

# Changing Betrothal and Marriage Ceremonies in Malta: 1960–1986

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During the past twenty-five years the courtship period in Maltese villages has lengthened and the engagement and wedding festivities have grown in scale and been gentrified. This ritual escalation seems to form part of a general increase in similar events in Western Europe.

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This paper looks at the extent to which courtship and marriage rituals have changed in Malta during the past twenty-five years. I first describe two weddings I attended, one in 1960 and the other in 1986, and then compare them and seek explanations for the changes. I conclude that the escalation in celebrations is part of a general increase in similar events in Western Europe.

## Two weddings

The wedding of Frans Fenech and Maria Attard took place at 6:00 p.m., Sunday 13th November, 1960 in the parish church of Kirkop, the little village (1200 inhabitants) where they both lived. Frans, 21, was an orphan who lived with his uncle, the butcher. He worked in the dockyard, earning £M 7 per week. Maria, 19, was the daughter of the village baker and helped out in the shop and at home. They had been 'talking' to each other – without the parents' knowledge – for six months before they became formally engaged and had their rings blessed by a friendly priest, a custom that had recently come to the village from the city (Boissevain 1969: 32). They were married a year later.

The church was crowded with the bride's female relatives. Besides the groom's uncle, his best man, the bride's father, two witnesses and, of course, the priest, there were no men

present. After the ceremony the public rushed out of the church ahead of the bridal party. The bride and groom, followed by the bridal party, walked the 200 yards to the St. Leonard's Band Club, where the reception was to be held. The street was lined with spectators. The bride was dressed in white and the flower girls and maid of honour (her sister) in pink. The groom wore tails while the other men in the party had on dark suits. The women in the bridal party wore hats, as did the groom's uncle, who kept his Australian brown fedora on during the entire reception (see Boissevain 1969: 34 for a picture of the wedding party).

Meanwhile the guests were gathering in the band club. The bride's parents had sent out 250 invitations to their relatives and friends (those who had invited them in the past) and expected about 150 to be accepted, though almost all would send gifts. In fact there were about 200 people present. When the bride and groom entered the club they set off a mad scramble for seating. Again most of those present were women and children but many men came later and stood along the edge. However, few of the groom's friends were present, though I had seen a number outside the club. The seating consisted of a triple row of chairs arranged along three walls of the reception room, the bridal pair seated on a dais against the fourth wall.

As soon as most guests had located seats,

waiters began circulating with the traditional first course, ice cream, followed by cake and then progressing copiously through tray upon tray of various sweets, ending with ham sandwiches. A variety of alcoholic drinks were then circulated, whisky for the men and vermouth and anisette for the ladies, many of whom also poured this down the throats of their often protesting off-spring who, not surprisingly, became progressively more excited. After about thirty minutes the bridal party left to have their pictures taken. They were transported to the photographer's studio in Hamrun, a town about six miles away, in three gleaming hired limousines decorated with sunvisors, plush pillows and flannel tigers. Eating and drinking continued unabated in their absence. The children became steadily noisier and ran about, while their mothers screamed at them to be quiet. Some were beginning to be sick.

The bridal couple returned after well over an hour. The photographer then positioned them for the traditional dancing portrait. Maria could not dance, but Frans could and later he danced with a dapper village bon-vivant, who also danced with a few women. Few of the older girls and none of the teen-age girls danced, though many of the youngsters whirled about to the dated tunes churned out by a hired band that had been playing noisily all the while. Gradually people began to leave, though some of the men reappeared dressed more comfortably in cardigans instead of jackets.

At around 9 p.m. the bride and groom left in the rented limousine. Fifteen minutes later they returned, having made a quick tour around the village. The driver deposited the couple in front of the bride's family house, where they were to live, blew the horn at them to get out of the way and screeched out of the village. The reception continued for an hour. All together it lasted about three hours and cost the bride's family £M 200 for the catering and the hire of the band club. It was the most lavish wedding I attended in Kirkop.

