

Surnames as an Indication of Demographic Changes in Gozo

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In Summary

A study of distribution of surnames within a community can give an indication of the homogeneity of the population. In Gozo, a few surnames account for the majority of surnames in any locality. In this study, the distribution of surnames according to the recent (2011) census were compared with those in 1990. These results can be summarised as follows:

- There were marked difference in the proportion of population with the same surname. For instance, in Żebbuġ and San Lawrence the top five surnames accounted for about 50 per cent of the population in 1990, but in 2011 this has been reduced to 29 and 43 per cent respectively.
- Similar changes have been consistent but less marked in all other localities (except Għasri), with least changes occurring in Għajnsielem, Rabat and Nadur.
- The biggest variation in the distribution of the top five surnames (as measured by 'rank difference') has occurred in Fontana and Għasri.
- This indicates that there has been considerable dilution of surnames within most of the localities in Gozo.
- It may be concluded that the population of Gozo has become less homogeneous over the past couple of decades. A number of reasons why this has happened are postulated.

Changes in the demographic distribution within a community may be gleaned from a study of how surnames have changed over a period of time. The recent census (2011), gives data relating to the relative frequency of surnames in various localities of Malta and Gozo. A comparison between the latest census and that of previous years has never, to my knowledge been attempted. However, in the case of Gozo, such a study was made in relation to Gozo surnames (Cauchi, 1998: 19-47). A comparison between the two studies would give an indication of change surname variation over the past couple of decades.

For the purpose of this analysis, the five most common names in each locality in Gozo in 2011 (as

found in the recent census) are compared with data obtained from the Electoral Register in 1990, and differences that have occurred in this 21-year period are analysed. Surnames are ranked according to frequency and a rank is allotted. The 'rank difference' refers to alterations in frequency: a rank difference of '0' indicate that there has been no change, while a rank of '1' indicate that that particular surname has increased in frequency so that now it has stepped up one rank. A negative mark indicates that it has gone down by one or several steps (maximum 5 steps).

The sum of rank differences for the five surnames in each locality (ignoring the plus/minus sign), reflects the degree of variation of the five most common surnames in a particular locality. In the tables below, the frequencies of surnames for the various localities in Gozo are given.

Fontana				
1990		2011		
Surname	%	Surname	%	Rank Difference
Galea	7.2	Attard	5.6	-5
Borg	6.8	Camilleri	4.6	-2
Farrugia	4.6	Mizzi	4.6	-3
Attard	4.6	Borg	3.7	3
Cassar	4.1	Grech	4.0	-1

Comment: There is a marked shift in the proportion of surnames with 'Attard' coming up top (moved up three positions), and 'Galea' disappearing completely from the first five positions (rank difference = -5).

Għajnsielem				
1990		2011		
Surname	%	Surname	%	Rank Difference
Xuereb	7.7	Xuereb	6.5	0
Azzopardi	4.8	Grech	5.3	1
Grech	4.8	Vella	5.1	1
Buttigieg	4.7	Azzopardi	5.0	-2
Zerafa	4.6	Grima	4.6	-1

Comment: There seems to be only minimal change, 'Buttigieg' and 'Zerafa' disappearing and 'Grima' becoming more prominent.

Gharb				
1990		2011		
Surname	%	Surname	%	Rank Difference
Vella	6.6	Cassar	6.5	-2
Cassar	6.6	Cauchi	4.9	1
Cauchi	6.5	Vella	4.4	1
Micallef	5.3	Caruana	4.2	-1
Portelli	5.0	Micallef	3.9	-1

Comment: The most marked changes relate to a reduction in the incidence of the surname 'Vella' (from 6.6 to 4.4 %), and 'Portelli' disappearing from the top five surnames, and 'Caruana' upgraded to fourth position.

Ghasri				
1990		2011		
Surname	%	Surname	%	Rank Difference
Vella	6.1	Mintoff	9.6	-5
Attard	5.4	Zammit	3.8	-3
Saliba	4.7	Farrugia	5.9	-1
Caruana	4.4	Saliba	5.9	-2
Grech	4.1	Attard	5.2	-1

Comment: Marked changes seem to have taken place here, with 'Vella' disappearing from the top five surnames, being replaced by 'Mintoff'. The overall percentage of the other surnames remain relatively stable although changed in priority.

