



Research Article

## Communicating identities: A sociology of house names in Malta

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**Abstract.** 19,683 house names from a convenience sample of ten localities across the island of Malta were collected and analysed in late 2022, with the aim of teasing out how they communicate social identities. Trends in multilingualism and secularisation were particularly explored, from two sets of house names that represent different historical epochs, one dating from 1977 and one from 1977–2022. Results, secured from the ten localities studied, suggest that: (1) English remains by far the preferred language for naming houses, followed by Maltese; (2) house names that involve two or more languages have increased; (3) house names that relate to the religious or sacred have declined (from around 16% to 10%); and (4) in spite of evident secularisation in house-naming practices, the most common house name is 'St Joseph'.

**Keywords:** House names, Identities, Language, Malta, Secularisation, Sociology, St Joseph.

### 1 Introduction

House names are a medium through which people represent and communicate their identities to themselves and others. House names, carved on wood, marble or stone, or made of glass, iron or clay, and occasionally even written on paper as a temporary measure, provide a wealth of visual and linguistic data which is "inextricably interwoven with our personal identities, narratives, lifestyle, culture and society" (Camilleri Grima, 2020).

Names of houses are often sentimental, humorous, historic, or descriptive. Frequently, they were chosen by their owners to make a personalised statement, often about the house but sometimes also about themselves (Batchelor, 2020).

What people do, how they talk and dress, and how they choose to represent themselves and their assets, are active engagements and manifestations of how they wish to be

seen, understood and 'read' by others in their community, and beyond. In this sense, our identities become signifiers of those personae that we wish to convey about ourselves. This lifelong exercise is supported by what we own and demonstrate as ours; and a house is typically our most expensive asset. Thus "naming a house [is] a statement of personal or family identity; [but also] a public statement destined for a particular audience and within a defined context" (Garrioch, 1994).

Sociologically, we can move beyond the individual choices of millions of house dwellers and understand that their personal decisions are influenced by the social and political context in which they live. The choices of house names can thus be examined holistically, with reference to current trends at particular places and times. House names are "an expression not only of individual tastes, but of a collective culture and identity" (Garrioch, 1994).

The very act of naming, and the actual names given to private properties and assets — such as a boat, a car, and of course, one's children — are similarly acts of signification. For those who own their own home, this is likely to be their most valuable material possession in their life course. Moving into or out of a home is one of the most stressful, life-changing (and exciting) events in one's life. Hence, the significance of 'naming' as a declaration of ownership: "naming a house [is] a way of taking possession of it: a statement of power" (Garrioch, 1994). Brincat (2009) observes how the intimacy and character of a house name somehow makes up for and contrasts with the blandness and anonymity of a house number (Pink, 2013).

The practice of naming one's home is not widely disseminated. In most countries of the world, the main signifier and locator of a home is a number and a street name or a civic or rural address, although even these are fairly recent attributions to the urban or rural landscape

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(ASPO, 1950; Tantner, 2009). These are determined by (national, regional or local) state authorities, much more intent in being able to trace residents; for example for the purpose of registering their dwelling for tax, water and electricity consumption purposes, to be able to forward their postal items, or to smoothen the encounter of and with strangers in increasingly cosmopolitan urbanscapes (Tantner, 2015).

Street names and house numbering in Malta are the exclusive purview of government units (Electoral Commission, Malta, 2023a, 2023b). These are then typically complemented by a house name, the choice of which is usually a purely personal one, decided by the original builders, contractors and/or subsequent buyers and occupiers of the home.

House names can be renewed or replaced by their successive owners and tenants; and so they reflect changing times and home-making attitudes (Garrioch, 1994). House names are bound to be more prevalent when people own the homes that they live in (and which they are therefore at liberty to name or re-name); as against living in rented accommodation where the privilege of naming does not belong to the tenant. Hence the popularity of house naming in Malta, where the home ownership rate is around 80% of all households (Sansone, 2018).

It is therefore feasible to examine the preponderance of house names as indicative of social and economic trend[s], such as home ownership, but also of globalisation and secularisation. Recent decades have seen an acceleration of diversity in Malta's demographic profile, with so many returned migrants or foreigners not born in Malta but now living in Malta. There has also been a decline in ecclesiastical power and influence (manifested in the introduction of divorce and the legalisation of same sex unions) and a decline in religiosity and religious practices (such as lower attendance at Sunday mass) (Deguara, 2020; Fargugia, 2019; Fenech, 2012). Such and similar trends are bound to find expression in:

1. whether a residence has a name at all
2. whether such a name, where it exists, bears a relationship with the religious, spiritual and/or divine
3. whether the house name is spelt out in English (EN), in Maltese (MT), in a third language or a combination of languages.

## 2 Why House Names?

Garrioch (1994) argues that house names and shop signs started off as markers of status, allegiance, and religious devotion, while they identified the family or profession of the individual who lived in a particular dwelling; the latter was an especially important signpost to would-be visitors or clients.