The second village wedding took place in the large village of Naxxar (7000 inhabitants), 26 years later, in December 1986, between Angela Borg and Toni Bajada, both from the parish. Toni, 26, was the son of a dockyard worker

and 23 year-old Angela's father was a carpenter. Both worked in factories, and had been working since they were 16. Their combined income was about £M 65 a week. They began 'talking' to each other six years ago, and had been engaged for the last three. Though they had not celebrated their engagement with the now customary engagement party, preferring for reasons of economy to have only the simple blessing of the rings, they had received many engagement presents: useful items for household and kitchen.

The wedding ceremony began at 7:30 p.m. in the Naxxar parish church. There were about 120 guests present in the church, the majority of whom were relatives and friends of the groom. As many men as women were present. Those invited by the groom sat on the right-hand side. The bride was dressed in white and had a 1.5 metre train. Her flower girl and bridesmaid were also dressed in white. The groom, his best man (his brother), the fathers of the bride and groom and the two ushers all wore tails. The groom carried a top hat and gloves during much of the ceremony and the reception. In the church the hired video cameraman and his assistant were very evident, often blinding the public with their lights. At times they, rather than the priest, seemed to be officiating. After the ceremony the guests left quickly for the reception. This was held in the Palazzo Parisio, that had been hired for the occasion and which is located directly across the parish square. The bridal party remained behind to be photographed and videoed in a variety of poses, including a triumphal procession down the aisle and one standing in front of the gilded statue of the parish patron, the Nativity of Our Lady. After twenty-five minutes of posing, the bride and groom left for the reception in a hired Rolls Royce, seen off only by the bridal party and the video crew. Ten minutes later, after a drive around the village, they returned to the Palazzo Parisio, where in the meantime some 350 guests had gathered in response to the 250 invitations Toni and Angela had delivered. The guests included many of their own friends.

The reception began with coffee served to the bridal party by the catering manager. The

guests were then offered an astounding variety of drinks: brandy and soda, whisky with water or soda, gin and tonic, beer, vermouth and a choice of soft drinks. Every few minutes, literally, waiters passed to collect empty glasses and offer more drinks. Canapés were served in the same tempo: smoked salmon, caviar, chicken liver and bacon, small vol-au-vents, chicken legs, cheese cakes, small pizzas, ham sandwiches, interspersed with rounds of ice cream, almond cakes and a variety of other sweets. The refreshments were lavish and their quality excellent, for they had been supplied by one of the island's leading caterers, who had been booked sixteen months in advance. After cutting the huge wedding cake, Toni and Angela personally distributed pieces to all the guests, he to the women and she to the men. Waiters served abundant champagne (*Sekt*) to accompany it.

Although chairs were arranged along the walls of the gilded and tapestried ballroom and adjoining reception room, most guests stood. The bride and groom circulated among the guests in the two rooms, sometimes together, sometime apart. People had ample opportunity to move around, to meet and to talk to each other. A band played loudly in the corner of the ballroom. Before long the photographer and video man posed Toni and Angela for the traditional dancing photographs. It was obvious that they had rarely, if ever, danced. They danced alone for several minutes, before they were joined by a few mixed couples and several female couples. After two slow numbers the rhythm picked up. Soon only women and children were left dancing, although at one stage they did the 'birdy' dance with Toni, the only male, enthusiastically accompanied by Angela's youngest aunt, at the centre. The atmosphere resembled that of an extremely animated cocktail party. Though there were babies in push chairs and many children scooting about, there was no disciplinary screaming from the mothers, nor did I see any children being sick.

At about 11:15 p.m. Toni and Angela disappeared to change into their elegant going-away clothes. When they reappeared after thirty minutes, they were lifted up on the

shoulders of their brothers and friends. As they bobbed and twisted their way to the exit they managed to catch hold of each other and kiss three times. They then drove off in Toni's car, which his friends had covered with wet flour and other muck. They spent the night in their new house. Their two-storey house was large and sumptuous. It had an expensively tiled bathroom (complete with sunken bath), marble stairs, a fitted kitchen, carved balconies, mahogany doors, aluminium window frames, a garden, and a garage running under the entire house. Toni, helped occasionally by his family, had built the entire house himself (he had even made the 1200 chipped marble floor tiles) during the preceding three years. Angela's father had contributed the carving and joinery. The furniture was to be delivered the following month. When they moved in they had only a bed, T. V. set and a kitchen table and chairs.

