The future of festa food in Malta: lost legacy?

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the extent to which food in Maltese communal gatherings is successfully staged to be understood by both the community and the tourist. Research indicates that distinctive and particular foods have typified such gatherings for centuries. Nevertheless, this characteristic is overshadowed by the commercialization, commoditisation and alteration of traditional food and foodways for wider preference in a globalised environment. Such foods have also been adapted for easier consumption in informal settings such as the village festa. Communal gatherings serve as a platform for negotiation and renegotiation of their cultural identity. The study suggests that to achieve the fine balance between traditional cuisine and an inclusive democratised product, community involvement needs to take place through active citizenship, stakeholder input and professional interpretation.

Keywords

Maltese festa, Cultural heritage interpretation, Food and foodways, Intangible heritage

Introduction

Since time immemorial, much of the relationship between human survival and food was primarily influenced by its physiological primacy. Yet food is more than a body fuel. As Roland Barthes has described it, *"An entire 'world' is present in and signified in food [it] transforms itself into situations and performs a social function, it's not just physical nourishment"* (1997:23). The centrality of food is further described by Fox (n.d.:1): *"It is also a profoundly social urge. Food is almost always shared; people eat together; mealtimes are events when the whole family or settlement or village comes together."* Within this framework, and similar to several other societies in the Mediterranean region and beyond, the Maltese have developed an elaborate set of symbolic concepts revolving around food; reflections of human activities and relationships.

Food is an important channel that permits an attempt at self-understanding; it is a revealing means of understanding our behaviours and our social interactions with other humans. As Boucher opines, *"Food is a window which allows us to look into any society, anywhere in the world, and determine critically important things about its structure[...] Food is a window that can illuminate a broad variety of forces acting within a society"* (1999:335).

The 'variety of forces' are regularly practised through exchange, moments which allow humans to use food as another medium to define individual and group identity. Food is an object with particular manifestations in cultural spaces, motivated by particular practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills which UNESCO earmarks as qualities that define intangible cultural heritage.

Acknowledging that food and foodways are important markers of intangible cultural heritage and crucial when understanding the relationship between identity and a people's past, this study explores the interpretation of food within the context of the Maltese popular village *festa*. With special reference to nougat (*qubbajt* in Maltese), this paper evaluates the interpretation of this food as it is presented to the community and the tourist. The village *festa* setting is here employed to better understand the challenges experienced with the presentation of nougat as a traditional food forming part of the cultural heritage of the Maltese islands. Various official institutions and researchers acknowledge how 'traditional' food is a crucial part of local history and culture and interpret it as a modicum that confirms cultural identity and national pride. For Xu, *"food operates as one of the key cultural signs that structure people's identities and their concepts of others"* (2008: 2). As a cultural sign it therefore links to the history and the heritage of a community. It was in 2010 that for the first time UNESCO deliberated and decided upon national cuisine and gastronomic traditions and included them in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the world (Peralta 2010). This is in line with what Bell and Valentine, for example, have argued: *"The history of any nation's diet is the history of the nation itself, with food fashion, fads and fancies mapping ep-*

isodes of colonialism and migration, trade and exploration, cultural exchange and boundary making." Yet they did not stop there, for they then continued to observe that *"here begins one of the fundamental contradictions of the food-nationalism equation: there is no essential national food; the food which we think of as characterising a particular place always tells stories of movement and mixing"* (1997:168-9).

It is arguably quite plain that the assumption of a national cuisine is loaded with challenges resulting from in-depth studies that invade political boundaries and historical time. Malta is not immune to this reality and the discussion and debate on the theme are mostly a product of post-colonialism. It is therefore obvious that the interpretation of heritage food and foodways requires a comprehensive understanding of the changing cultural context and thus demands that local institutions explore modern means of how to interpret such foods using techniques based on characteristics and issues of intangible cultural heritage.