The oldest house names go back to the European Middle Ages. They primarily spread through oral heritage, although in the Habsburg Empire they were also recorded in official church documents. House names arose from the need to more accurately differentiate between people because social development and advances meant that personal names were no longer sufficient (Geršič et al., 2016). The practice of house naming spread with British colonialism to the western part of North America, South Africa, Australia and other parts of the British Empire, including Malta. Within the United Kingdom itself, according to its Land Registry, just 1.4 million homes in towns and villages (out of 26 million) had a house name in 2011 (Batchelor, 2020).

In the Maltese context, the most compelling reason for house naming, argues Camilleri Grima (2020), was that, until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, houses were not assigned numbers. Therefore, residents would identify newly built houses by assigning them a name. The vast majority of new buildings have continued to be named, even after a door numbering exercise was completed throughout the Maltese Islands, and is now updated on an ongoing basis. Houses which already had a name often affixed a peel-on version of the number given to them on, or near, the plaque with their house name (*ibid.*). Writing fairly recently, Falzon (2020) argues: "It is common practice in Malta for even the humblest house to be given a name, which is usually displayed on a small ceramic plaque on the facade. Naming is typically inspired by local patron saints, places visited by the owners, and so on, but also by bird names in the case of hunter's homes. 'Turtle Dove', 'Honey Buzzard' and 'Skylark' are not uncommon house names..."

The earliest locale in Malta to have official house numbers (and official street names) introduced was Valletta, the capital city. In 1813, the British authorities assigned a permanent number to every door in the city, and which had to be prominently displayed; most have remained unchanged ever since (Denaro, 1967). This permitted the straightforward identification of every address in the capital, considered as a measure to help control the spread of the plague (Bonello, 2018). This early introduction, plus the extensive rental housing stock in Valletta, snuffed out the resort to house names in the city: as an example, there are only six named houses in the whole of Merchants' Street. In the even older city of Mdina, the former capital, only nine houses have names.

## 3 This study

This study looks at the names assigned to homes in ten localities in Malta, the main island of the Maltese archipelago. It explores:

1. the popularity of such names
2. the language used in house naming, identifying the distribution of houses named in Maltese and in English — the two official languages — as well as a variety of other languages (Italian, French, Spanish, Latin, Hebrew ...), and linguistic combinations thereof
3. the rationale behind the choice of house names, with special attention to the recent secularisation dynamic that is also manifest in such options.

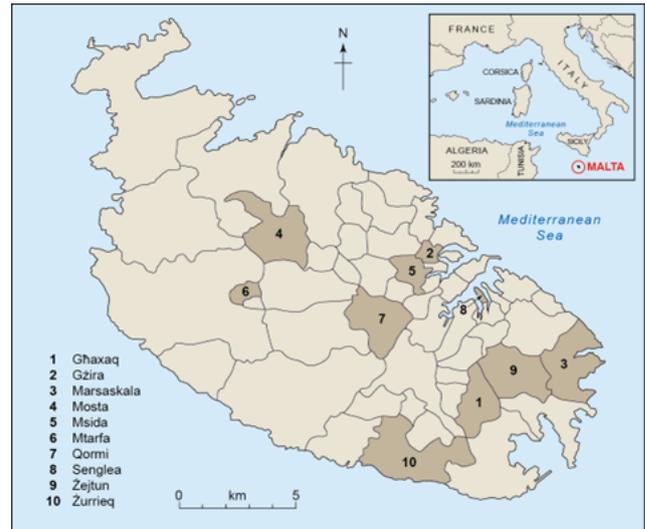
Attempts will also be made to compare house name practices in urban and village cores with those of the same town or village suburbs, where the housing stock is likely to be more recent.

A similar focus on house names, but using a different research methodology, has been used in earlier studies. Camilleri Grima (2020) focused on house names to explore the Maltese linguistic landscape. In her case, ten of her students from the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta each photographed a minimum of 50 house names in the vicinity of where they lived and carried out incidental interviews with their (Maltese) residents during 2017–8. Meanwhile, Brincat (2009) undertook a study of all the house names in the sister island of Gozo: 7,144 houses had names, out of a stock of 10,744 dwellings, at the time of that study. This, mainly qualitative, research identified some of the same house name categories proposed in this study: including composite names, nicknames, names associated with trades, and religious names: 1,817 house names involved the names of saints or the Holy Virgin; and 41 others had biblical names.

This study uses a different approach. It resorts to the Local Council Electoral Register of April 2022 as its base document and population frame: the register is publicly available from the website of the Malta Electoral Commission (MEC, 2022). This offers a comprehensive official and up-to-date directory of those eligible to vote in local council elections, comprising Maltese and other European Union citizens with a registered residence in the Maltese islands. The register includes the names, identity card numbers, address, and the name of the house or apartment block (where this exists and is registered).