After Toni and Angela left, most guests soon departed, and by midnight the reception was over. It had lasted three and a half hours and cost close to £M 1200 (£2200, DM 6175, US\$ 3375). The wedding was one of the more lavish Naxxar weddings.

## Comparison

Though both couples had roughly the same socio-economic background and both lived in villages, a number of striking changes had taken place during the intervening twenty-five years. Some of the more obvious changes include the following. First, Toni and Angela were several years older than Frans and Maria. Second, the bride now worked and contributed substantially to their joint fund. Third, the courtship of the second couple was almost four times longer. Fourth, though Toni and Angela had not held an engagement party, in contrast to many young couples, their engagement had received ritual prominence through the many presents they were given. Fifth, the planning of Toni's and Angela's wedding and reception was a much more complex and lengthy operation. Sixth, while Maria's parents had organized and paid for the wedding, Toni and Angela arranged and contributed substantially to their own wedding. Seventh, the grea-

ter independence of the second couple was reflected by the presence of a larger number of their own friends and relatives at the reception.

Toni and Angela's wedding also demonstrated that differences between middle class urban weddings and those of working class villagers, which were noticeable in the 1960's, had been greatly reduced, at least as far as the material trappings were concerned. They now both sent out similar invitations, they often hired the same reception halls, they dressed alike (the men literally wore the same rented formal clothes), and they engaged the same caterers. Their receptions also had a similar cocktail party ambiance. In both circles the newly weds were now carried out on the shoulders of their peers, both drove off in their own ceremoniously dirtied cars and both took up residence in their own houses. Of course there were some striking differences. Upper class weddings were stiffer, not as cheerful, partly because there was no dancing and children and babies were not present. Newly married upper class couples normally also left for an extended honeymoon abroad, while working class village couples like Toni and Angela stayed in Malta and went back to work after a week's holiday.

To summarize then, during the past twenty-five years the period of courtship in the villages had lengthened and been given more ritual importance and the wedding itself had grown in scale and had been gentrified. These changes reflect developments in Maltese society at large.

### Changing Malta

Maltese society has altered in many ways during the past two and a half decades. The level of prosperity has risen remarkably, especially for the working classes. The weekly income of Toni and Angela, for example, was ten times higher than that of Frans and Maria. Even taking inflation into consideration, which in Malta has been modest, it is a substantial rise. The rise in the standard of living that the increased income has made possible is striking. Gas cookers, refrigerators, television, luxuriously appointed bathrooms, cars and, espe-

cially, separate houses for working class newly weds were unthinkable in 1960. They have now become the norm. Everyone expects to have these, and status is measured by the number and quality of acquired material attributes. In 1960 it was considered scandalous to owe money. Villagers saved until they could afford to pay cash. Debts have now become common practice. Many young families are deeply in debt to the banks and to Lohombus (Loans for Housing and Business). Fiercely competitive consumerism is rife in Malta.

It requires substantial capital to build a house and acquire the other material possessions on which status increasingly depends. This means long, hard work. This, in turn, is reflected in the increase in the average age of marriage, especially for women, who, in contrast to the early 1960's, now take part in paid employment until they marry. Engagements have lengthened to permit couples to earn the funds required for their house. The age differences between our two couples is no coincidence. Between 1961 and 1986 the average age of marriage in Naxxar increased by just over a year for men and by two full years for women (see table below).

Average Age of Marriage 1961-1986, Naxxar Parish.

	Number of Marriages	Average Age	
		Men	Women
1961-1964	96	26.7	22.9
1983-1986	108	27.9	24.9

Source: Naxxar Parish Marriage Registers, courtesy of Rev. Peter Xuereb, Archpriest.