The presence of food sellers during the village *festa* in Malta raises critical questions as the 'traditional' co-exists with the more recent fast food stalls. The consumption per capita of particular 'traditional' foods has significantly dropped; nougat may be the single food item from what is considered to be traditional that has been spared this slump; many Maltese still seek this item and tourists generally do not miss buying a piece in their search for local products (Christians 2013).

However ssues related to authenticity, ownership and understanding of intangible cultural heritage as well as the commercial approach to the same foods, requires serious attention.

Contextualising Maltese foodways

Prior to looking at Maltese foodways as intangible heritage, it is important that an attempt is made to understand the meaning of food acquisition, distribution, production and consumption in Malta's changing historical context.

The eminent French historian Fernand Braudel categorised the Mediterranean islands, including Corfu, Cyprus, Crete and Malta but not Sicily, as *"lands of hunger"* (1972:152). As elsewhere in the western world, and especially in the Mediterranean Southern Europe, the Maltese population lived a frugal life, the consequence of habitual rationing that by time became both voluntary and necessary (Pontieri 1931; Fazio 1993; Castro, 2000; Barcelona City Council 2013). As a matter of fact, the local diet was in essence a forced choice, and this compelled the islanders to be mass consumers of bread and other grain products (Cassar 1993, 1994, 2000).

Malta's geography offered scarce natural resources. The combination of large areas of karstic land and sparse rainfall reduced the farmer's ability to meet the island's demand for supplying basic agricultural products, such as grain (Vella 1980; Wettinger 1982; Cassar 1994; Cassar 2015). The cultivation of land continues to be a major concern to this day. As more land was taken over for building development, and with a significant drop in farming, the island's ability to provide for itself remains a recurring political and economic challenge (Debono 1981; Vassallo 1997; Luttrell 1982, 1993). With Malta's continued inability to be self-sufficient in the production of food for its population, provisioning for the past centuries has increasingly depended on imports (Cassar 2000).

Malta's foodways are also a product of foreign imports and culinary skills mixed with Maltese products and local knowledge. This fusion of cuisines emerges from a somewhat chequered past. Although Malta is a relatively young nation, only gaining its independence in 1964, its foodways are an eclectic ensemble of all that has existed in many other parts of the Mediterranean and beyond for centuries on end. For this reason Malta's foodways make an interesting case study to understand intangible heritage in a constantly evolving culinary culture.

Although Malta might be thought of a backwater and forgotten island, this is not quite the case. The archipelago can boast of its fantastic tangible and intangible heritage. Recently, Malta's cultural heritage became a very important element supporting Malta's economy. A cursory look at tourist related websites and tourist books immediately communicates this actuality in colourful and enticing but not exaggerated terms (see for example, Gallagher 2015; Blasi 2016). However, some aspects of Malta's intangible heritage, such as food, are still awaiting serious consideration.

Food is a paramount marker of ethnic consciousness, an important contributor towards the formation of historical identity. This understanding carries more weight when an entire population identifies defining moments in the history of the nation. For the Maltese, the attainment of independence has brought to the fore an unprecedented

awareness of national consciousness. The most fundamental challenge with the history of food in Malta is evident through the very little sustained research attempted so far. Writing in 1961, folklorist Joseph Cassar-Pullicino introduced his writing entitled 'Antichi Cibi Maltesi' as follows: *"The aim of this study is to describe some eighteenth century Maltese foods. Since traditional cuisine gained no attention from our writers [probably referring to historians], we lack an adequate overview of Maltese gastronomy"* (translated from the Italian original, Cassar-Pullicino 1961:31).

Maltese food and foodways has now started to get some attention. Researchers are becoming increasingly engaged to better understand this important cultural heritage at a time of rapid change. Malta is not unique in this regard. Against this background, there is a need to draw one's attention to whether heritage food and foodways that have been modified to meet new tastes and demands should be preserved while these are being discredited for loss of authenticity. To comprehend this paradox, it may suffice to look at the role of food within the ambit of one of the most important tourist attractions – the village *festa*.