The research design involves a desk review of ten select localities, these being *either* the localities that the students following the study unit *Sociology of Space and Place* (code: SOC 2079) at the University of Malta during the first semester of 2022–23 called home; *or* an adjacent locality, if more than one student lived in the same locality<sup>1</sup>. The localities chosen, represent a fair cross-section

<sup>1</sup>Three students resided in Marsaskala, so two of these opted to study Qormi and Żejtun instead.



**Figure 1:** The ten localities featured in this study. (Map work courtesy of Sandra Mather and Ritienne Gauci).

of Maltese towns and villages, and involve localities from all six regions except Gozo and Comino<sup>2</sup>. These localities are: Għaxaq, Gżira, Marsaskala, Msida (including Swatar), Mosta, Mtarfa, Qormi, Żejtun and Żurrieq (including Bubaqra). The study-unit professor added Senglea (L-Isla, in Maltese), so as to include a locality from the inner harbour region, still completely hemmed in by practically intact outer walls and thus unable to expand, and where therefore no additional streets — and houses — have been laid out since 1977. This contrasts with the town of Mtarfa, where all streets — and therefore all homes — have seen the light of day since 1977. All the eight other localities have sets of squares, streets and alleys — and therefore houses and their names — that both pre-date and post-date 1977 (figure 1).

The research method involved first looking at all the streets of each chosen locality, and for each street identifying:

1. the total number of households;
2. the proportion of households with house names
3. the actual house name

Next, the older streets of the locality were identified — as explained below — separate from the more recent streets, so that a comparison of house names could then be made between these two clusters of streets of the same

<sup>2</sup>These regions are: Southern Harbour (in our convenience sample: Senglea); Northern Harbour (Gżira, Msida, Qormi); South Eastern (Għaxaq, Marsaskala, Żejtun, Żurrieq); Western (Mtarfa) and Northern (Mosta). With Gozo-Comino, these six 'regions' correspond to what Eurostat, the statistical agency of the European Commission, calls 'Local Administrative Units' (LAUs). See NSO (2021).

locality. Renaming house names can happen everywhere, even in old houses, of course. But house names can be 'sticky': they can persist, even though owners can and do change. Sometimes, it is simply too much of a hassle (and an expense) to change a house name and the ceramic tile to which it may be affixed.

It is thus hypothesised that house names in the older street sets would have a heavier dose of religious and sacred terms than those in more recently built areas, where personal, sport, trade, hobby and terms associated with particular professions and pastimes are more likely to proliferate. It could also be postulated that more recently built homes are more likely to have house names that appear in other languages (apart from EN and MT); and these homes were also more likely to have house names that express a combination of different languages.

A research ethics self-assessment (minimal risk) was undertaken in September 2022 and registered with the Faculty of Arts Research Ethics Committee at the University of Malta.

House names come in an abundance of diversity (figure 2); but most can be organised inductively according to a number of categories, following a review of the rich database, as well as in light of the insights from previous research (Brincat, 2009; Camilleri Grima, 2020). A tentative classification would break down house names as follows below. (Note that names can overlap more than one category.):

- Religion and the Sacred: pertaining to particular saints or holy persons, including the patron saint/s and/or feast day of the town or village where the house is located, or from where the homeowner(s) originated. E.g. Cova da Iria [valley near Fatima, Portugal, where the Virgin Mary allegedly appeared to three children in 1917], Dar l-Għammied [Home of the Baptist, patron saint of Xewkija, Gozo], Santa Katerina, Holy Family, Madonnina, 8 ta' Settembru [8th September, a national day], Immakulata [The Immaculate Conception, feast celebrated in the city of Cospicua], Salvajtni Mulej [You saved me, Lord]... The references here are mainly to Christianity, but there are also house names that align with other religions (e.g. Shalom, Shiva).
- Hobbies and Professions: pertaining to particular artefacts involved with trades, professions or activities that presumably are associated with the owners—current or previous—of the house. E.g. Synapse (medicine), Il-Karettun [the cart] (farming), Sirius (astronomy), Woodcock (hunting and trapping), The Art Studio ...
- Home Dwellers: related to the persons who own the building, live in the house and/or their family, in-

cluding nickname (laqam) and other references to those residing inside the home, such as the zodiac sign of one or more of the dwellers. This category also includes homes with a reference to the personal, with the usage of words like 'My' or 'Our'. E.g. L-Għekiereb [The Scorpios], Pisces, Micallef Home, Ta' Pawlu Farmhouse [Paul's Farmhouse], My Burrow, Our Nest, Vella Flats ...

