

Birth taboos (3)

THE WAY OUT OF A QUESTION

Sex has always been an integral part of human life. It is one of man's basic biological needs and it is the means which makes the propagation of the species possible. Naturally, it figures prominently in most "primitive" ritual, custom and art. The pregnant neolithic mother goddess is literally the apotheosis of the power of femininity, the divine symbol of fertile Mother Earth. In folk consciousness elaborate *rites de passage* surround birth and other life crises. The primitive thought idiom invests the sexual act with magical powers.

With the advent of Christianity the ritualistic element of sexuality fell into disrepute. The new religion of course stressed the importance of the soul, and the body was largely looked upon as the major hindrance to salvation. Thus, sex was strongly tabooed. The figure of the pregnant woman was tabooed. Intricate and ingenious ways and means were employed to conceal the physical evidence of pregnancy on a woman, especially from children.

According to Maltese folk practice, all information about sex must be kept secret. Propagation of knowledge about sexual matters, especially to children, must be avoided. At least such was the case up to a decade ago.

Women in their pregnancy period used to take all the possible measures to make sure that no information is yielded about this phenomenon, which might generate dirty thoughts, unnatural feelings and morbid curiosity, especially in the young set. Women who were pregnant for the first time usually were somewhat ashamed of being pregnant, knowing that their mothers and relatives knew that they had made love with their husbands. These undertones of shame often made communication about the subject difficult. Speaking on this subject was limited to the female sex. Their culturally inherited knowledge was transmitted to each other in the form of whispered advice. The close relation existing between mother and daughter also helped in the propagation of information regarding this transitional period.

During this period, especially when the woman's physical appearance becomes ample proof that she is with child, seclusion is important, as the proverb states: *Mara b'tarbija ma tesagħhiex ta' Brija*, "A woman with child does not find *Ta' Brija* road big enough for her".

The traditional faldetta, a spacious black satin

headgear, helped a lot in keeping this phenomenon secret. It helped in concealing the figure of the pregnant woman. This is seen in this proverb: *Mara bl-ghonnella qatt ma taf x'ghamlet u x'kellha*, "You can never tell what a woman wearing a faldetta has done or has had." The code of honesty bound all. The clothes put on were such that the figure of the pregnant woman was completely concealed. This prudish mentality surrounded woman all her life. The fear of "sin" and "scandal" pervaded her behaviour.

In contrast with all these observations and secrecy, with which pregnancy was attended, Shidyaq's 'al-Wasitah fi Ma'rifat Ahwal Malitah said:

"When a Maltese woman is pregnant she struts and thrusts her abdomen that all the passers by may notice her."

Although Shidyaq's account seems to be prejudiced, proverbs and sayings show that the Maltese woman is very proud of her procreative power, hence such behaviour as referred to by Shidyaq's cannot be altogether eliminated.

Expectant women used to prepare the *ghiež*, the baby's trousseau, long before the arrival of the baby. Usually the baby's trousseau used to be ready at least four months before delivery. This usually consisted of *fustana*, *franella*, *twittija*, *harqa*, *qlejba* and two *qmejsiet*. These clothes used to be hidden somewhere out of reach so that the other children of the family would not see them and ask embarrassing questions. Women having their first baby used to buy their pushchairs long after they were married, otherwise the neighbours would begin scandal mongering.

The inquisitive nature of children, the "What-is-it?" reflex – the urge towards learning – as it is called by Pavlov, many a time makes them ask their mothers "embarrassing" questions. Where do babies come from?; Why has a certain woman suddenly grown fat?; How are babies born? The precautions taken to avoid such questions in the old days usually worked. Old people state that their children did not ask such questions. Today's younger mothers, however, state that children have become more "cunning" and ask more questions. In this situation mothers had their evasive answers and untrue statements ready to stop what they regarded as morbid curiosity. Or else they dodged the questions.



