
BIRD SHOOTING AND TRAPPING IN MALTA: A TRADITIONAL SPORTS?

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Whether bird shooting and trapping are traditions and whether they can be justified, are two different questions. For an activity to be accepted, it does not have to be traditional. On the other hand, traditional activities may become unacceptable as the values of society change. Even so, one has to establish whether what some people call 'traditional' is in fact traditional.

Hobsbawm states that "“Traditions” which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented. “Invented tradition” is taken to mean a set of practices which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.”¹

Hunters and trappers frequently claim that their pastimes are 'traditional sports', hence they are more than justified in practising them. They claim that man was always a hunter. If man was always a hunter, all men should be hunters, not just in Malta but worldwide. As it is, hunters are a small minority of any population. Table 1 shows statistics for some European countries. Malta has the highest density of shooters and the highest percentage of the population who own a shooting licence. Yet, the number of hunters is under 5 per cent of the population, a far cry than what it should be if the 'man the hunter' instinct is anything to go by.

Hunting in Malta's History

A cursory glance through Malta's history is sufficient to show that the claim that hunting is a traditional sport is unfounded. Any hunting or trapping which may have taken place was for food, not for sport.

Professor Evans noted that people in the first eight separate phases in the prehistoric occupation of these Islands had no metal for tools and

1. Hobsbawm, E., 'Introduction: Inventing Tradition' in Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T. (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge 1992, 1.

	Population (1990 figures)	Shooting licences	% of population with shooting licence	number of licences/ 100km ²
Italy	57,512,000	1,500,000	0.2%	498
France	56,647,000	1,850,000	0.3%	336
Greece	10,038,000	50,000	3.5%	265
Malta	352,430	16,760	4.8%	5312
Luxembourg	366,000	2,600	0.7%	100
UK	57,000,000	200,000	0.3%	87

Table 1

weapons.² He also states that, once the sea separated Malta from Sicily, there could have been little attraction for hunting societies, even if these had means of crossing the sea, which is in itself doubtful.³ Both Evans⁴ and Bonanno⁵ support the theory that the first societies in Malta were already farmers who brought with them domestic animals and supplies of seed for cultivation.

The fact that the only weapons that may have been used for hunting were only some sling stones and two spear heads, indicates that hunting was not an important activity in prehistoric Malta. This view is further strengthened by the lack of finds of wild animal bones and the lack of pottery incised with birds and wild animals.

There is almost no information about hunting before the fourteenth century, except for falconry. Falconry was the hallmark of the noble classes in the Middle Ages and the Maltese nobility had petitioned the king to allow them to keep falcons 'as in Malta there was nothing to do, except to go hawking.'⁶

Prior to the arrival of the Order of St John, the Maltese lived a meek existence and it is unlikely that they had the time and means for hunting. In the earliest known description of Malta, dated 1536, Jean Quintin d'Autun noted that the Maltese cultivated cotton and cumin and that they

2. Evans, J.D., *Ancient Peoples and Places MALTA*, London 1959, 29.

3. *Ibid.*, 39.

4. *Ibid.*, 45.

5. Bonanno, A., 'A socio-economic approach to Maltese prehistory the temple builders' in *Malta Studies of its heritage and history*, Malta 1986, 20.

6. Mifsud, A., 'Sulla caccia in Malta nel passato', *Archivum Melitensis*, III (1917), 118.

fed also on thistle and used cow's dung for the baker's oven.⁷ In his extensive description, Quintin d'Autun does not mention anything about hunting. Over two hundred years later, Baron Riedesel noted that the diet of the Maltese consisted of 'bread, pepper, onions, and anchovies.'⁸

Under the Order of St John edicts regulating hunting were issued. Most of these edicts stated that no one could hunt without a licence from the Grand Falconer. Large areas of land as well as the hunting of partridges and hares were declared as reserved for the Grand Master. Trespassing, the disturbance of nests of partridges, as well as the collection of firewood from reserved areas, were heavily penalized.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the standard of living of local people, although improved, was still miserably low and remained so for a long time. In 1804 De Boisgelin wrote that 'The Maltese are remarkable sober; a clove of garlic, or an onion, anchovies dipped in oil, and salted-fish, being their most usual diet. On great festivals they eat pork.'⁹ In 1870 the noted naturalist Andrew Leith Adams described the Maltese as 'olive oil and pickled-fish eating islanders.'¹⁰

Bird meat seems to have been a welcome addition to people's diet and Adams noted that the 'poulterers' shelves are stocked with all manner of birds, great and small.'¹¹ At the same time Charles Wright, an ornithologist, noted that all kinds of birds 'from an eagle to a nightingale are sent to the market as game.'¹² These observations show that a mere 120 years ago people caught birds for food, not for sport. So much for the 'sporting tradition'. Needless to say, bird stuffing became popular even more recently. Fridges and deep freezers were uncommon even during the first half of this century.