### Ritual escalation

The socio-economic developments of the past twenty-five years have not only increased the average age of marriage. They have also brought about an escalation of the ritual associated with courtship and marriage. At the village level this is manifested in the introduction of engagement parties and gifts, a longer engagement and an increase in the scale of wedding celebrations. Obviously the increase in working class incomes has enabled villagers to

imitate the rituals of the elite. But a purely economic explanation for this increase is too simple. Engagement parties and expanded wedding celebrations have also become important for other reasons.

The engagement party publicly celebrates a couple's commitment to each other not only to marry, but, and this is new, to work together and to save for three to five years in order to be able to build and furnish a house. Thus the engagement party is also a public statement of a very serious financial commitment. It is ritualized to give it greater solemnity. It is much more difficult to break a promise that has been celebrated before a large group of friends and relatives, who have all acknowledged its contractual message through their gifts, than to terminate an engagement only solemnized *en famille*, as was formerly done. If the engagement were broken it would be extremely painful to have to return all the presents. How would they share out the funds invested, the sacrifice and work devoted to building a house? The social control exercised by means of a public engagement party is considerable.

Similarly, the growth of wedding celebrations reflects the increase in scale of material resources that the marriage partners have committed to each other. The greater financial investment in the marriage, as compared to the early 1960's, is publicly ritualized through a more elaborate wedding celebration. The increase in the number of guests, especially the friends of the bride and groom, is a consequence of the greater role the bridal couple have assumed in the planning of the wedding. Those who pay the piper call the tune. Since they now pay for much of the wedding expenses themselves, they also invite their friends.

Finally, and more tentatively, I suggest that the enthusiastic increase in the betrothal and marriage festivities, in part and probably unconsciously, fills the void created by the marked decline of other family celebrations that used to play an important part in social communication. Because of the drastic reduction of the birth-rate (down from 26 per thousand live births in 1960 to 16.8 in 1986), there has been an equally drastic reduction in the

number of baptismal and first holy communion parties. In 1960 families with five children were common and those with more were not uncommon. Formerly every kin group thus celebrated many such parties each year. They brought together friends and a wide range of relatives. Now they have become a rarity, for one-child families have become the rule. People require formal occasions such as parties to service the network of relatives and friends upon whom their social, psychological and even their economic welfare depends. Where such occasions have been reduced or eliminated (or don't yet exist), they are often replaced with others or invented.

### Conclusion: Family resemblances

The increase in the scale of courtship and marriage rituals in Malta parallels a more general growth of other rituals. Good Friday processions and *festa* celebrations have been growing in Malta and Italy (Boissevain 1983, 1984, 1987, and Bravo 1984). Carnival is being celebrated with renewed vigour in France, Italy and Holland (Fabre and Camberoque 1977, De Simone and Rossi 1977, Werdmölder 1979, Helsloot 1981). The revival of traditional rural weddings and the introduction of totally new village feasts have been noted respectively in Holland and France (Baas-Hoffschulte 1983, Huitzing 1983).

The developments stimulating this growth have been many: the rise of incomes enables people to celebrate on a larger scale; increasing numbers of tourists stimulates local pride and commercial initiatives; growing democratization enables the poorer segments of the population both more readily to emulate elite culture and to gain acceptance for their own culture; rationalization of the working year, of family size, of belief – which has eliminated many traditional feast days – stimulates the development of substitute celebrations so that social intercourse can continue; tensions inherent in a complex society create a demand for occasions to opt out and to rest by celebrating together. The search for identity, for roots, for social anchorage in an increasingly impersonal and mobile world leads to the revival if not the

invention of traditional feasts to enable people to meet and service their personal networks by eating, drinking, singing and dancing together.

It is evident that the growth of courtship and marriage rituals in Malta is not an isolated event. It is part of wider social developments that are taking place throughout the late industrial societies of Western Europe. If alienation was characteristic of industrial society, will late industrial society be characterized by celebration and feasting? I hope so.

## Note

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