Kerċem				
1990		2011		
Surname	%	Surname	%	Rank Difference
Grech	13.7	Grech	12.9	0
Spiteri	7.9	Vella	8.0	1
Vella	7.8	Spiteri	6.1	-1
Formosa	5.4	Formosa	5.1	0
Borg	4.6	Mercieca	4.3	-1

Comment: Only slight differences noticed, with a reduction in 'Borg' and increase in 'Mercieca'.

Munxar				
1990		2011		
Surname	%	Surname	%	Rank Difference
Debrincat	8.1	Debrincat	5.4	0
Bajada	6.1	Vella	4.9	-1
Curmi	5.7	Bajada	4.7	-3
Vella	4.4	Attard	3.4	2
Parnis	3.8	Grech	3.3	-1

Comment: While the overall relative positions are largely unchanged (with the disappearance of 'Parnis' and an increase in 'Grech'), there is a considerable reduction in the proportion of 'Debrincat' and 'Bajada' with an increase in 'Vella'.

Nadur				
1990		2011		
Surname	%	Surname	%	Rank Difference
Camilleri	10.3	Camilleri	10.0	0
Muscat	9.2	Portelli	8.8	-1
Portelli	9.1	Muscat	8.3	1
Said	5.2	Said	5.1	0
Buttigieg	5.0	Buttigieg	4.6	0

Comment: Hardly any change in rank, or in proportions of surname overall.

Qala				
1990		2011		
Surname	%	Surname	%	Rank Difference
Buttigieg	14.1	Buttigieg	10.9	0
Portelli	6.8	Camilleri	5.6	-1
Xerri	6.4	Portelli	5.5	-1
Vella	6.4	Xerri	4.8	-2
Mizzi	5.1	Mizzi	4.1	0

Comment: There is minimal change in rank but considerable reduction in proportion of 'Buttigieg'.

Rabat (Victoria)				
1990		2011		
Surname	%	Surname	%	Rank Difference
Grech	6.1	Grech	6.1	0

Vella	5.6	Vella	5.5	0
Farrugia	4.9	Attard	5.2	-1
Attard	4.6	Farrugia	4.6	1
Zammit	4.3	Camilleri	3.5	-1

Comment: There is minimal change in rank order.

San Lawrenz				
1990		2011		
Surname	%	Surname	%	Rank Difference
Grima	17.0	Grima	15.1	0
Cauchi	11.1	Cauchi	8.4	0
Formosa	9.3	Formosa	8.3	0
Cassar	8.8	Cassar	7.3	0
Piscopo	4.5	Attard	4.3	-1

Comment: A remarkably stable ranking. Note the very high incidence of the surname 'Grima'.

Sannat				
1990		2011		
Surname	%	Surname	%	Rank Difference
Muscat	6.9	Vella	6.3	-1
Spiteri	5.7	Muscat	5.7	-2
Vella	5.2	Buttigieg	4.3	2
Curmi	5.0	Spiteri	4.2	-1
Grima	4.8	Curmi	4.1	-1

Comment: There is reduction in the ranking of 'Grima' and 'Spiteri'.

Xaghra				
1990		2011		
Surname	%	Surname	%	Rank Difference
Sultana	12.8	Sultana	11.5	0
Attard	7.3	Attard	6.7	0
Bajada	4.3	Galea	3.6	-2
Galea	4.2	Mercieca	3.5	1
Refalo	3.8	Bajada	3.2	-1

Comment: There is some reduction of ranking of 'Bajada' and 'Refalo', with an increase in 'Mercieca'.

Xewkija				
1990		2011		
Surname	%	Surname	%	Rank Difference
Attard	7.4	Vella	7.1	1
Vella	7.2	Azzopardi	6.3	1
Xuereb	6.4	Attard	6.2	-2
Azzopardi	6.2	Spiteri	4.5	2
Spiteri	4.5	Xuereb	3.9	-1

Comment: Minimal changes.

