1887			
San Lawrenz	1893	Saint Laurence	Gallard et Fils, Marseilles, France (Ramat Statuaire)	Migrant	10 August 1895	1893-1940	1987-1995	
						1945-1986		
Kerċem	1885	Our Lady of Perpetual Succour	El Turco, Sicily, Italy	Local	10 January 1891*	1885-1940	1987-1995	
								1945-1986
			Gallard et Fils, Marseilles, France	Migrant				
					4 July 1897**			
Fontana	1911	Sacred Heart of Jesus	Fabrica di Statue Religiose – Francesco Rosa, Rome	Priest	May 1907*	1920-1940	1987-1995	
								1945-1986
			Wistin Camilleri (1885-1979)					
				Local				8 June 1923**
Għasri	1921	Corpus Christi	Michael Camilleri (1951-)	Local	19-Sep-82	1921-1940	1987-1995	
						1945-1986		
Munxar	1957	St. Paul Shipwreck	Wistin Camilleri (1885-1979)	Local	5-Feb-33	1957-1986	1987-1995	

A major migration/return migration period is registered when more than 1% of the particular village/town's population migrates/returns in a given year

abroad, two from Fabbrica di Statue Religiose, Francesco Rosa in Rome and nine from the renowned Gallard et Fils of Marseilles, France.

The period 1836 through 1900 saw the wave of migration from Gozo to the French speaking Barbary Coast, primarily to the cities of Algiers, Philippaville, Tunis and also to Stora, Annaba, Oran, Susa and Bona (Bezzina, 2002). Gozitan young men quickly earned a reputation for being hard workers and were sent to work at their employers' home estates in France, mostly in Marseilles and Lyon. Although most Gozitans remained in France and never returned to Gozo, the few that returned informed their respective parish priest of the renowned Gallard et Fils and often took it upon themselves to collect funds to pay for these titular statues and prepare the necessary arrangement to purchase, pack and deliver the statue to their respective village.

Migrants also contributed financially towards gold/silver-gilded pedestals, gold gilding and ornaments related to the titular statues during the subsequent years, interventions made on the statue and the wave of restoration a century later between 1990 and the present.

In Qala, the titular statue of Saint Joseph was gold-gilded solely with financial contributions from Marseille-based Qalin migrants in 1917 (Xerri, 2005).

Migrants' Contributions to the *Festa*

Gozitan migrant and return migrant influences on the *festa* are definitely not limited to their contributions to Gozitan churches and their respective titular statues. Following the second world war, a popular movement in Gozo started a process of expanding the *festa*'s external dimension beyond the main square to spread throughout the village. The British military and Maltese *festas* both heavily influenced this development, particularly with the establishment of the local brass bands, the evolution of firework use on the ground and in the air, street *festa* ornamental furniture and lighting, the massive use of drapery,

paper and balloons, *festa* memorabilia, and most visibly, flags of migrant nations flying on return migrants' houses.

Most Gozitan migrants return to Gozo in order to be home for *festa*. Other reasons range from attending funerals, marriages, first holy communion and confirmation of loved ones and to settle property or will matters. While in Gozo, migrants meet members of local *festa* related associations and particularly, as is tradition, the local parish priest. These encounters often lead to contributions towards church maintenance, the *festa*, *festa*-related associations and/or to projects being undertaken at that particular time by the parish.

Gozitan migrants have provided not only much needed financial contributions over the years, but more importantly innovative ideas to improve and expand the operation and impact of the *festa*. Gozitan migrants still purchase musical instruments to improve the local band and to establish awards for members of the band. In some villages migrants persuaded their clergy councils to include and dedicate a Migrants' Day where migrant flags are paraded in the streets and during a migrants mass, in honour of all their fellow villagers around the world.

The first form of fireworks used in a Gozitan *festa* were mainly discarded explosives, flares, air and ground squibs, coloured gas canisters and sparklers from the Royal British Navy. Since the 1950s, many Gozitans mastered the technique of manufacturing fireworks in creating new, noisier and more elaborate ground and air designs. The 'dahna kulur'¹ and 'fetha dahna sewda'² are creations of Gozitan manufacturers. Some patterns and designs were purchased and/or brought over by Gozitan return migrant sailors, mainly from the United Kingdom (UK) and the USA.

The late 1970s saw the introduction from the USA by Gozitan migrants and return migrants of firecrackers, jelly bombs and a whole range of Chinese manufactured fireworks used in the USA

¹ A colour-smoke bomb which explodes about 300 metres in mid-air. The usual smoke is thick and white.

² Fireworks which explode at a 400-500 metre height and showers in the form of an umbrella with dark black smoke instead of thick white.

during the 4th of July celebrations. Fireworks were often transported with tremendous risk in aircraft luggage accompanied by migrants and return migrants. The practice ceased once importation of such fireworks was allowed by the government. The same period saw the introduction of the use of shredded paper, initially produced by shredders imported from the USA (later produced by local presses) and balloons brought over from migrants and/or return migrants. Migrants from Canada and the USA also introduced *festa* memorabilia consisting initially of printed T-shirts and caps.

The 1990s saw the introduction of typically American foods – burgers, hotdogs, candy and doughnuts – alongside typical Gozitan and Maltese foods. The first vendors of such foods were Gozitan return migrants from Canada and the USA.



A typical Gozitan landscape of villages celebrating their local *festa*. Flags depicting return migrant families from Canada and Australia.

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