The village festa

Malta is renowned for its *festa* which is mainly linked to its religious heritage. Throughout the year each town and village in the Maltese islands – that is in the two inhabited islands of Malta and Gozo – celebrates the feast in honour of its patron saint, an event which stretches over a week and in some localities over two weeks (called *il-kwindiċina* – the fortnight). All towns and villages consider this event as an apex in the life of their community for the year. The feast goes beyond the religious foundations; it is an occasion when people meet socially, when the community lets itself go and expresses itself to the full, not least engaging in some mild and not so mild transgressions which break the normality of daily routine (Formosa 2015). There is also an element – at times quite pronounced – of pique and rivalry among the *festa partiti* (Boissevain 1993). These *partiti* are groups of supporters who normally belong to one band club or another in the same locality; in Malta many villages have at least two band clubs which in effect are to various degrees rivals and competitors. Each group tries to outdo the other in festive decorations, musical performances, expressions of joy and merry-making (*briju*), and whatever else can show that one club is more able and better than the other. Sometimes a festa partit is based in a fireworks club or in the group that takes care of the street decorations of the village. The Maltese are an exuberant society that expresses itself through noise, colour and amazing project ideas.

The *festa* is a one ritualistic marker of Maltese identity which is also a time and a place when 'outsiders' such as tourists and non-Maltese are welcome to enjoy the festivities together with the locals. Cultural texts such as feast programmes and other literature, posters and adverts feed imagery of an event which is filled with enjoyment and merriment such as fireworks, bands and food. This imagery also feeds a nostalgia for a past where everyone was happy, living within a tight community that shared not just everyday problems, but also values and heritage.

The village feast is a melting pot of ingenious ideas, bombastic projects, lavish spending on band marches and fireworks. However, what goes on in public is to a large extent replicated in the privacy of the home. Families meet and party. They make sure that the house is geared to receive guests from near and far. Emigrants return to their beloved village and meet the extended family. They yearn for the festa as it is the occasion, indeed the reason, for which they can return to Malta (Visanich 2015). And not least among the special items that mark the Maltese *festa*, there is the grandiose lunch which brings together the family, some special friends and any other person that the family has the pleasure to invite for this special occasion. Food is varied, plentiful, and in some way or another, special – it needs to mark the solemnity of the occasion. The Maltese are famous for their rabbit dishes which vary from the famous fried in garlic to that stewed in tomato sauce which is then used to make the much sought after spaghetti with rabbit sauce. Other favourites on the feast table are the baked chicken or pork, accompanied with a good dish of roast potatoes seasoned with fennel seeds. Other past favourites which bring the family together are the baked macaroni or *timpana* – a type of pasta pie. The Maltese can tap from a wide variety of food recipes for all occasions (Cremona 2010) and the *festa* is one occasion which offers them the chance to indulge in such a culinary euphoria.

For the Maltese the *festa* is very much about merrymaking and celebrating, and what better way to do this if not by indulging in an exuberance of food. A continuation of this food bonanza during the festa days sprawls into the main streets of the locality and intensifies as one approaches the core of the town or village – typically made up of the parish church towering over an open space, which hosts people who come to congregate, meet, buy food,

and talk while they watch and cheer as the statue is brought out of the church and later on it returns after it has been carried in procession along the streets and among the community. Street food in past times included the ubiquitous *pastizzi* (baked pastry filled with ricotta or peas), and the *mqaret* (date-filled pastry fried in oil). Such items have however, slowly but surely, been ousted by the more globalised fast foods in the form of the burger with chips, hot-dog topped with baked beans and tomato ketchup, and the doughnut, to mention just three of the most visible, and extensively popular with the young and not so young (Cassar 2015).