- First Name Sets: A sub-set of the above is a curious practice which involves naming the house with a selection of letters from the names of the partners (or children) living there. This exercise has the character of a pub quiz. Guess why these homes are called: ChaRit, MarTrev, CarAnt and NaJoPetAn? (figure 3).
- Links beyond Malta: a practice usually associated with households where one or more family members may have spent their honeymoon or lived abroad, and then returned to Malta. Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, and towns and cities therein, would be the main reference points, since these are the countries to which the Maltese migrated en masse in the difficult years after the Second World War (e.g. Jones, 1973). E.g. City of Melbourne, God Bless America; Kangaroo House, Maple Leaf ...
- Locality and Topography: names that refer to natural features, possibly with a connection to a local and neighbouring topographical feature on land or sea or a natural phenomenon, usually associated with the sun, the wind or a flower/garden. E.g. Il-Qolla [The Hillock], Seaside, Blue Sky, Għabex [Sunset], Tramonto [Sunrise], Il-Ponta [The Point], Bay View, Mistral, Dahlia, Poinsettia, Rainbow ...
- Sports: names here bear a direct connection to the name of a sport, a sport team, a famous player, or to the stadium or home of a (local or foreign) sport (usually football/soccer) team. E.g. La Vecchia Signora [The Old Lady: Juventus FC], Old Trafford [Manchester United FC], Casa Del Piero [legendary player with Juventus FC], San Siro [Stadium for both AC Milan and Inter Milan], Toronto Blue Jays, Hibernians House, White Hart Lane [Stadium for Tottenham Hotspur]...
- Politics: here we come across names of political personalities or events from Maltese politics. E.g. Dom [short version for Dominic, the first name of Mintoff, Maltese Prime Minister, 1955–58; 1971–84], Dar il-Helsien [Freedom House], Villa Indipendenza [Villa Independence], 31 ta' Marzu [31st March: one of Malta's national days]...

Other house names turn up and which do not fit com-



Figure 2: A collage of house names. (Source: the authors).



Figure 3: JoeGrace and ErnMar: Double evidence of the practice of naming houses with the combination of parts of the names of persons: typically, their owners and occupiers. (Source: the authors).

fortably in any of the above categories. E.g. Boronia, Dolce Vita, Kitty Hawk, Mirage, Saratoga, Shangri La, Touch and Go ... And one in particular is symptomatic of a touch of creativity and humour, including a pun on the Maltese word 'dar' which, apart from being the noun 'home', also stands for the verb 'he turned' (figure 4). This is a practice also in the United Kingdom, where the names assigned recently to some homes come in the joining together of words in new and witty combinations, also in jest (Wright, 2020). Initially lumped together as 'miscellaneous', various new categories may be teased out from a study of these names. This is a task for future research, and may require a researcher asking the home dweller to explain their choice.

From the ensuing corpus of house names, the language used in the naming of the house will be identified. A separate area of attention in this exploratory study is the actual language in which the name of the house is established. Maltese is the national language of Malta but is more commonly used orally than in the written form; in contrast, English has tended to be the language of correspondence, documentation and officialdom (Brincat, 2019, 2021; Vella, 2013). Indeed, from the sample of 642 house names in a study by Camilleri Grima (2020), around 19% were in English and 15% were in Maltese. We can thus hypothesise that house names are most likely to be spelt out in the English language (and followed by the Maltese language).

Which takes us to 'third languages'. We also postulate that a large proportion of house names are now being written in other languages beyond EN and MT. More than one in five of those who live in Malta today were not born in Malta (NSO, 2023; Sammut et al., 2022). The diversity of citizenships of Maltese residents (including dual citizenships); the variety of languages now spoken in Malta; and the large variety of countries in which Maltese residents have lived, worked and/or studied; means that we can reasonably expect a colourful range of languages used in the naming of houses, even beyond EN and MT. Sciriha et al. (2015) report on the results of a quantitative study of languages used in public signs, notices and house names in Malta, identifying 23 languages. This suggests that "Malta's linguistic landscape is far from insular", and that "the Maltese are linguistically quite versatile ... and draw from a considerable linguistic repertoire when giving names to their home" (*ibid.*).

Thirdly, and following directly from the arguments above, we propose that there is an increasing tendency towards — or the Maltese are increasingly adventurous in — mixing languages when determining a house name; such that, if a house name consists of two or more words, we should not be surprised if these relate to different lan-

guages (figure 5). And so, some house names are bilingual, for example 'Monte Carmelo Flats' [IT/EN] 'Dar ta' Déjà Vue' [literally: 'House of Déjà Vue', MT/FR] as reported by Camilleri Grima (2020).

Finally, a reference was earlier made to 1977. This is the year that Joseph G. Borg published his first edition of 'A to Z of Malta and Gozo', the first published collection of 130 maps comprising all the streets and alleys of the Maltese archipelago. This 167-page book includes a thorough and indispensable 'street guide': an index of street names by locality (Borg, 1977). All information in this book is based on survey maps provided by the then Public Works Department.