Increase in shooting licences

A better standard of living meant that guns and cartridges came within the reach of more people. Better conditions of work, such as the

7. Vella, H.C.R., *The earliest description of Malta (Lyons 1536) by Jean Quintin d'Autun*, Malta 1980, 39.
8. Cavaliero, R., *The Last of the Crusaders*, London 1960, 89.
9. De Boisgelin, L., *Ancient and Modern Malta*, London 1804, I, 78.
10. Adams, A.L., *Notes of a Naturalist in the Nile Valley and Malta*, Edinburgh 1870, 108.
11. *Ibid.*, 90.
12. Wright, C.A., 'A Fourth appendix to a list of birds observed in the Maltese Islands', *The Ibis*, 1870, 493.

introduction of the forty-hour week, and more holidays, gave people more free time. Shooting provided many with a manly activity which was easy to follow and which gave them a certain status in their respective peer groups.

The increase in the number of hunting licences is a clear indication that hunting is anything but traditional. In 1902 there were 1709 hunting licences. The number increased to 5138 by 1968. The average increase over 66 years was of 51 licences per year.

The number of shooting licences started to soar in the 1970s when Malta experienced rapid and significant changes in standards of living. Between 1968 and 1981 there was an average increase of 446 licences per year while the number of licensed shooters stood at 10,953. In 1989 the number of shooting licences stood at 16,133, an average increase of 647 licences per year.¹³

The population growth between 1985 and 1990 was of 5 per cent, yet the increase in the number of shooting licences was of 39.84 per cent. The biggest percentage increase was in Gozo, where the number of shooting licences increased by 8.6 times more than the population.

Bird Trapping

De Soldanis,¹⁴ in the mid-1700s, mentions trapping sites for turtle doves, falcons, short-toed larks, and pigeons. Nets were more efficient than guns and it is not surprising that people used them to catch birds. However, their use was very restricted as people worked hard for long hours to earn a miserable living, and although birds were a welcome addition to their diet, they had no time to spare trying to catch them.

Antonio Schembri, the nineteenth-century pioneer of Maltese ornithology, does not mention anything about bird trapping.¹⁵ It was Wright who, in 1864, stated that trapping was the favourite pastime of country people adding that 'the village priest, whose occupations and duties afford him an abundance of idle time, pursues it with great assiduity.'¹⁶

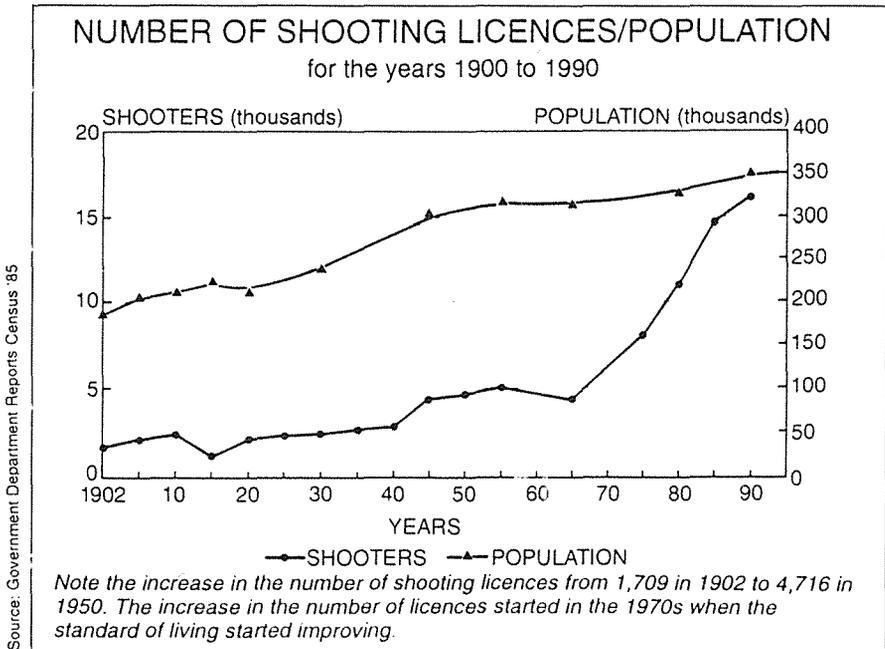
Finch-trapping is another side-effect of the improved standard of living. Besides the lack of free time, every patch of soil was cultivated and