Against this background, nougat became an even more important part of the Maltese's prospective memory. This is the food item which the local population considers as part of its heritage that has proved to be the most resilient to the encroachment by international food items so much sought after today by both Maltese and tourists alike during the *festa* season. Nougat fits well the UNESCO (2003) definition for intangible cultural heritage, as it is *"transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity".*

Consequently, it is imperative that prospective memory is sustained. Knowledge needs to be transmitted between one generation and another especially since Maltese society is already faced with situations where some of the heritage foods and their associated foodways have by and large disappeared, or else have undergone significant transformations to meet new tastes and other commercial interests including the increasing consumption of alcoholic drinks (Avellino & Avellino 2015). Foodways is an excellent example of how official institutions should give this field of study its due consideration.

Some fieldwork data

In December 2014 a limited survey was carried out among foreign students aged between 18 and 30 who were visiting Malta at the time. This exercise returned 59 filled in questionnaires. The results showed that 29% had not been to a feast within the last six months, 10% indicated not having been in Malta when a feast was held, and another 11% not having been aware of feasts. Others indicated that they did not have the time or inclination to attend feasts, while just one respondent declared that due to impediments set by her/his religious beliefs s/he would not attend and could not eat the food presented at the feast. The other 71% indicated that the culinary aspect (23 respondents) and the cultural interest (26 respondents) where the main elements that attracted them to the event, while eight sought to be in touch with local people.

We also sought to get a hint as to whether young locals who did not live in a locality that had a feast, and therefore did not have a '*festa* culture' would be attracted to visiting localities where feasts were celebrated. In this pilot survey comprising 58 young people, 78% indicated that they enjoyed going to feasts, especially the one hosted in the neighbouring town, with 31% being motivated by the fireworks, 16% by the traditional food, and 17% by the prospect of being able to socialise. The list of preferred features that the respondents sought to enjoy during the feast indicated that 31% were after the fireworks, 19% sought socialising, 15.5% were attracted by the cultural aspect and another 15.5% were enticed by the atmosphere. Then there were those who sought the food (12%), drinking alcohol (8.6%) and doughnuts (13.8%) which meant that those after the food and drink added up to 38%. The party atmosphere with high alcohol consumption also featured in the responses.

Some interviews were also done with older locals who visited one of the local feasts – that of St Joseph in Rabat, Malta, which was held in March of 2015.

From the responses it was evident that the more religious aspect was quite significant, as were the fireworks, processions, and band marches which were considered to be part of the *festa* atmosphere. There was, however, a divergence of opinions regarding *festa* food. Some were satisfied with the products that were on offer for consumption and indicated *żeppoli*, the main sweet marking the feast of St Joseph (*żeppoli* comes from Żeppi which is a Maltese short version of *Ġużeppi* - Joseph), as the main treat to be enjoyed during the Josephite festivities. Of lesser significance were burgers with chips, hot dogs, and mqaret.

On the negative side a good number of interviewees lamented the fact that the quality of the products were inferior when compared to the past. They felt that nougat tasted the same, from whatever stall one purchased it,

which seemed to indicate that it was being produced by one factory. Others lamented that it was quite rare to see a 'candy floss' stand which although, not traditionally Maltese, reminded them of their youth with a certain nostalgia. One interviewee recalled the fun she used to have as she recalled how the bright pink candy floss would stick to some people's *festa* coats or dresses which would have been taken out of mothballs for the special occasion. A few also complained about the type of fast food which was sold and which was unhealthy in that it was either predominantly made of sugar, or fried in re-used oil. One interviewee remarked that permission should be withheld to street food stands that sold untraditional Maltese food such as Turkish kebabs and German *würstel*. This is in direct contrast to the young people whom had been interviewed in December 2014 and who considered doughnuts as one of the attractions of the festa and considered it part of Maltese culture.

The social life of nougat

Arjun Appadurai (1986) considers food a commodity with a social life. Appadurai studies food in close relation to other kinds of exchange, mainly gifts and goods. His idea of the 'social life of things' highlights the constant 'dialogue' that follows between human beings and the material world in a manner that objects are given particular meanings. The psychological/emotive relationship that exists between individuals and their ability to create objects also recognises the same objects as means to justify particular aspects of human existence. In other words, humans produce, process and consume food but at the same time, food has utilitarian and social functions. Consequently, a cursory look at the social life of nougat is necessary here.

