Folklore

Ġużè Cassar Pullicino

Malta and Gozo possess a rich legacy of folklore. They stand half-way on the land ridge that once joined Sicily to Africa, and their geographical position has influenced their history and traditions.

Besides reflecting the usages and ways of thought of the present, Maltese folklore preserves the soul of the past, embodying the mode of life and the beliefs and practices of preceding centuries. This national heritage of lore and tradition is the product of simple, psychological reactions to the historical environments and to the various culture contacts which our people have experienced in the past. At different times and by various routes, many people have come to these islands and dominated them for varying periods. Each ruling group – Punic, Roman, Arab, Norman, Swabian, Angevin, Aragonese, Castilian, the Knights of St John of Jerusalem and, lastly, the English – brought its own lore, language and way of life in its wake. Most of these left their imprint on local tradition and, in their turn, underwent changes in the process of adaptation to the conditions of the country and subsequent adjustment to the traditional pattern of Maltese life and thought. The result has been an extremely variegated form of folk-culture constituting a distinctive element of Malta's national identity.

Even a short stay in Malta will enable visitors – especially those from a Northern climate – to notice certain features of the local scene. They are struck by the compactness of the buildings, the absence of chimneys and slanting roofs, the prevalence of balconies. They will note an eye – the protective eye of Osiris – painted on the bows of Malta's characteristic *dgħajsas* and fishing boats. They may see the farmer using a primitive plough (M. *moħriet*), which is now fast going out of use, and the circular threshing floor (M. *qiegħa*) of hard trampled earth. They cannot fail to notice the rubble walls separating the fields, and the wayside shrines, niches and stone crosses. They will hear the cries of the hawkers at town or village festivals, and at the open-air markets held at Valletta and other localities. Besides, there are numerous items of local craft produce to choose from, including silver and gold filigree work, probably introduced into Malta via Sicily during the 17th century, and hand-made lace, which achieved a high degree of perfection in the 18th century and then, after a period of decline, was revived by Lady Hamilton Chichester and others in the 19th century. These and other aspects of the Malta scene, however, will not enable them to look into the heart of things or to understand the working of the Maltese mind in its various manifestations. It takes a much longer period to get into touch with the inner life of the people and discover the varied structure of their folklore as it has evolved in the course of centuries.

Birth and Infancy

Maltese tradition has preserved the memory of several rites of passage characteristic of a pre-industrial community. From the cradle to the grave a series of time-honoured customs marked the main events of human life. Many pious beliefs and practices were associated with the birth of a child. When the delivery was

difficult, the mother borrowed a withered plant known as *Il-Warda tal-Passjoni* (The Passion Flower) which was put into some water. Popular belief claimed that the mother was delivered of her child as soon as the branches of the dried plant opened out. The help and protection of certain saints – St Lukarda, St Blaise, St Raymond, St Spiridion of Corfu, St Calogero and St Victor – were especially invoked during childbirth. Delivery often took place in a small room known as *l-alkova*, 'the alcove', which served as a labour or delivery room.

The birth of a girl was not as welcome as that of a boy. It was considered advisable to have the baby baptized as soon as possible, one reason being that if, unfortunately, the child died before it was baptized it would go to limbo. When the christening took place within twenty four hours it was believed that a soul was freed from Purgatory. So long as the baby remained unbaptized it was not considered to be a Christian, but a Turk. In some localities, the unbaptized child was laid in the cot facing left. After the christening, however, the midwife could put the baby either on his back or facing right.

Up to the 16th century the Gallican rite of baptism by immersion was practised in some parishes. In 1575 Mgr Pietro Duzina, the Apostolic Visitor, prohibited the practice on account of its unhygienic effects. Traditionally, the first children are named after their grandparents, the deceased ones taking precedence over those still alive. A child born with a caul (M. *bil-borqom*) is believed to grow up exceptionally strong and invulnerable. Old fishermen will tell you that if you keep a piece of caul on you the sea will have no power over you, the reason being that the caul in reality forms part of another human being.

From the Child Health Clinics two interesting folk-beliefs were communicated to the present writer in 1945. At Mosta and Tarxien it was held that the mother of a newly-born baby has to eat a hen's neck and head on the day following childbirth; if she failed to do so the child would take more than three months to start keeping his head erect. The other belief was that the placenta or afterbirth (M. *is-sekonda* or *seħbitha*) must be left in the rain till it is washed away, or be buried in the soil and water poured on it; if this is not done the baby will suffer from skin eruptions.