13. Reports on the workings of Government Departments.

14. National Library of Malta, MS 143 (M) 1.

15. Schembri, A., *Catalogo ornitologico del gruppo di Malta*, Malta 1843, 136.

16. Wright, C.A., 'List of the birds observed in the islands of Malta and Gozo', *Ibis* 1 (6) 1864, 48, 138.



valuable agricultural land could not be wasted simply to accommodate a trapping site. Today, many trapping sites are situated on arable land. The number of trapping sites spiralled over the past forty years. In places such as Ghar Lapsi, trapping sites practically touch one another. There were a mere three trapping sites there in the 1950s.¹⁷ In Gozo there were less than 100 finch trapping sites in 1944;¹⁸ now there are over 1,600.¹⁹

Shooting and Folklore

The fact that shooters and trappers are practically absent from Maltese folklore implies that shooting and trapping are not really ingrained cultural attitudes. There is hardly any mention of hunting, except in ornithological works of the late 1800s and, occasionally, in travellers' accounts of the same period.

Hunters feature very sparingly in local paintings. The earliest known

17. Victor Mamo (personal communication).

18. Joe Attard Tabone (personal communication).

19. Fenech, N., *Fatal Flight, the Maltese obsession with killing birds*, London 1992, 111.

watercolour of a hunter is found in a treasury manuscript of the mid-eighteenth century. The way the hunter is dressed shows that he is unlikely to be a Maltese. In the watercolour of the Grand Falconer by Zimelli (c. 1770), a barefooted hunter holding a rabbit is seen in the background. This may be the oldest drawing of a Maltese hunter. In the Ġgantija watercolours by C. Brockdorff (c. 1830), hunters can be seen in three different paintings. But again, the way they are dressed shows that they are unlikely to be Maltese.

The earliest collections of proverbs of De Soldanis²⁰ and Vassalli²¹ list nine proverbs which mention birds. Of these only two mention bird trapping. These imply the use of vertical nets which were set and left unattended. Trapping by the use of clap nets, although known to exist in the mid-eighteenth century, became widespread over the last forty years.

The contemporary works of Aquilina²² and Manduca and Mifsud²³ list 58 proverbs which mention birds. Of these, 16 are related to hunting and trapping. Although the fact that the proverbs related to hunting are absent from the earliest works does not necessarily mean that they did not exist, the fact that they escaped the authors' attention could signify that they were not commonly used, if they existed at all. In all probability, the proverbs listed by Aquilina²⁴ and subsequent works came into being during this century.

Religion and hunting

The 'tradition' where shooters fire blank shots in honour of saints is an invented tradition. Shooters say that this tradition dates from the time of the Knights, yet this practice was introduced at St Julians in the early 1980s.²⁵ The use of firearms for salutes, known as *feu de joie*, was a prerogative of the military and had no connections with Church festivities. There is no mention of and such salute in a recently published 344-page

20. Gatt, E.C., 'The Semitic element in the "Damma" of Agius de Soldanis,' Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Malta, 1984.
 21. Vassalli, M.A., *Motti, aforismi e proverbi Maltesi*, Malta 1828, 93.
 22. Aquilina, J., *A comparative dictionary of Maltese proverbs*, Malta 1972, 694.
 23. Manduca, J.S. & G. Mifsud, *Il-Qawl iqul*, Malta 1989, 316.
 24. Aquilina, 694.
 25. Azzopardi, A.E., 'Is-salut tal-kaċċaturi' in *San Ġiljan Programm tal-festa*, (ed. A. Borg), Malta 1990, 21.
- Bugeja, J., 'Salut lil San Ġiljan mill-kaċċaturi,' *Il-Passa*, Ottubru 1992, 13.