Nougat has been part of Malta's culinary past for centuries and it is considered as the most representative *festa* food that the Maltese can offer. Joseph Cassar-Pullicino, one of the eminent Maltese folklorists, argues *"Festa bla qubbajd mhix festa"* (lit. without nougat a feast cannot be called a feast) , (Cassar Pullicino & Camilleri 1998).

This ancient sweet can be found in several Southern European countries. Variations of the same sweet are known as *turrón* or *tourron* in Spain, *torró* in Cataluña, *torrone* in Italy, *pasteli* in Greece. In Sicily it is called *cubbaita* which is derived from the Arabic *qubbayt* (Agius 1996: 381) and very much akin to the Maltese *qubbajt*. This almond and honey based confection was largely cultivated by the medieval Arabic cooking tradition in Spain and Sicily. Malta's past dominion under Arab rule, and its direct link with Sicily, added this sweet to Malta's culinary culture.

The earliest references to *Il cobaytaro* (nougat seller) dates back to the opening years of the rule of the Order of St John (1530-1798) over Malta. For instance, in 1580, in one document we find that the wife of the nougat seller had passed away. In 1638, a man called Francesco was known as *il cobaytaro*, while a certain Gio. Paolo informed the authorities that he sold nougat as a means to earn his daily living (Gambin & Buttigieg 2003:164).

These nougat confectioners had several customers with a sweet tooth, including sixteenth and seventeenth century members of the Order of Friar Preachers in Valletta, better known as the Dominicans. In fact nougat made it to their monastery refectory table on special occasions, probably associated with important religious celebrations.

Evidence also informs about nougat production. One of Malta's eminent writers, Mikiel Anton Vassalli, sheds interesting light on the key ingredients for one type of eighteenth century nougat – *"composizione per pospasto fatto di sesame, amendola, miele, zucchero"* (the composition of the mixture is made from sesame seeds, almonds, honey and sugar) – producing a brittle type of toffee known as *Qubbajt tal-Penit* (Cassar-Pullicino 1961). Another eighteenth century contemporary of Vassalli, the Gozitan Canon G.P. Agius de Soldanis, described the final phase of nougat production – *"tutto posto in una tavoletta condensate che sarà della longhezza di un palmo in circa"* – a practice carried on to the present since the searing confection is normally poured over a marble slab and allowed to cool and then cut into smaller manageable pieces.

The type and quality of nougat represented the socio-economic condition of the consumer. For the lower classes, any type of nougat was more than welcome. As an occasional food, it became necessary for the affluent to continue to emphasise their socio-cultural standing, thus making it clearly understood that for the majority of the common people this would be economically out of their reach (Buttigieg 2010). Thus, consumers could find at least two basic types of nougat available to their tastes and pockets. De Soldains describes how nougat was made out of white and black honey (J. Cassar-Pullicino 1961:48). The latter, commonly referred to as *melenegra*, was also a marker of social distinction, and normally consumed by the *menu peuple*.

One persistent characteristic that stood the test of time is the association of nougat with a form of exchange. Twentieth century folklorists have recorded aspects of nougat associated with gift giving. Particularly during the village *festa*, it was almost compulsory for grooms to buy their bride a piece of this festive sweet as a sign of affection. Although marriage rituals have experienced rapid changes throughout the twentieth century, nougat related rituals seem to have persisted until relatively recent times. Nougat formed an integral part of marriage and courtship, and what better way to experience this if not during the hot summer days when village *festa* prepared a platform for social interaction with fellow parishioners, but also with those who visited from near and far. Nostalgic stories of betrothals starting through the gift of nougat have now become romantic memories of days gone by. The importance of nougat in courtship has been immortalised in one form of Maltese folk music called *għana*. Here, the groom sings to his bride in the prospect of their marriage (Cassar Pullicino & Camilleri 1998).