A cost-effective and timely but valid and reliable method had to be found to compare house names across time. Borg's 1977 index provides this convenient time marker. While the Local Council Electoral Register included all streets and alleys — and the names of the houses therein — of all localities at the time of writing (December 2022), consulting Borg (1977) would identify which streets and alleys already existed in 1977, 45 years before. In this way, the data of each locality was divided into two sets: that pertaining to house names drawn from streets and alleys that already existed in 1977; and that pertaining to streets and alleys that did not feature in Borg (1977) and are therefore deemed to have been developed and laid out after that date.

We are fully aware that this is not a perfect and error-proof technique: some old streets would have been extended or had empty plots and now contain new housing; some old homes would have been demolished and rebuilt, or renamed, since 1977. But, *grosso modo*, we believe that it is fair to argue that the two datasets represent largely old (pre-1977) houses and largely new (post-1977) houses. And, bar the odd farmhouse, there would only be new housing on new streets<sup>3</sup>. We also had to resort to at least one local expert to identify a number of streets which have changed their name in the interim.

We started the analysis by sourcing the number of persons entitled to vote in local council elections in each of the ten localities, according to the April 2022 electoral register. We also elicited the population count per locality from the demographic statistical database of the National Statistics Office (as at December 2020)<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup>Indeed, the names of streets in Malta are themselves worthy of study and echo house naming trends: from a naming practice that was largely dedicated to religious names, we have more recently moved on to celebrating local personalities and events. Borg (1977) confirms that there is a 'St Joseph Street' in most localities in the Maltese Islands.

<sup>4</sup>Total population by region, district and locality. Available at: <https://statdb.nso.gov.mt>



Figure 4: Seen in Marsaskala: Having fun with your house name. (Source: the authors).



Figure 5: Seen at the limits of Rabat: English and Maltese words together in a dwelling's name. (Source: the authors).

## 4 Contextual Demographic Data

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics of the populations of the ten localities under study. Their resident populations amount to 115,959, which is 22.3% of the resident population of the Maltese Islands: 519,562, according to the 2021 Census (NSO, 2023). The total number of voters for local council elections from these ten localities is 97,583: Mtarfa and Senglea are by far the smallest, with resident populations of around 2,700 each; while Mosta is one of the most populous localities in the Maltese Islands, with almost 21,500 residents. Mtarfa has the highest proportion of local youth aged 16–18 with voting rights in the sample (2.5%). In contrast, Gżira and Msida have the lowest proportion of local youth aged 16–18 with voting rights in the sample (0.7% and 0.9% respectively) and followed by Senglea (1.5%), suggesting a relatively ageing population. Għaxaq, Qormi and Żejtun are localities where non-Maltese voters who are EU nationals constitute less than 4% of the total voting population; this is in sharp contrast with the North Harbour areas of Gżira and Msida where the proportion is a staggering 51.8 and 46.1 percent respectively. Higher proportions of non-Maltese nationals is likely to mean a higher proportion of rental accommodation, which in turn is bound to suggest a lower resort to house names per capita.

These 115,959 adults lived in 29,764 distinct addresses: a mean of four adults per address. This is a consequence not just of the number of persons per household, but also of the preponderance of apartment blocks, old people's homes and other large social residences which are counted as one address. Thus, in Għaxaq, where homeowner occupied housing prevails, there are 1,596 addresses for a population of 4,989: one address for just over three persons; while in Gżira, with its rental housing stock and apartment blocks, there are 1,672 addresses for a population of 13,021: a ratio of one address for almost eight residents.

## 5 Analysis

Out of 29,764 distinct addresses in the ten localities under study, 19,683 have a house name: that amounts to a sample mean of 66.1%, or almost two out of every three addresses. Localities which have seen relatively large recent increases in population, and where homes are mainly owner owned and occupied — such as Għaxaq, Marsaskala and Mosta — have the highest proportion of named dwellings: 76.6%, 82.1% and 75.2% respectively. At the other extreme, there are only 109 named dwellings in Senglea, where there is a considerable stock of social housing: that is only 8.2% of the total number of distinct addresses (Table 2), (Table 3), and (Table 4).