book which marks the 100th year of St Julians as a parish.²⁶

Shooters also mention the legend of Our Lady of the Grotto, first recorded in a 1670 manuscript, which talks of two hunters who, on their way home, saw a rabbit entering a cave. One of the hunters went after the rabbit but suddenly felt very tired and fell asleep. The other hunter left as he thought his friend had died. To his surprise, he saw him coming out of the cave fifteen months later. At first he thought he was seeing a ghost and was more surprised to hear his friend say that he had slept for a few hours when he knew he had been missing for over a year.²⁷ The sleeping hunter said he had dreamt that he had seen a lady holding a child and felt certain sweet feelings which made him conclude that he had seen the Virgin Mary.

Without going into the merits of the legend, which talks about a dream or an apparition, one can interpret it as one in favour of nature protection, since the hunter was made to sleep so that the rabbit could escape death!

Even the other saints whom shooters claim are their patrons have messages for shooters to change their way of life. St Hubert is said to have seen a deer with a cross between its antlers, and the deer told him to change his lifestyle.²⁸ The legend of St Julian also has a similar message as the saint changed his life when, on his return from a hunting trip, he killed his sleeping parents by mistake. St Julian than changed his lifestyle and started building hostels for the poor.²⁹

The Myth of Tradition

Bird shooting cannot simply be called a tradition because some people have been killing birds for a long time. As the statistics of shooting licences show, shooting gained in popularity following the Second World War. Most shooters came from the upper classes and saw hunting as a prestigious pastime. The increase in their number has nothing traditional about it and is not related at all with demographic growth.

Moreover, one cannot say that hunting is traditional when non-traditional means, such as breech-loading and repeater shotguns, efficient shotgun cartridges, electronic bird calls, and plastic decoys as well as cars, rubber dinghies, and fast motor-boats and other non-traditional

26. Fiorini, S. (ed), *San Giljan mitt sena Parrocċa*, Malta 1992.

27. Fsadni, M., *Our Lady of the Grotto, priory, church and sanctuary*, Dominican Publications, Rabat 1980, 41.

28. 'San Umbertu - patron tal-kaċċaturi', *Il-Passa*, November 1990, 7.

29. Fiorini, 3-8.

paraphernalia are used. Even if one were to accept that hunting is a tradition, traditions may well be wrong and there is no valid reason for perpetuating them.

The Hunting Instinct

Some shooters say that hunting is natural, that it is an instinct. Azzopardi states that 'one of the morphological adaptations of hunters are forward-looking eyes as present in sharks, cats, and hawks, while the hunted have eyes on the side of their heads so as to have a wider range of vision as a protection against surprise attack'. Human beings have forward-looking eyes: hence we are hunters, he argues.³⁰

Such a statement shows a profound ignorance of elementary biology. Sharks and hawks do not have forward-looking eyes. Jumping spiders and wolf spiders, which are hunters *par excellence*, have eyes all round the head. They in turn are hunted by both birds and certain wasps. So much for the argument that the direction in which the eyes face, distinguishes the hunters from the hunted.

Human beings have forward-looking eyes for ancestral reasons - we are primates. Primates originally lived in trees and needed stereoscopic vision to be able to judge distances carefully, as they moved from branch to branch. Primates are omnivorous, not primarily carnivorous, as real hunters are.

Cats and other raptorial predators, such as wolves and weasels, have many adaptations for hunting. They have speed for running down prey, sharp claws for catching, and incisive canines for tearing flesh. These adaptations, as well as other physiological and morphological ones, are present in natural predators but are absent in man.

Even the claim that hunting is an instinct is unfounded. Primitive man was never a hunter but a hunter-gatherer, and one cannot speak of a hunting instinct with reference to man. The instinct was to obtain food, not to hunt. Even if one were to agree that hunting was natural, being natural is not a good enough reason why it should be performed in our times. We often have natural desires to do a number of things, but some of them have to be controlled in society.