U l-qubbajd li tajtek jiena
Kollu lewż, kollu ġulġlien;
U dis-sena kiltu waħdek,
Sena oħra nikluh flimkien.

[And the nougat I have given you
Full of almonds, full of sesame seeds;
And this year you ate it by yourself.
Next year we will eat it together.]

The relation of nougat to love continues into marriage, especially during the national feast of St Peter and St Paul, popularly known as *l-Imnarja*. The newly wedded husband had to live up to the promise of taking his new wife to the *Imnarja* festival. Nougat is the food that symbolised love, eternal affection, a moment of exchange which was crystallised in another folk song. This advised the newly wedded bride to hold her husband responsible to buy her nougat into the first year of marriage.

U żagħżugħ l' għadek tiżżewweġ
Qis li tniżżel fil-kuntratt
Lill-għarusa trid teħodha
Lejn l-Imnarja għall-qubbajt.

[And you young man who has just married
See that you include in the contract
That you will take you bride
To the feast of Mnarja for nougat.]

Nougat also features in children's rhymes. One of the several versions of the children's rhyme *Pizzi, Pizzi, Kanna,* ends thus:

Bandiera tal-ħarir,
Ixtrilu biċċa qubbajt,
Itmagħielu, bellagħhielu,
Ħabbatlu rasu mal-ħajt.

[Silk flag,
Buy him a piece of nougat,
Feed it to him, push it down his throat,
Bump his head against the wall.]

These practices are today gone and forgotten as nougat's social life got morphed into other meanings and social expectations.

Nougat as a marker of 'authentic' intangible heritage

Food is an intangible heritage that each generation cherishes as it is considered to be part of its dowry, and considered worthy of passing on to future generations. Many grandparents and parents make it a point to introduce inherited food recipes and dishes to their children and then continue with their mission of heritage preservation by

encouraging them to prepare them themselves. They wish to pass on to their descendants what their ancestors had left them, in the hope that they will do the same when their turn comes. Food is an intimate heirloom which has the power to stimulate nostalgia and a strong feeling of 'yesteryear', and it is therefore protected as a precious component of the culture of a people. As Gena Philibert-Ortega (2012:10-11) has reflected, *"What does food have to do with your genealogical research? Everything. Food plays a major role in social history. Adding a social history perspective to your family history will teach you more about who your ancestors really were. And when we pass on family food traditions to our children and grandchildren, we help them better understand their connection to their family history"*. A community tends to try to keep, in one way or another, what it considers to be its traditional food dishes as these, it feels, are a reflection of itself. Some recipes tend to die a natural death for one reason or another, but others have a way how to survive because of causes which may go beyond the very food item itself.

Nougat is one of those food specialities that is still quite prominent, primarily because of a newfound scope – Malta's booming post-war tourism industry. As nougat's social life continues to change, we seem to be constantly struggling with the need to establish ways of how to deal with the manifest paradox of preserving intangible heritage yet making it available to others every day. Different schools of thought cancel each other through debates that range from the loss of intangible heritage due to lack of interest, and sustained education to employ modified or commercialised foodways to preserve the past according to today's market needs. Some might say that nougat has up till now survived the test of time as it has somewhat managed to morph itself into a new role. At the same time, several are questioning its authenticity and viability when the local younger generations are growing increasingly distant from this 'traditional' food to the point that many realistically only remotely consider nougat as part of Malta's culinary identity. Indeed, many may not even have tasted it and have no urge to do so.

