

Youths and the 'festa'



The village feast season is almost over. Most band clubs, pyrotechnical societies and youth sections, among others, would already be thinking about the forthcoming feast, hoping it would be even more colorful and receive better accolades than the previous one. The festa remains one of the most significant and noteworthy communitarian events for an array of reasons, whether religious or otherwise.

There are so many interesting complex and intertwining dynamics embedded in the festa, namely cult, culture, spirituality, art and identity. The feast provides an encounter and an opportunity to engage and to get people to come together, when they can speak, argue, laugh, celebrate, contemplate and pray. It's essentially a 'community' experience in the strongest sense of the word. The feast tends to weave a sense of community and not only that; it converges culture with tradition, with religion, within a sense of commune.

What the feast does is that it stirs a melting pot of emotions. A scientific EU-funded research study under the Youth in Action programme – 'Qalb żaġħżuġha, festi inklussivi' (young heart, inclusive feasts) - set out to understand at a national level what young people think about village feasts, how are they affected, how are they involved, whether feasts are an opportunity for social inclusion or not, among other things.

The statistics indicate there is still a significant amount of young people involved in feasts, whether it's internal church and/or street decorations, pyrotechnics, band clubs etc. It was also heartening to note that among those participating in the survey 51.9 per cent are post-secondary students.

This highlights the fact that people involved in the different festa facets are educated and not as perceived 'out there' that those engrossed in the village feast are illiterate or uneducated. When it comes to the social class background, 72.2 per cent of those who answered said they consider themselves as coming from a manual labour family background and only three per cent consider themselves coming from a professional family background.

Young people involved in village feasts are engaged because there is a sense

When asked how long they have been active in the different feast organisations, 46.8 per cent said they have been involved between five and 10 years, which shows that young people do not just pop in and out of these organisations but are affianced with this experience. The response indicates that 38.7 per cent are 'only' members of the society, 32.1 per cent form part of the youth committee and another 22.2 per cent are members of the central committee. These figures imply that they are actively engaged and not just passive participants.

As far as the number of hours spent contributing to the festa via their organisations, 19.7 per cent of respondents say they contribute between 21 and 50 hours a month and 23.1 per cent are engaged for more than 50 hours a month or circa 13 hours a week. According to young people, the reasons why they are involved in these organisations are varied but 98.5 per cent agree they are there because they value 'friendship' first and foremost. What is noteworthy is that 76.1 per cent state that their passion for the patron saint is a central reason why they are involved and so does their love for their village (59.6 per cent) while 79.7 per cent say they love the feast culture.

When young people in the survey were asked whether they feel integrated in society or not, 62.6 per cent replied that the organisations they are part of make them feel more accepted in their community. The issue whether feasts are in fact an encounter of faith has always been a bone of contention in the debate taking place 'around' the festa.

This study shows that young people are not only betrothed by the festa but there seems to be a mix of socialisation, devotion and spirituality. What seems to be significant is that young people who are involved in the feasts are engaged because there is a sense of community and belonging and this makes them come together to work towards a common cause. While some young people speak about the patron saint as if they 'side' with him/her in the same way they support a football team, in the majority of cases there still is an attempt to link up beyond the cult and the symbolisms.

The research shows that the festa is a catalyst of youth engagement but also of identity formation and personality configuration. The passion for the festa is being passed on from one generation to another.

The migration of people to other villages so far is not having a devastating impact because there is a sense of ownership among young people born and raised in the different localities. Essentially, the fulcrum of this study is our appeal to the authorities to work towards drawing up a policy that encapsulates these realities and develop a strategy that will work towards the preservation of this important social reality, a source and resource on many fronts for adults and young people alike.

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