

‘Events and community participation: an informal study of local and overseas events’

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After some 12 years involvement in community cultural development projects and events, I have a pretty good idea what makes for positive community participation at events. But I was looking for tangible proof- pictures and the first hand observations of community participants. A trip to Europe in May afforded me an opportunity to do just that.

I visited:

- Day of Our Lady 13th May, Fatima Portugal
- Feast of Saint Yves, 19th May, Treguier in Brittany, France
- Chippenham Folk Festival, Last weekend every May (26-29 May 2006) Wiltshire, England

The ‘methodology’ was mostly observation (informed by my own background in event management) and a few interviews with community participants

The aims were to explore factors behind the very marked levels of community participation in those events and to gather any insights useful to my own practice here in Australia

FATIMA

Background Story

On a Sunday 13 May 1917, 3 shepherds were tending their flock in the valley near Fatima when suddenly, a lightning bolt struck nearby revealing the image of a lady in radiant shimmering light. She told them not to be afraid. She was from the heavens and told them she would meet them there at the same spot, same hour on the 13th of every month for the next six months. Then she would tell them who she was and what she wanted

The children retold their encounter to their family and their local priest– there was great controversy. The children were thrown in jail and repeatedly interrogated by police and church at one point but returned to the spot each time with more and more believers in tow. The apparition appeared but only to the children but promised a sign that all could see on their last meeting. On the 13th of October amid torrential rain that turned all roads to mud, 50,000 pilgrims, many carried on stretchers and chairs returned to the spot for the last apparition and the promised miracle.

The lady told them she was the ‘immaculate conception’ the ‘immaculate heart’ and the ‘lady of the Rosary’. The war would soon be over but much prayer was needed to absolve the world of its sins and that she would like a chapel built on the spot. With that, the heavy skies parted and the sun appeared in the shape of a silver disc. For a quarter of an hour, it grew in size and moved around while spinning, sending rays of brilliant coloured light in all directions. The masses cried out, wept

and asked for forgiveness. Some reported spontaneous cures from paralysis, blindness and deafness etc And the legend of Fatima began.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

I say legend of Fatima because of the nature of perception. It is always subjective. We invariably perceive what we are trained to see. The interpretation of the events of the 13th October 1917 are themselves the result of enculturation. Today we might report it as an extra terrestrial encounter of the third kind. No matter, the site and ceremonies commemorate not only an extraordinary event in history but the belief in its ongoing power.

The central message of Fatima is world peace; an international context that brings people from every corner of the globe. But it also has a socio-political dimension. The lady appeared to 3 poor local children – not the bishop or the mayor. In 1917, it sent a very strong message to a highly stratified social order in Portugal ruthlessly maintained between both the church and the aristocracy up until 1911. It reaffirmed that everyone in the new fledgling republic was equal in importance under God.

EVOLUTION

In 1919 a chapel was built on the spot where the shimmering lady appeared. One has a sense of being a witness to history. The Basilica where the 3 shepherd are buried opened in 1953. In front lies an immense forecourt of 86,000 sq metres – 300,000 people now make their way there on critical dates like the 13th May and the 13th October each year.

TRADITIONS

Deep within Roman Catholicism lies the practice of martyrdom and self denial for the forgiveness of sins. Making long and arduous pilgrimages are part of this tradition. Fatima is a popular destination for many such pilgrimages but there are also pilgrimages within the precinct. The forecourt itself and surrounding reserves at Fatima are criss-crossed with paths which many pilgrims make on bended knee – only a few years ago, smooth concrete runners were added.

Wax offerings are nothing new in Christian traditions. At one point, one could say a prayer, light a candle and set it down in a large sand pit provided. Sheer numbers have long made this impossible at Fatima. Now there is a huge incinerator behind the small chapel. Beside it a number of candle sellers ply their wares- candles of every size. You buy the candles, light them say a prayer and throw them in.

Fatima also resonates with the long established Catholic tradition of asking special favours of particular saints. In pre-Christian times they were specific deities for specific needs. When Roman Catholicism took root, particular saints came to be associated with particular areas of life. Our lady is hardly a local saint – although there are many in Portugal. Lisbon claims St Anthony who is also the patron saint of Love and Marriage. However, Our Lady, invariably depicted as the Virgin Mary, appeared on that very spot. At Fatima, she is local and personal.