It is tourism that is largely keeping nougat alive and it is therefore to that direction that we must look for its continued survival. As Long (2004:2) has observed, food is both *"a destination and a vehicle for tourism"*. Cultural operators do argue that cultural tourism may be a strong prompt towards the revival of waning traditional cultural forms and objects. Giving cultural heritage a refreshed meaning will thus reinforce cultural bonds while concurrently providing host communities with a measure of material benefits. This said, one needs to deliberate on the assumption that the local actors can, in fact, distinguish between that which is 'sacred' and therefore not open to the whims and pleasures of tourism, and that which is profane and can thus be subjected to commodification (Shepherd 2002). Seeking a balance between presenting the authentic product in contrast to that which is diluted, modified, and more to the taste of the consumer, does put cultural heritage, so to say, in a strait jacket. How to preserve what one has, yet offer it in such a way so as to be attractive to today's tourist may, and does, create a dilemma for those who are aware of this reality and its complexities.

The case for authenticity is, arguably, a hot one too. Many today challenge even the concept itself. One may refer for example to David Sze (2015:n.p.) who ponders: *"But what is 'authenticity' exactly? As we excavate the term, we find that it is founded on particular ideas of what 'culture' is, and should be. And these ideas are shaky."* Continuing the argument, one gradually becomes increasingly cognisant that the 'authentic' is much more perceived then real. Many tend to seek the 'real thing' but this rarely exists beyond the world of the tourist. Johnson has put this context very clearly, underlining that when he spoke of 'authenticity', he did not propose that "such a thing is present outside of the perception of the tourist." What Johnson calls *"a reified authenticity"* did not actually exist but was *"imagined by the tourist"* (2007:158).

Interpretation – a saviour or a shot in the dark?

Intangible heritage may be more difficult to communicate than that which counts as tangible. Arguably, all heritage benefits from interpretation if this is to be better understood, appreciated and taken seriously. Freeman Tilden (1977) has set down a demanding list of six interpretation maxims. The first makes it clear that interpreters should relate to the personal experience of their audience, otherwise all their effort will be sterile. Another of the six underscores the need to provoke and stimulate people into some form of action. The rest are no less revealing and challenging. Interpretation comes out as a strong and effective tool if used intelligently and skilfully. Yet, this provides no straight forward solution to understanding heritage. Indeed, there are those who even challenge the existence of heritage per se. It was in the 1980s that this argument began to come to the fore when Robert Hewison (1987) proposed a new term – 'heritage industry'. By this he meant the sanitised and commercialised version

of the past produced as heritage. In other words it constructed a nostalgic image of a past age which is perceived to be better than the present in which we perpetually live. Since the time Tilden proposed it, some have come to consider interpretation as having become entangled in a web of challenges and perplexities. Uzzell (1998:11) has put it thus: *"Some might argue that the initial challenge of interpretation has been reduced to a challenge to find ever more tricksy techniques and sophisticated hardware. If only as much attention been paid to how we can get the visitor to really question their values, attitudes and actions."* The work of the interpreter, as also the motivation for interpretation, have thus come under scrutiny by those who question the validity and genuinity of the outcome as had been proposed by Tilden (cf. for example, Waitt 2000; Staiff 2014). Indeed, Munjeri (2009:133) points out to the existence of *"some serious discontinuation in the purpose, meaning and the application of intangible cultural heritage"* as the different *"parties and stakeholders may be reading from the same script, but their interpretation is much influenced by the interests of the actors and the issues at stake"*. Such issues draw from a variety of contexts such as the historical, temporal, spatial, socio-economic, geo-political and from various perspectives and vantage points.

On the other hand, there are those who support interpretation and vouch for its effectiveness and untainted motivations. For example, Ivanovic (2008:168) believes that it is necessary 'to speak' on behalf of cultural heritage. Thus interpretation and presentation of intangible cultural heritage emerges *"as the only way of revealing and communicating meaning to visitors"*. She continues that if one wants such visitors to grasp the symbolism of traditional elements, this *"requires oral explanation as well as visual presentation. Intangible heritage is intermingled with tangible heritage [...] and presented in heritage centres, ethnic/cultural villages and along heritage trails and routes"*.