Sport Hunting

Some argue that shooting is a sport and, in a romantic vein, try to describe the thrill of the kill after having stalked the bird with a dog since the

30. Azzopardi, A.E. *Fatal Flight - the facts*, Malta 1992, 4.

very first light of day. Such shooters usually say that their fun arises not from killing the bird but in seeing their dog rushing, pointing, and, finally, flushing a bird from thick cover. But, in all honesty, the real fun, the climax, is not when the bird is flushed and takes flight, but when it is shot. If the fun is really to see the dog stalk, point, and flush, and not to kill, then there would be no need to shoot the bird when it takes to the wing. Indeed, there would be no need for shooters to carry a gun at all!

Others argue that shooting is an important source of revenue for the Government. A leading article in *Il-Passa* (a monthly paper for shooters and trappers) stated that between 1985 and 1989 over Lm690,000 was paid as duty on items related to bird shooting, such as shotguns, loaded cartridges, cartridge cases, lead shot, and gunpowder.³¹ This implies a Government revenue of less than Lm140,000 a year from material which is used primarily for killing birds. A low price which does not compensate for the millions of birds which are shot and trapped each year without taking into account the unquantifiable loss of earnings from decline in competitiveness resulting from loss of work (many shooters and trappers take long periods of leave and sick leave to practise their pastimes), damage to property, pollution from spent lead shot and cartridges, nuisance and inconvenience caused to the non-shooting public, the toll on migratory birds, and so forth.³² The costs of what the Government loses from hunting-related activity works out to be over twice of what it earns.

Among the excuses used to justify shooting, the commonest one is that shooting takes place almost world-wide. Even if it were so, hunting is not practised anywhere as it is in the Maltese Islands. Nowhere is bird-shooting so uncontrolled. Nowhere in the world are birds killed for the thrill of the kill, for no purpose other than machismo.

We are living in a country and in an age where no one needs the protein from hunted birds or animals. Shooting is not a sport; it is a pastime, done solely for fun. The pleasure is in the killing and killing can never be allowed to become a pleasure in a civilized world.

Shooters deny that their fun is derived from killing birds. George Bernard Shaw had very strong ideas about this: 'the sportsman shooting quite skillfully and coolly without the faintest sense of murderous

31. 'Qed jinxtraw 19 il-senter kull ġimgha', *Il-Passa*, December 1990, 1-2.

32. Fenech, N. 'Socio-economic aspects of bird hunting in the Maltese Islands.' Paper presented at the UNSRID conference on The Social Dimensions of Environment and Sustainable Development, Foundation for International Studies, Valletta Malta, 22-25 April 1992.

excitement, and with no personal feeling against the birds, is really further from salvation than the man who is humane enough to get some wickedness out of his sport. To have one's fellow feeling corrupted and perverted into a lust for cruelty and murder is hideous; but to have no fellow-feeling at all is to be something less than even a murderer. The man who sees red is more complete than the man who is blind.³³

One may, or may not, agree with Shaw's way of thinking. But his words may give plenty of food for thought: 'Even as it is, there are now so many other pastimes available that the chic of killing is becoming more and more a disgrace to the chooser. The wantonness of the choice is beyond excuse. To kill as the poacher does, to sell or eat his victim, is at least to act reasonably. To kill from hatred or revenge is at least to behave passionately. To kill in gratification of a lust for death is at least to behave villainously. Reason, passion, and villainy are all human. But to kill, being all the time quite a good sort of fellow, merely to pass away the time when there are a dozen harmless ways of doing it equally available, is to behave like an idiot or a silly imitative sheep.'³⁴

Shaw was writing at the turn of this century – a time when the pastimes available could not match what is available now. Today hunters have clay pigeons and guns which shoot infra-red beams at moving targets, thus avoiding the use of lead and noise pollution. There are also computer games which enable shooters to kill as many birds as they like on their computer screens, without depleting the natural populations.

Hunting is not really a tradition and if, by any stretch of imagination, it is qualified as a tradition, it still cannot be justified. Bird shooting and trapping should disappear gradually. This should be a natural step in the evolution of mankind. If not for the sake of birds, we have to do it for the sake of mankind.

In our day and age, where building sprawl and roads have taken up close to 20 per cent of our Islands, and with a population density of over 1000 people per square kilometre, what sense does it make to allow people to roam about with guns with ranges of over 50 metres?

33. Shaw, G.B., Preface in Salt, H.S., *Killing for sport, essays by various writers*, London 1915, xxxii.

34. *Ibid.*, xxxiii.