Supplicants ask a favour in return for a promised offering which to some extent depends on their means. For the poor, offerings might include a pilgrimage, a wax image or both. Pictured are wax figures of babies, legs, breasts. I saw a whole digestive tract once. These are offered in return for delivery of a healthy child or a cure from cancer etc

The procession has been a feature of Catholic life and special saints' days since early medieval times. And all festivals in Catholic Europe are based on religious events eg even the most flamboyant like Carnaval in Rio/ Mardi Gras. The religious festival usually takes the familiar form; High mass is followed and sometimes also preceded by a procession.

No saint walks alone – every time a saint's statue is moved or goes walk about from its chapel or church, it is accompanied by singing and praying believers. Like any other march, joining the procession is an affirmation of faith and identity that is both individual and collective. It has great personal meaning for the person who participates in it and it is also a mark of solidarity binding fellow walkers.

The procession concluding the big day's mass, however, is attended only by the hundreds of clergy and VIPs. For obvious reasons, the crowd of 300,000 stays put and waves Our Lady by with a sea of waving white hankies.

Mass is followed by the blessing for the sick which I find a surprisingly moving spectacle. Many people have come along way with great difficulty. Not everyone's prayer will be answered but every year, enough stories of miraculous cures emerge to keep the faith, hope and the mystery going.

Not everyone who comes to Fatima on the big day is there to pay a promise or pray. Many come mostly to feel part of something enormous and important in the national calendar. They come loaded with all the accouterments of elaborate picnics. People have been up half the night preparing these big family picnics.

OBSERVATIONS

Marketing is almost non-existent. Most Portuguese know the Fatima story. Attendance at the event as a result of word of mouth conversations. People talk about it in the months and weeks leading up, whether they will go, how and with whom.

Despite its massive size, there is no one coordinator. The secretariat that manages the site is led by the local diocese - it dominates the ceremonial aspects of the mass, which VIPs are invited and negotiates TV rights. Contractors are brought in to handle staging, power and sound for the mass- there are no other staged events. A few officials in reflective vests and uniformed local laws people handle crowds and traffic: Police handle the main approaches into the town.

Traffic was gridlocked when I arrived and we had to walk the last 2 kilometres to the Sanctuary - tough on older passengers and those carrying big picnic hampers. Beside us walked dozens of pilgrims, staff in hand, in their Nikes, finishing the last leg of their pilgrimage. Once there, people had to look to their own needs in terms of seating, sun protection and hydration. The forecourt is a large asphalt depression without any shade. I didn't see water fountains though there may have been one or two. People were selling bottled water at every entry point. There were public toilets in the buildings to either side of the forecourt but a crowd of this size would need to be prepared for very long queues. Yet no one complained about the chaos or the lack of adequate toilets, seating or free water etc. There was a tacit acceptance they were responsible for their own personal comfort.

FEAST OF SAINT YVES

Another saint's day, but as we have already observed, religious occasions are accompanied by many traditions and customs that have social, cultural and nationalistic dimensions. The Feast of St Yves is another classic example.

Saint Yves was born in 1253 in Minihy Treguier. The son of a country squire, he was a lawyer whose conciliatory approach, compassion and compelling defence speeches often in the service of the poor, made him a legend in his own lifetime. He is a Breton folk hero. St Yves is not only the patron saint of Brittany, he's the patron saint of lawyers and of the poor - a rather odd 'portfolio'.

TRADITIONS

The familiar features of traditional Catholic practice are strong in the Feast of St Yves: namely the public procession and the personal bargains forged between saint and supplicant. The chapel tells the story in many marble tablets of grateful recipients of St Yves' personal intercession on their behalf. All day, in the days leading up to the big day on the 21st, the chapel is visited by the faithful paying their respects.

St Yves is also a classical example of the medieval custom of praying to tangible relics –pieces or things belonging to the saints themselves. The mortal remains of the saint lie in a glass and gold reliquary case. It sits on display in his chapel within the Cathedral of St Tughual which dominates the city square of Treguier*.

** Treguier still bears many of the concrete features of its medieval past. The square is lined with medieval buildings but these now house banks, shops, schools and cafes in their very modern interiors. Unlike Fatima, there appears to be only one store dedicated to the selling of souvenirs. This is not a commercialised tourist spot. Every imaginable service from orthodontists to haberdashers, accountants to shoe repairers and BSL type stores can be found here. And St Yves' ancient granary at his nearby ancestral home 'Kermartin', is still part of a working dairy farm.*

PREPARATIONS

I arrived early wanting to observe through Friday to Saturday the last frantic preparations for the big event. But there were none - that I could see. I knew the square would be the site for Breton folk music and dance but no stages were going up.