Many consider interpretation as the mouthpiece for what cannot be understood if it is not explained. For the uninitiated in heritage contexts, for the cultural experience seekers, for people who wish to know more, interpretation should turn out to be a useful vehicle in the various forms it is presented. As Mannix has put it: *"Done well, interpretation can enhance the visitor experience. [...] Done badly, it can inaccurately communicate the meanings of the site and alienate those who visit"* (2014:3). This observation can indeed apply to any type of heritage, be this tangible or intangible.

The Maltese *festa* and the elements that make it what it is need to be understood if it is to be appreciated. Interpretation may be a good way to do this. Balance is, however, necessary to avoid that the interpretation does not become a commoditised fairy tale. Though authenticity may realistically be a buzz word in any situation, at the same time interpreters can and should strive to bring out as much of the traditional element and transmit it to the cultural tourist. Food may be one tricky cultural item to interpret as it is in a continuous state of change and evolution. Both the recipes and the presentation 'inspired' by the globalisation phenomenon have impacted and will continue to impact on the Maltese festa street food (Cassar 2015) as they do on other food recipes in other parts of the world. Many a time the heritage is turned into what Hobsbawm (1983:2, quoted in Paxton 2014:30–1) has termed as *"invented traditions"* which he explains as *"responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition"*.

Maltese nougat is a case in point. It may be one of the few food items that continue to carry the flag of traditional heritage with some determination. It has persisted to make its presence in every feast, every year, many, many years ago. It is sold from stalls that one cannot miss due to their uniqueness. Each stall bears the name of locally known long-standing producers that are household names in Maltese feasts. The nougat itself comes in two main types – the soft and the hard. The soft variety is made from a mixture of egg white, sugar, water, candied fruit and glucose. Producers may add their secret ingredient to make their nougat different in taste from that of rival producers. The hard nougat type consists of a combination of almonds, hazelnuts, cashews, sesame seeds, toffee and caramel and when ready is brittle and dark. With the advent of tourism and more aggressive commercialisation the nougat mixture has been made more attractive to the eye and enticing to buy by including various flavours and colours to the basic white vanilla – thus there are strawberry, chocolate, mint, banana and orange flavours – and besides the more traditional almonds today's nougat also includes peanuts in the mix (Christians 2013).

The interpretation of nougat is thus the interpretation of a Maltese food item that has come to represent longevity and resilience. It may be considered to an extent symbolic of the Maltese islands, which have endured centuries of dominance and colonialism; yet, though small as a population and minute as a geographical entity, still very much present to this day.

Deriving their inspiration from the permanence of nougat, the Maltese should be more alert to the realities of

globalisation and how this can change their lives, by encroaching on what they consider as their cultural heritage to change their cultural physiognomy for ever. This prospect, which has proven to be an unmistakable reality for so many communities, needs effort to check, and training in active citizenship to slow down. Interpretation for both locals and tourists can help to raise awareness and promote respect for that which lies at the root of a people, for what makes them what they are today, for that which many still cherish and hold dear of their past. With tourism and the demands of the industry it becomes ever more necessary to preserve the 'sense of place' and the 'sense of the authentic'. It will benefit one and all much more than had the cultural operators to drift with the current of 'disneyfication'. For as Hargrove (2003:5-6) has observed: *"When authenticity is compromised, cultural heritage tourism loses credibility. Moreover, when authenticity is compromised cultural heritage tourism loses what differentiates it from sanitized theme park adventures and recreate (rather than real) attractions."* One needs to understand that, *"if the resource is not protected then the very opportunity to attract visitors with authentic experiences vanishes".*

Striving to keep as much of the local community's authentic characteristics as is humanly and circumstantially possible, should help to earn for that community the trust and confidence of visitors of today and tomorrow. It also nurtures self-respect among the locals and promotes a sense of pride for that which is their own. Interpretations cannot be left out of this undertaking, and interpreters cannot falter in the name of cultural heritage and its safekeeping for posterity.

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