The choice of a house name with a religious reference has gone down, from around one in six to around one in ten: 15.8% in 1977; 9.9% since 1977 (Table 5). In all ten localities except Gżira and Msida, the proportion of house names that express a religious or spiritual sentiment has decreased between 1977 and 2022; while in Gżira and Msida—two localities that have seen sharp increases in new apartment buildings — there is a marginal increase (from 12.9 to 13.8% and from 10.4 to 11.2% respectively), which may appear to be bucking the trend. The locality with the largest proportion of religious house names in 1977 was Żurriq (35.7%) followed by Senglea (26.6%). In Żurriq, the most common house names in 1977 were Sacred Heart and Ave Maria (6 times each); by 2022, these had been replaced by Madonnina (18 times), followed by Ave Maria (15 times). Meanwhile, in Senglea, Maria Bambina - the titular saint of the town - was used 6 times as a house name; followed closely by Redeemer/Redentur (5 times): the Senglea parish church vaunts a statue of Christ the Redeemer that is visited by pilgrims and devotees (Farrugia, 2019). Since Senglea has reached the maximum footprint permitted within its walls, it has no new streets and probably carries over most of the house names that had been chosen decades ago, when religiosity was a keener and more mainstream concern in Maltese society. Today, Senglea's house names can be considered an anachronism when compared to the more secular house naming practices of other localities in Malta (though not perhaps in Gozo: a topic for future research). In other localities, the patron saint of the town or village was the typically most common house name in 1977, and this position may not have changed by 2022: for example, St Catherine remains the most common house name in Żejtun (19 times pre-1977; 17 times post-1977); same with Mosta (St Mary/Santa Marija: 13 times pre-1977; 40 times post-1977) and Msida (St Joseph/San Ġuzepp: 9 times pre-1977; 8 times post-1977). Finally, Qormi is the only locality in the sample to boast two parishes, devotions and rivalries: one dedicated to St George, and one to St Sebastian. The name 'St George' (and derivatives) appears on 67 houses in Qormi (39 pre-1977; 28 post-1977); while the name 'St Sebastian' (and derivatives) appears on 34 houses (17 pre-1977; another 17 after 1977). There is also a diasporic devotionality, whereby those born or bred in a town (say, Żejtun) would go and live elsewhere (say, Qormi) but fondly name their home 'St Catherine' as a nod to the patron saint of their locality of provenance.

Locality	Resident Population (National Statistics Office: December 2020)	No. of Registered Voters of Maltese Nationality (April 2022 Local Council Electoral Register): 18+	No. of Registered Voters of Maltese Nationality (April 2022 Local Council Electoral Register): 16-18	No. of Registered Voters of Other Nationalities (April 2022 Local Council Electoral Register)	Total No. of Registered Voters for Local Council Elections (April 2022)
GHAXAQ	4989	4210	83	155	4448
GŻIRA	13021	4599	70	5012	9681
MARSASKALA	15579	10034	263	4022	14319
MSIDA (including Swatar)	15566	5465	101	4756	10322
MOSTA	21495	17019	347	1946	19312
MTARFA	2612	2146	56	44	2246
QORMI	17240	13542	297	496	14335
SENGLEA	2732	1907	34	255	2196
ŻEJTUN	11516	9899	209	336	10444
ŻURRIEQ (including Bubaqra)	11209	9490	227	559	10280

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics of the populations of the ten localities under study.

	No. of Streets as at 1977	No. of Streets in Streets	No. of Addresses with a House Name	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
Għaxxaq	33	604	430	71.2%	St. Joseph (10)	St. Mary (7)	75	355	17.4%	English	Maltese
	No. of Streets added (1977–2022)	No. of Addresses in Streets	No. of Addresses with a House Name	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	81	992	792	79.8%	St. Joseph (13)	Redemeer (6)	101	691	12.8%	English	Maltese
Gżira											
	No. of Streets as at 1977	No. of Addresses in Streets	No. of Addresses with a House Name	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	46	841	433	51.5%	St. Joseph (5)	St. Mary (4)	56	377	12.9%	English	Maltese
	No. of Streets added (1977–2022)	No. of Addresses in Streets	No. of Addresses with a House Name	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	39	831	414	49.8%	St. Joseph (4), St. Rita (4), Tony (4)	Angel (3)	57	357	13.8%	English	Maltese
Marsaskala											
	No. of Streets as at 1977	No. of Addresses in Streets	No. of Addresses with a House Name	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	32	418	273	65.3%	St. Joseph (4)	St. Anna (3)	29	244	10.6%	English (84)	Maltese (24)
	No. of Streets added (1977–2022)	No. of Addresses in Street	No. of Addresses with a House Name	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	145	3219	2713	84.3%	St. Joseph (18)	Sea Breeze (14)	219	2494	8.1%	English (710)	Maltese (219)

Table 2: House names in Għaxxaq, Gżira and Marsaskala

	No. of Streets as at 1977	No. of Streets in Streets	No. of Addresses with a House Name	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
Msida (including Swatar)	56	1,007	583	57.9%	St. Joseph (9)	St. Rita (4), George (4)	61	522	10.4%	English (420)	Maltese (21)
	No. of Streets added (1977-2022)	No. of Addresses in Streets	No. of Addresses with a House Name	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	53	751	604	80.4%	St. Joseph (8)	Aurora, St. John, St. Mary, St. Rita, Massabielle, Redeemer, Sunrise (3 each)	68	536	11.2%	English (385)	Italian (32)
Mosta	93	1,867	1,281	68.6%	St. Mary (13)	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	No. of Streets added (1977-2022)	No. of Addresses in Streets	No. of Addresses with a House Name	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	249	4,473	3,486	77.9%	Santa Marja/St. Mary (40)	St. Anthony (7)	155	1,126	12.1%	English	Maltese
Mtarfa	0	0	0	0	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	No. of Streets added (1977-2022)	No. of Addresses in Streets	No. of Addresses with a House Name	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	51	868	399	46.0%	Redentur	Anfield (16)	302	3,184	8.7%	English	Maltese