Opposite my room, down by the river, a very compact amusement village -26 big rides, 26 sideshows, had quietly and independently set itself up on the narrow strip between road and river bank anticipating a crowd of 10,000. No event professionals directed their set up. And a major road closure had been minimally affected with one traffic sign and three free standing barriers. No one manned the closure. Traffic entering the city was down to one lane but there were no dramas.

Sunday 21 May. Feast of St Yves has arrived and it's raining. The buildings that line the square were all festooned with bunches of white and yellow flowers that hang from almost every window and door. Many windows also fly yellow and black banners with St Yves' family crest. Clearly

much of this was put up the night before or early that morning by shop keepers and residents. It was not 'organised' but the collective effect is spectacular. People take great delight in doing it as one might hang a Christmas wreath at one's door.

OBSERVATIONS

People arrive. Many come in anoraks and umbrellas. Lawyers and judges are decked out in legal academic robes. A few women in starched lace caps and black beaded dresses scurry past en route to the cathedral. And men in national costume also walk past with bagpipes under their arms and disappear into the Cathedral.

Outside the square is almost deserted but inside it's standing room only. Young and old, rich and poor rub shoulders. Breton mass was said earlier. This high mass is in French. The blessing of the wine and communion host involves a small ceremonial procession of lawyers bearing the traditional yellow and white flowers, incense, wine and bread on several platters led by a group of some eight altar girls. After communion the procession leaders pick up their parish standards and assemble in a line in the city square just outside the cathedral without any direction from event officials.

People file out to join the procession led by some eighteen bag pipe players in Breton costume. Behind them, people both young and old in Breton costume are followed by all the different Breton parish standards and their respective parish representatives. Behind come the bishop and clergy with the ancient statue of St Yves and the reliquary of his mortal remains carried aloft.

They are followed by a cortege of splendidly robed judges and lawyer and the general public. This pecking order quickly becomes mixed as people join at various points, singing in unison up the narrow Rue de Saint Yves. The rain returns and grows heavier as the wind picks up. It's freezing but more and more people join the procession, a few with walking sticks, some in parkas, others in black robes, children by the hand, parents pushing strollers walk slowly but steadily through the driving rain. We are a sea of umbrellas singing the three kilometres to the little church in Minihy Treguier. We are accompanied by the bagpipes up ahead and led by the sound of choristers over the loud speakers intermittently placed along the route. It's very moving and very beautiful.

When we reached the church at Minihy Treguier, the medieval statue of St Yves is returned to its original post. Many people unable to enter the small church visit the graveyard containing the now empty grave where St Yves was first buried. Hundreds of people take turns passing under its archway in the popular belief this represents a special blessing. And it's a little like saying I was here.

Then the procession returns with the reliquary in the same manner to the cathedral although the bag pipe players, now more at ease, drop in to their clubrooms en route! Unfortunately, the afternoon program of Breton music and dance that was to take place in the square had been cancelled due to bad weather. I left for a more sheltered folkloric concert further south that was not. Like many such concerts it ends with an invitation to the audience to join in.

Many public events are held in towns across Brittany in honour of their patron saint around that time of the year. Little is required in terms of marketing. The festival is now over 600 years old. People can anticipate, plan and discuss their participation with family and friends well in advance.

Participation is what such big community events like Feast of Saint Yves are really about – there are relatively very few spectators. Some join the procession because they have a pact with the saint and this is part of their offering or ‘pardon’. Others because he is the patron saint of their profession, an important tradition, in a profession steeped in tradition. Some join in because he is a distinctly Breton saint and they celebrate their distinct Breton identity and heritage. And many join in for all three reasons.

Importantly the colour, music, traditions and ceremony were provided by participants who need very little direction as to how, when and where to participate in such a well established traditional format. Like Fatima, it is essentially a very decentralized approach to event organization.

LOCAL EVENTS: GOOD FRIDAY EASTER PAGEANT

In Brimbank we also have many processions – it’s a very strong ‘imported’ tradition with the Croatian, Greek Orthodox and Maltese communities. But in Brimbank, participation is not community wide but limited to dwindling, ageing members of community organizations. The Good Friday Easter Pageant is the biggest and attracts a crowd of 3-4,000 but these are overwhelmingly just spectators. And each year, there are fewer participants and the organizers face mounting risk management costs. The brief part- essential road closure cost organisers many hundreds of dollars in Traffic Management.

CHIPPENHAM FOLK FESTIVAL

Chippenham is a small market town on the banks of the river Avon in Wiltshire. Chippenham Folk Festival, now in its 35th year, runs during the last week of May every year. The following year’s date is announced on the last page of each year’s program.