Żebbuġ				
1990		2011		
Surname	%	Surname	%	Rank Difference
Cini	16.9	Cini	10.1	0
Vella	9.7	Saliba	6.1	-1
Saliba	8.6	Vella	5.5	1
Zammit	7.0	Zammit	4.4	0
Camilleri	6.2	Camilleri	3.7	0

Comment: While there is hardly any change in ranking, there is a relative reduction in ranking of the distinctive surname 'Cini' as well as in 'Vella', 'Saliba' and 'Zammit'.

Rank Difference

The 'Rank Difference' is obtained by adding all the differences in rank for all five surnames. This reflects the changes in surnames over the period under study in that particular locality.

The most marked change in surnames (as measured by 'rank difference') occurs in Fontana and Ghasri, two of the smallest localities. The least marked change in surname differences occurs in Nadur, Żebbuġ and St Lawrenz.

The proportion of the population within a community that is accounted for by the five top surnames varies considerably. In 1990, five surnames accounted for 25 per cent or more of the population. In the case of Żebbuġ and San Lawrenz, they covered 48 and 51 per cent of the population respectively. In many other localities, (Xewkija, Gharb, Xaghra, Kerċem, Qala and Nadur), the top five surnames accounted for more than 30 percent of the population.

In comparison with the 1990 census data, the recent census data shows that the proportion of persons having the five most common surnames has become considerably less in all localities (with the exception of Għasri), indicating that there has been a considerable dilution of surnames and consequent reduced homogeneity of the population. This is most marked for Żebbuġ, where now the five top surnames account for only 29 per cent of the population (compared to 48 percent in 1990), and least marked for Għajnsielem and Victoria.

The table below summarises changes in the incidence of surnames in the various localities

Changes in surname prevalence 1990-2001 by rank difference					
	Pop.	Rank Diff	Proportion of Population with five top surnames		
			1990	2011	Diff
Fontana	873	14	27.3	22.5	5.1
Għasri	427	12	24.7	30.4	-5.7
Munxar	1073	7	28.1	21.4	6.7
Sannat	1801	7	27.6	24.6	3.0
Xewkija	3112	7	31.7	28.0	3.1
Għarb	1183	6	30.0	23.4	6.6
Għajnsielem	2621	5	26.6	26.5	0.1
Qala	1795	4	38.8	30.9	7.9
Xagħra	3968	4	32.4	28.5	3.9
Kerċem	1698	3	39.4	36.4	3.0
Rabat	6203	3	25.5	24.9	0.6
Nadur	3961	2	38.8	36.8	2.0
Żebbuġ	1824	2	48.4	29.1	19.3
San Lawrenz	604	1	50.7	43.4	7.3

Comments: This data indicates that the populations of most of the localities in Gozo have become considerably less homogenous compared to two decades ago. The most popular surnames are still largely unchanged (as indicated by a low 'rank difference'), but the proportions of persons included by the five most common surnames is considerably reduced.

Conclusion

There have been several factors which could explain the reduced homogeneity in the majority of localities in Gozo. Firstly there has been a considerable influx of persons from the mainland – a phenomenon which has reached considerable proportions in recent years. Secondly, the provision of government subsidised housing encourages families to leave their own village and find a home wherever it is made available. It is also possible that there has been an increased rate of internal migration, with younger persons preferring to make their domicile on the larger island for economic or other reasons.

It would be of interest to see comparable data for localities in Malta (as opposed to Gozo), but as far as I know, such comparisons have not yet been made. This would confirm the degree of mobility within the Maltese community as a whole.

References

Cauchi, M. (1998). *A Picture of Gozo: Studies on Ethnographic, Educational, and Health Aspects of Life in Gozo*. Gozo, Malta: Gozo Press.

Prof. Maurice Cauchi was the head of the Pathology Department at the University of Malta. He is currently retired in Australia, where he is also President of the Maltese Community Council of Victoria.