Table 3: House names in Msida (including Swatar), Mosta and Mtarfa

	No. of Streets as at 1977	No. of Streets in Streets	No. of Addresses with a House Name	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
Qormi	86	1289	689	53%	Refecemer	St Rita	55	628	8%	English	Maltese
		No. of Streets added (1977-2022)	No. of Addresses in Streets	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	136	2609	1902	72%	St Mary	St George	73	1827	3%	English	Maltese
Senglea		No. of Streets in Streets	No. of Addresses with a House Name	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	41	1327	109	8.2%	Maria Bambina (6)	Redentur (5)	29	80	26.6%	English (35)	Maltese (17)
		No. of Streets added (1977-2022)	No. of Addresses in Streets	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0		0
Żejtun		No. of Streets in Streets	No. of Addresses with a House Name	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	114	2399	1193	49.7%	St Catherine (19)	St Anthony (17), St Joseph (16), St Mary (15), St Rita (14), Dar il-Hena (10)	274	919	23%	English	Maltese, Italian and French
		No. of Streets added (1977-2022)	No. of Addresses in Streets	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	169	2233	1377	61.7%	St Catherine (17)	Shalom (16), Redentur (13), St Joseph (12)	204	1173	14.8%	English	Maltese, Italian and French
Żurrieq (including Bubaqra)		No. of Streets in Streets	No. of Addresses with a House Name	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	53	795	536	67.4	Sacred Heart (6), Ave Maria (6)	Sunset (4), St Catherine (4)	141	395	35.7	English (440)	Maltese (57)
		No. of Streets added (1977-2022)	No. of Addresses in Streets	Addresses with a House Name (%)	Most Common House Name	Followed by	No. of Religious House Names	No. of Secular House Names	Religious House Names (%)	Most Common Language of House Names	Followed by
	218	3241	2360	72.8	Maddonna (18)	Ave Maria (15)	296	2064	14.3	English (1845)	Maltese (306)

Table 4: House names in Qormi, Senglea, Żejtun and Żurrieq (including Bubaqra)

Fast forward to 2022, and the increased diversity in the range of house names is also evident in the most common house names in each locality. Secular house names have become more popular; and some of these appear on the facades of many homes. 'Sea Breeze', a naturalistic house name, is the second most common choice for a house name in post-1977 Marsaskala, a coastal community (14 times); 'Aurora' and 'Sunrise' come in joint second place among house names in post-1977 Msida, which mainly consists of the Swatar neighbourhood (3 times each). Anfield is the second most popular house name in post-1977 Mosta (16 times): there seems to be a cluster of Liverpool Football Club supporters living there.

Otherwise, in spite of the decline in religiosity, the religious category of house names remains the most prevalent choice: perhaps an indication that, in a more individualistic society, a house name with religious connotations is redolent of a sense of community and collective identity (Vassallo, 1974). In relatively younger communities, where allegiance and association with the local patron saint may not be as strong, house names can still bear relationships with other religious symbols or personages. In Mtarfa, a young community which celebrates the feast of St Lucy as a parish since 2004, the most common house name is Redeemer, followed by St Joseph. In Marsaskala, which became a parish in 1949, the most common house name is St Joseph, both pre-1977 (4 times) and post-1977 (18 times); and not St Anne, the local patron saint. In Gżira, St Joseph is the most popular house name, both pre-1977 (5 times) and post-1977 (4 times) even though the local patron saint is Our Lady of Mount Carmel. In Għaxaq, the main village feast is the Assumption of Our Lady; but it is the secondary feast and patron saint of the locality, St Joseph, that scores highest amongst house names, both pre-1977 (10 times) and again post-1977 (13 times). In post-1977 Żejtun, St Joseph is the third most popular choice as a house name (12 times), bested only by Shalom (16 times) and Redentur [Redeemer] (13 times).

There are at least 240 houses named 'St Joseph' in the ten localities under study: one out of every 82 house names (see Figure 4). The pervasiveness of 'St Joseph' — and its linguistic derivatives, such as San Ġużepp (MT) or San Giuseppe (IT) — as a house name throughout the ten localities under scrutiny may come as a surprise. Boissevain (1994) and Boissevain (2004) describe the origins of the devotion to St Joseph and his installation as the secondary saint in many Maltese towns and villages, tracing this to a "ritualised conflict between established and opposition interests" and a tangible outflow of a pent up frustration by a new pro-British Maltese middle class, un-

able to break into the ranks of an entrenched pro-Italian conservative elite, starting in the late nineteenth century. St Joseph became the rallying point for the development of most secondary feasts in Malta; he is the patron saint of workers, and so a fairly good fit with the ideology of the Malta Labour Party which historically prided itself as being a socialist, workers' party. (In tacking to the political centre, the Partit Laburista now calls itself the champion of 'families and businesses'). Is this a legacy of a naming tradition from the past, not likely to be maintained in the future?<sup>5</sup>

Finally, in terms of linguistic diversity, English remains the preferred language used in naming one's house throughout all ten localities studied, thus confirming the findings of Camilleri Grima (2020). Maltese is the second most common language for assigning house names throughout, but with one exception: it is Italian that comes in as the (distant) second most common language for house names in Msida post-1977 (32 times) after English (385 times). With so many immigrants moving to Malta in recent years, and at least some of these buying their own home, we can expect a greater number of houses named in other languages in the coming years.