The 3-day festival was started by a group of local folk musicians and enthusiasts with significant funding from the English Folk Dance and Music Society. Over the past 11 years, however, it has had to fall back on its own resources through a mix of sponsorship and ticketed events. A full pass to all events is £50 per person- with half price concessions and children under 10 free. Tickets are £56 to £62 with a camp or caravan site (unserviced) by the river

The Chippenham Folk Festival is essentially a meet for Morris and other strains of English folk culture enthusiasts, mainly music and dance. The 2006 program boasted 200 festival events, 10 Ceilidh or bush dances, dozens of different Morris and English clog dance groups and featured 80 folk musicians. There were was an extensive program of some 97 workshop for various ages on various international styles of folk song, dance, crafts and storytelling. There were swap meets for folk music or dance moves and learning to play unusual folk instruments. Most workshops were run in local halls and school rooms. The ceilidhs were run in local pubs.

TRADITIONS

There are different traditions and histories or myths behind the many different ‘strains’ of Morris dancing. Some wear colourful hats with flowers or beautiful floral garlands to celebrate the coming of spring and the fertility of summer and autumn.

Morris dancers Angela and Bernard attended Chippenham Folk festival for the seventh year running. They love performing and seeing other groups perform; the different costumes, dance steps and 'shapes'. They particularly enjoy getting together with people they've met before, here and at other folk festivals. They are wearing coats of many coloured strips in their group's colour scheme.

They explain the coats of many colours go back to the 1500s. Beggars went from town to town dancing for their supper. Strips of brightly coloured cloth made their clothes more colourful though the practice may have also started as a way of patching up holes and adding warmth. The badges are a modern emerging 'tradition'. Angela and Bernard's costumes are studded with over 50 souvenir badges from all the festivals they have attended.

According to Morris dancers Davic and Andrew, the practice of blackening the face goes back to a collier strike in the districts of Shropshire and Wales – the men desperate to make enough money to feed themselves and their families, blackened their faces and thus incognito, took to the streets in their colourful garb to dance for loose change.

Others opt for a military look and marching music, flags and ribbons on staffs and uniform-inspired costumes in with red, white and blue. The brandishing of sticks in fighting dance routines go back to the Jacobite civil war.

Some wear clogs – black with red laces. The clog dancing hails from the Shropshire area. Twirling batons, decorated hoops or the white hankie are also used as dance props to distinguish the various Morris dancing groups. The white hankie dance commemorates the arrival of steam powered trains in Chippenham in the mid 19th century.

Then there are the dance groups based on the iconic court jester or fool who through the guise of childish naivety was free to speak 'inconvenient' truths and say the emperor had no clothes. North West English dancing is street dancing from the court jester era in England.

OTHER PARTICIPATION

As the festival has become a familiar fixture on the annual calendar, other groups in the community have also made their contribution to the colour and movement of the big event. The Chippenham Flower Arrangement Society sees the festival as a way to fundraise; between them a small team has made 132 floral arrangements for sale. Fundraisers Pat, Helen, Joan and Maria are pleased with their takings. Funds will go to putting a new roof on their parish church.

The local shopping centre has also opened specially for the day. Critically it's made its public toilets available for the festival.

OBSERVATIONS

Cultural Context at this festival is very strong. In their different ways the Morris dance groups celebrate

- Celtic mythology – seasons and pagan rituals
- historical events and local stories
- iconic figures like the jester (and free speech)
- regionality is emphasized in different colour schemes, costumes and dance routines

Despite a packed program of workshops and performances, there was only one rather small outdoor covered timber stage - with an MC and a front of house controlled sound system. The event is relatively very light on infrastructure and logistical needs because of the degree of support it now attracts from local council, schools and all the local cafes and pubs who see opportunities for mutual advantage. The latter provide the enormous number of venues for ceilidhs, workshops and folk culture forums. The local leisure centre now gets in on the act with an 'Aqualidh' a bush dance in the local swimming pool!

Also, most dance groups performed in the open air to live music at 3 designated clearings along Chippenham high street. No boundaries or special surfaces were required. The audience itself respected and maintained the clearing space for performers without incident or assistance from organizers. There were no stage managers or MCs. Groups arrived in the vicinity 15-20 minutes ahead of their programmed time. Stood or sat, watched and waited their turn. When it came, a member of their group walked into the centre of the clearing and with the appropriate flourish, introduced themselves, their dance group and their performance. The musicians took their places. and as the music started up, the dancers virtually leapt into their performance.