Maltese woman wearing the "faldetta" that concealed her "secret"

The answers given to the children have been fantastic – the product of transmission from one generation to another: *It-tfal jiġu bil-vapur*, "Children are brought on ships", falls under this category of fantastic ready-made answers to be given in this context. Other answers were of individual coinage. Certain communities had their own ready-made answers drawn from their environment: *It-tfal jiġu mill-Maqluba*, "Children are brought from *il-Maqluba*" is an answer which has no meaning to children outside Qrendi, where this karstic depression is found. Usually these evasive answers were the products of past ages. Hence certain topical references have passed out of popular usage. Thus "cradles", in which boys used to be found, are no longer in use today. Other answers show that they were of recent coinage. *Daħal il-konvoj*, "The convoy has entered harbour", as the inclusion of English words denotes, is of recent origin. Perhaps, we can say that the fear of imparting that knowledge, which goes against religion (moral values), was too strong to answer these

questions, since any other question put by children and adolescents were usually answered by adults. (All these views as held by children, about the creation and births of babies, are of great importance in psychopathology and in developmental psychology.)

The most widespread answer given to children, even today, is that they are brought on ships. Idiosyncratic ways of putting the answer differentiates one answer from another but only in certain minor details. Ships in the child's mentality are surely mysterious powers, bringing with them unknown things from abroad. Such an answer will surely be effective in reaching its required end, namely that of satisfying the insatiable curiosity of the child without at the same time giving him the right information.

The ship which brought a 12-year-old from Qrendi had various glass compartments behind which babies were placed to be seen by the mothers who wanted to buy one of them. It was coming from Africa. The ship which brought another boy from Mosta carried various bags, surrounded with flowers and blue or pink butterflies depending on the sex of the baby. Children from Selmun were brought by trawlers. Qormi children are told that they are brought to Malta on board Turkish ships. A friend of mine told me that when he was 13 years of age he still used to go near the coast at Marsascala watching out for some ship which might have been carrying babies.

Fear of imparting the relevant knowledge has always been at the back of these evasions and half-truths.

Babies are to be found among thistles and thorns. This answer, according to information gathered from Għaxaq, many a time led young children to search for babies in the fields. If the parents behave themselves there comes the Holy Spirit and brings with him a baby swaddled in clothes which he places near the window. At Birgu (Vittoriosa) a lotto draw will put in your possession a baby or two. A rocket brought to earth a young boy from Birżebbuġa, while another boy from Tarxien reached earth by means of a parachute. An aeroplane driven by Christ brought a young boy to his mother. A stork brought another child.

Certain individuals refer to various localities, villages or buildings as the places where children are brought from. Sometimes these buildings are the hospitals or their surroundings. A boy from Imqabba, was told that he was found by his mother near the *Tal-Hniena* Chapel, near *il-Maqluba*, in a cradle hanging between two trees. Another boy, this time from Santa Venera was found near a stream. Children from Qormi sometimes are found at the *Infetti*, "Contagious Disease Cemetery", whilst children from Rabat, Gozo, were told that they were brought from Saint George, where there is a hospital. *Il-Majjistra gabet lit-tarbija*, "The midwife brought

the baby”, used to be a most common way-out of a question.

Il-Bambin tana tarbija, “Baby Jesus has given us a baby” has been the most acceptable answer given by the Maltese, because it is nearest to Catholic beliefs, and at the same time a most effective answer with children. The traditional form of giving the message of a new born was: *Qaltlek ommi ejjew oqoghdu*, “My mother told you that you may come to visit her”. In this way the birth is not directly referred to.

(The taboo put on information regarding sex surely does not help in the educational process or the personality formation of the child. The pathogenetic danger concomitant upon some of these concepts becomes evident when we remember that the infantile concepts are generally not corrected through knowledge acquired later, but are merely covered up by it as many informants confirm by their behaviour.)

In our society this lack of information in the informal educational process and to some extent even in the formal educational process has led to great ignorance about the basic rules and attitudes

connected with these matters.

The taboo that surrounded the figure of the pregnant mother in Malta was the result of the Christian revolt against the overt sexuality of paganism. This taboo naturally tended to lead to dangerous sex repressions and inhibitions in the individual. We can add that although in its extreme form the attitude of our forefathers regarded sexuality as sinful, in its more normal form it entailed respect for the pregnant female – a respect that manifested itself in various folk methods that provided her with decorous privacy.

(to be continued)

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FURTHER READING

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The karstic depression at Qrendi where children used to be told that babies came from “Il-Maqluba”