The resort to 'mixed languages' in house names remains steady since 1977, having increased in some localities and decreased in others. The largest increase in this disposition is in Marsaskala, which had at least three mixed-language house names pre-1977 (Razzett Bella Vista (razzett means farmhouse, MT/IT; Dar Frate Jacoba, MT/IT; and Aqua Gem, IT/EN) and since 1977 has had at least 11 more (El Kantaoui Flats, Tal-Bidni Farmhouse, Monte Carmelo Flats, Quċċa Garage, Farmhouse Sqaq il-Hrejba, Casa Abela, Gandoffla Court, Carina Tower Estate, Tal-Farmhouse and Sea La Vie). Żejtun is the locality reporting the largest number of such mixed language house names: 30 pre-1977 (e.g. Mamma Mia Lodge, IT/EN) and 38 post-1977 (e.g. Mater Grazzja Latin/MT).

## 6 Conclusion

Maltese house names act as potent symbols of identity: they provide a readily, freely and publicly available source

<sup>5</sup>The same observation could be made about the naming of males as Joseph in Malta. Joseph is still the most common name for males in Malta, followed by John, Mark and Mario: one out of every 47 Maltese-born children is called Joseph (Forbears, 2022). Writing on the occasion of the feast of St Joseph celebrated in Cospicua, Bonello (2003) reminds readers that there are four parishes dedicated to St Joseph in Malta (Birkirkara, Kalkara, Manikata and Msida) and one in Gozo (Qala). He adds that 'Joseph' was (at the time of writing) the first name of 63 diocesan priests in Malta (him included) and another 35 in Gozo, along with the Archbishop of the time. Note, however, that this situation is bound to change, since the practice of naming boys with this name has waned.

Locality	Percentage of Religious House Names		Total
	Pre-1977	1977-2022	
GHAXAQ	17.4	12.8	14.4
GŻIRA	12.9	13.8	13.3
MARSASKALA	10.6	8.1	8.3
MSIDA (including Swatar)	10.4	11.2	10.9
MOSTA	12.1	8.7	9.6
MTARFA	not applicable	12.0	12.0
QORMI	8.0	3.0	4.9
SENGLEA	26.6	26.6	26.6
ŻEJTUN	23.0	14.8	18.6
ŻURRIEQ (including Bubaqra)	35.7	14.3	15.1
Total	15.5% (875 out of 5,527 named homes)	9.9% (1,397 out of 14,156 named homes)	11.5% (2,272 out of 19,683 named houses)

**Table 5:** Prevalence of Religious House Names (by %): pre-1977 and post-1977.

of information about Maltese society. Behind the name of each and every house there is a sociological narrative which contextualises that particular name within a social, religious, political and linguistic context. Compared to house names in 1977, we have noticed a trend across most localities in Malta where house naming is less about the divine, religious and supernatural and more about the human, natural and immediate.

Nevertheless, many Maltese collectively still use house names as a way to express, maintain and affirm traditional local parochial allegiances, as manifest in other cultural practices such as festas and fireworks. The recourse to religious house names has declined (from around 16% to 10%); but the choice of 'St Joseph' as the most common house name may be redolent of a 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century class struggle. Perhaps some Maltese are perpetuating traditional parochial patronal and secondary saint house names as counterfoil to secularization and globalisation?

House naming as practice has persisted even during the construction spree of recent decades when "large tracts of the island, far from existing urban areas, were made available for real-estate development", resulting in housing units and estates "lacking either a sense of community or place... divorced from the identity of the place and its history" (Bianco, 2006).

For the students of sociology at the University of Malta, this exercise was conceived as an insightful and original experience of seeing social science 'come alive' and serve as a powerful source of information about Malta, its recent social transitions and its collective identities. The process of going to press is also part of the students' learning experience.

The rich databases that have made this research and its analysis possible are available in open access format, rendering themselves freely amenable to further research.

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The datasets from the 10 localities that form the basis of this article have been deposited in the data repository of the University of Malta (drUM) and are available (in open access format) at: [https://drum.um.edu.mt/articles/dataset/House\\_names\\_in\\_ten\\_Maltese\\_localities/24331825](https://drum.um.edu.mt/articles/dataset/House_names_in_ten_Maltese_localities/24331825).

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