This contrasts with the heavily managed process of local community performance groups who are clearly much less self sufficient. This and a lack of live music means sound systems, MCs and stage managers are essential.

On the last big day – a public holiday, despite blustery wet weather, craft and market stalls moved in to line the high street. They were completely self-sufficient with their own marquees and tables. By agreement with high street traders, no food stalls were allowed in. Local cafes and pubs did very well.

The festival concluded with a half hour parade of the hundreds of folk performers that had taken part in the festival. Despite inclement weather the Morris groups made their way down the street to live music, stopping every 100 metres or so for a brief performance and then dissolving into the crowd as they reached the end of the high street.

Nonetheless, the Chippenham Folk Festival is a sizeable undertaking for its organizers. There is the marketing campaign to advertise each festival's special attractions and to sell tickets! And the dozens of folk celebrities and Morris dance groups have to be accommodated. All that great social capital- so many stakeholders offering monetary and in kind support, is so very liaison intensive. The bulk of the work is undertaken on a voluntary basis by a Working Committee of nearly 50 and an Executive Committee of 9 mostly local townspeople and folk music enthusiasts.

THE LOCAL EXPERIENCE

This sits in contrast to the Brimbank Festival. After a hiatus of 5 years the big municipal festival had to be extensively marketed just to let people know it was on. We had:

- flyers
- big full colour adverts
- pull outs in Council's community newsletter
- billboards
- banners
- website
- an 8 page wrap around feature in the local paper
- radio pointers
- programs

And in comparison to the events I observed overseas, there is so much more liaison and risk management needed around:

- siting and access for carnival rides and infrastructure -stages and marquees
- traffic management and parking – a truck load of signage and a small army of volunteers and trained staff were needed. We had to notify all affected residents by letter drop
- the provision of power, water, marquees, tables, chairs and lighting to stall holders
- public liability cover for every contractor, supplier, performer
- provision to the festival public of :
 - Shade and UV cream ,
 - toilets (1to every estimated 250 punters),
 - free drinking water

- all legal requirements.

There is nothing extraordinary in what I have listed – I've worked on other local events and it's much the same. The Brimbank Festival ran smoothly with good attendances **but**, and this is my central point, without the advantage of a well established festival date and meaningful festival traditions, community participation at an event is always going to be limited. Festival goers are reduced to mere spectators. The majority of visitors have a little look around and depart after an hour or two. No matter how amazing the program and event organization, so many of our festivals can be mostly detached 'spectator-driven' experiences.

The real wonder of the three events I visited is the sense of being part of things. Participants outnumber spectators. And they stay for the duration. Festivals – the word itself derives from the word 'party', are about being a party to an event. Partygoers make the party. Festival goers should make the festival!

The preparations made by people (rather than the event organizers) for the events I visited, the decorating or cooking, the dressing up, the dancing, the joining in - singing and walking together, observing little quaint and symbolic rituals, are where the real enjoyment lies for individuals – and it's also where the social value really lies for communities.

LEARNINGS

So in summarizing, we cannot call upon ancient history or local customs- yet! However we can try to plan events around dates, local stories or experiences that have real meaning for our communities. Events need a WHY?

And like the waving of white hankies or darting under St Yves old monument or the festival badges worn by Folk festival veterans, traditions start somewhere. It is possible to come up with activities, that over time can develop meaning or relevance to a place, time, theme or story.

And we also need to make room for community participation. In a bid to put some of my new enthusiasm into practice, we designed one of our stages at the Brimbank Festival for community participation. We constructed a dance floor at ground level in front of a fairly low covered stage.to bring performers and audience closer together.

The results spoke for themselves. People had a great time. But of course it's a very small step and we have along way to go. Managing the risks are an important consideration. The community participation stage gave me a couple of sleepless nights. The ground underneath was not uniformly level. We did our best to bevel the edges at ground level. I drove my production manager crazy and went over every inch of that dance floor. I also asked the MC to caution everybody repeatedly to mind their step.

Community participation at events is helped enormously if the festival date and venue are the same each year (and less marketing is needed). Over time people can anticipate and plan for the event in their social calendar. But marketing needs to be more than creating awareness of the event and fun stuff to see. Events need to make connections to issues, stories and/or events dear to people's hearts.

Events are organic. They need time to grow, take root and evolve. Over time, more stakeholders bring in more resources, add size and diversity to the event. This can also make for savings in infrastructure. Like all community cultural development, ongoing and long term commitment is essential to this critical mass of interdependent relationships.

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