Weaning generally took place when the child was twelve months of age, hence the saying: *It-tnax fattâm*, i.e. at the twelfth month one must wean the baby. To wean their young, mothers smeared their nipples with the juice of the aloe plant (M. *sabbara*) which tastes bitter.

To ward off the harmful effects of the evil eye, children are made to wear amulets in the form of a horn, a cowrie shell (M. *baħbuħa*), or a holy medal hung round the child's neck. Some blessed olive leaves and, up to a few years ago, a piece of candle used in church in Holy Week known as *xemgħa tat-tniebri*, 'candle of the Tenebrae', were also considered effective. On Easter Saturday, at Qormi, children who took an unduly long time to walk were made to stand up and to try and walk at the *Gloria*.

The child's hiccup was formerly cured by the mother with the utterance of the following lines, which were reputed to have the effect of transferring the child's hiccup to someone else:

Solluzzu buzzu,
Mur għand min jobgħodni;
'K m'għandix min jobgħodni
Erġ'ejja għandi.

O nasty hiccup,
Go to someone who hates me;
And if there's none who hates me
Return to me.

A similar Sicilian formula given by Giuseppe Pitrè runs as follows:

Suggiuzzu, sugguzzieddu,
Ramuzza ri funtana,
Vattinni ni to mamma,
Va' viri s'idda t'ama.
Si t'ama, statti dda.
S'un t'ama, veni cca.

Hiccup, little hiccup,
Little branch of the fountain,

Go to your mother,
See if she loves you.
If she loves you, stay with her,
If she does not love you, come here.

When the child loses his first tooth, he is urged not to leave it lying about but to bury it in a flower pot. It is believed that, as a new plant emerged from the flowerpot, so a new tooth emerges from the child's gum to replace the buried one.

These beliefs and practices are closely related to similar concepts and customs reported from North African and other Arabic-speaking countries (Morocco, Algeria, Palestine) as well as in Sicily and among some other Mediterranean people.

On the child's first anniversary a special ceremony, known as *quċċija*, is held. This is a special party to which relatives and friends are invited, and when the company is assembled, if the child is a boy, they give him articles such as corn and comfits, jewels, money, an inkstand, Rosary beads, a sword, etc., and if a girl, needles, silk, ribbon, and similar articles. The child's choice is thought to determine the profession or character he will develop when he or she grows up. If the boy chooses corn, it is a sign of generosity; if he prefers the inkstand, he is destined for trade or the Bar; if he seizes the sword, it is believed that he will become a soldier, and so on. This divination ceremony seems to be gaining favour once more among a wide circle of Maltese society.

Lullaby – Children's Rhymes

A traditional lullaby or cradle song survived up to some years ago. It runs into some sixteen stanzas making up an exquisite piece of popular composition, rich in imagery and poetic feeling, opening with the following lines:

Orqod, orqod, ibni, orqod
Fil-benniena tal-ħarir ...Laam!
Dik ommok il-Madonna
Missierek Ġesù Bambin ...Laam!

Sleep, sleep, little child
In the cradle made of silk ...Sleep!
The Holy Virgin is thy Mother,
The child Jesus is thy Father ...Go to sleep!

The Christian inspiration and wording of this lullaby links it up with similar compositions in nearby Sicily, but the word *Laam* or *Naam*, from Arabic *nam* 'to sleep', betrays also an earlier Semitic influence.

Nursery rhymes introduce the child to the first wonders of life. Children experience their first journey on their parents' knees as they are rocked to and fro to the accompaniment of a special rhyme beginning with the lines:

Banni bannozzi,
Ġej it-tata ġej ...

Clap, clap your hand
For Daddy's coming ...

which closely resemble those of the corresponding Sicilian rhyme

Manu manuzzi ...
Veni lu tata ...

as well as the English exhortation

Clap hands! Clap hands!
Till Daddy comes home ...

Very few children's rhymes reach up to the standard of the lullaby mentioned above. A few, however, are quite serious in tone and content. One well-known stanza, in particular, reflects the people's preoccupation with the lack of sufficient rain in Malta:

Agħmel, xita, agħmel,
Ħalli jinbet il-ħaxix;
Il-ħaxix intuh lill-mogħża
U l-mogħża ttina l-ħalib;
Għandi nagħġa mmur nirgħaha
Bis-suf tagħha nagħmel qmis.

Rain, rain, rain,
That the grass may grow;
We shall give the grass to the goat
And the goat will give us milk;
I'll take out my sheep to graze
And I'll make me a shirt of her wool.

Incidentally, this presents a sharp contrast to the English nursery rhyme in which English children drive off rain far away to Spain:

Rain, rain, go to Spain,
Never show your face again.

In a few rhymes one can trace a definite link with a probable Semitic stream of

thought. Thus, the opening lines of a rhyme heard at Birkirkara during the last war, i.e.

Tat-tila tula!
X'kilt illejla?
– Ħobż u ġbejna!
Minn fuq?
– Terz ilma ...

Thou of the long dress!
What have you eaten tonight?
– Bread and a small cheese.
And after that?
– A measure of water ...

have a direct relationship with the following *rengaine populaire* from Lebanon given by M. Feghali in his *Syntaxe des Parlers Arabes actuels du Liban* (Paris, 1928, p.467):

Wáin ként el-bârha
'énd 'éhté sâlḥa
'aš tá 'mtak
Ǧébnè mâlḥa

Where were you yesterday?
At my sister Salha's house.
What did she give you to eat?
Salted cheese.

Children's Games

One can still find a diversity of traditional games among children of school age. It is a pity that Maltese games of the playground type do not figure in the organised play activities of the pupils. These are boys' games and girls' games, and in many instances counting out and other rhymes add to the zest of the games. Quarrels between children at play are made up by crossing the little fingers of their right hands while they say:

Paċi kulaċi,
Il-Madonna fuq rasi;
Kristu jaħbini
U l-Madonna ssibni;
Kristu fuq l-altar
Qed ibierek it-tfal żgħar.

Peace between us,
The Holy Mother over my head;
Christ hides me away
And the Holy Mother finds me;
Christ on the altar
Blesses the little children.

Some games show signs of native freshness and vitality, while others reflect outside influences, mainly Sicilian, and, in more recent ones, English. The very names by which some games are known, such as *faraboj* (It. *fare a boia*), *it-tiġieġa l-għamja*, 'the blind hen', recalling the Italian game *fare a mosca cieca* and the English *blind man's buff*, immediately suggest the probable origin of the games. In the case of the game known as *ċiknatur* a French origin has been suggested, from *chacun a (son) tour*, 'every one in his turn'. Furthermore, under direct British influence other games have been assimilated and given a Maltese garb. Such are the games known as *Master*, explained by J. Aquilina in his *Maltese-English Dictionary* (Vol.2, 1990, p.790) as "a game consisting in throwing a heavy flattish stone at a small standing stone with coins placed on it or under it", *gardinaw* (Eng. guarding out?), the English game 'hopscotch', a popular pavement game in both towns and villages of Malta and Gozo under the name of *passju*, and the words *kikks*, uttered in a game of marbles when one marble hits another, and *ġakk* (pl. *ġakkijiet*) [Eng. jack], a marble used in a children's game. In addition, the use of such words as *gastell*, 'castle' (Sic. *casteddu*) in games involving the use of glass beads or nuts, or of *brilli*, 'skittles' (It. *birilli*), no less than certain game-rhymes with foreign sounding words such as *siamo sette* and *in giro in giro ngella* suggest earlier or long-standing contacts and links with Sicily and Italy.

First Communion and Confirmation

In a predominantly Catholic country such as Malta, First Communion and Confirmation constitute important rites of passage, providing occasions of great joy both to the children receiving these Sacraments and to their parents. A special dress is worn for the occasion. After the church ceremony, the children go to the

local premises of the MUSEUM, a lay religious organization which prepares children for these Sacraments, where they are given breakfast, a bag of sweets and a small present. For Confirmation they receive, instead, an ice cream and sweets. A larger party, attended by relatives and friends, awaits the children when they get home. Holy pictures with the child's name printed on the back are distributed on both occasions. The child is usually taken to a photographer and the photograph is then framed and put in a prominent place and prized ever after as a happy remembrance of childhood. Nowadays a video cameraman is often hired to shoot the salient parts of the church ceremony and of the party.

Marriage Customs

Ancient marriage rituals have suffered rapid and successive changes since the first decades of the present century, with the result that modern marriage customs in Malta largely conform to the rites and practices of other European countries. However, the 18th century historians G.A. Ciantar and Agius De Soldanis, followed by various 19th century writers, have left us a clear picture of the older ritual. We read, for example, that a marriageable daughter was hardly consulted at all in the choice of her husband. A young man's first indication that he could pay court to a daughter of the house was a pot of sweet basil placed on a stone bracket on the outer wall of the house where the girl lived. He usually employed an old woman as an intermediary (M. *ħuttaba*) to arrange the match. When his suit has been accepted, the contract signed and the dowry stipulated, the young man sent his beloved a present of a fish with a gold ring in its mouth. Then followed the betrothal feast (M. *il-kelma* or *ir-rabta*) when the bride was first introduced to her future husband in the presence of parents and friends, and he would offer her an engagement ring, on which were engraved two hands joined in token of fidelity, while she, for her part, reciprocated with a handkerchief edged with lace.

On the day of the wedding, musicians and singers celebrated in verse the virtues of the happy couple, and handfuls of grain, nuts and wheat were showered on them on their return from the church for the nuptial feast. The guests usually stayed for the wedding banquet, to which they often contributed in kind – capons, wine, etc. The bride ate in a separate apartment, but after the repast she would come and sit near her husband, and drink out of the same cup. There was also dancing with castanets after the Spanish fashion. In the intervals the guests threw presents into the lap of the bride, who sat at the top end of the room. Eight days after the wedding, and not before, the bride would leave her father's house (M. *il-ħarġa*) and be received with due pomp and ceremony by her husband in their new home.

Courtship and marriage rituals have changed considerably, especially since the inter-War years (1920-1940). Under direct British influence the bestman and the bridesmaid have made their appearance and worked their way down to all classes of the population. And with the new customs came fresh beliefs and taboos. Should the bridegroom see the bride's dress before the wedding day, bad luck is sure to follow. To avoid the effects of the evil eye, the last stitch in the bride's dress must be made by the dressmaker shortly before the bride puts it on. Some people also believe that the bride should not make her own dress as this may bring her bad luck.

The transition to today's usages has taken place in stages over a fairly long period. Up to within living memory, according to the head dress worn by the bride, people could tell that she was married (i) *bil-għonnella*, with the old-fashioned faldetta – now gone out of use – in which case she wore a whole corded silk or black costume, (ii) *bil-kappell*, with the hat, usually wearing a faun or silver-

grey dress, or (iii) *bil-mant*, with a white veil, dress and train. Since World War II the veil has come into general use.

If either the bride or the groom happened to be in mourning, the bride usually wore a hat instead of a veil. Among the upper classes, if the bride is a widow, she puts on a lilac, pink or cream gown. When the bride wore the *għonnella*, or a hat, the groom put on a simple, black or Navy blue suit. Otherwise he wears a frac or cutaway.

The wedding reception may be of two kinds: (a) *bit-trattament*, with waiters carrying various rounds (M. *passati*) of drinks, sweets and other delicacies to the guests, who are seated round the walls of a hall or a yard, or (b) *bir-ripò* (Fr. *repas*), in which case the guests gather round the table, sometimes extravagantly laid out with all imaginable kinds of sweets, savouries, drinks etc., and help themselves.

The bride, assisted by the groom, cuts the wedding cake, which has now come into general use, and then makes her way among the guests, offering pieces of cake to the males, while the groom looks after the females. A smaller cake is given as a present to each of the witnesses. At country weddings there was no wedding cake. The newly married couple received two heart-shaped tarts (*tal-marmorata*) which they passed on as a present to the witnesses. Instead of grain and nuts, rice is showered nowadays on the newly-weds before they leave for the honeymoon.

Jeremy Boissevain, a well known anthropologist, has noted other details of present-day marriage ritual in his Paper "Changing Betrothal and Marriage Ceremonies in Malta", read at *The Life Cycle – SIEF's Third Congress*, held between April 8-13, 1987 in Zurich, Switzerland. The couple spend a period of 'talking' to each other, without the parents' knowledge, before they become formally engaged and have their rings blessed by a priest. At the engagement party they receive as presents many useful items for household and kitchen. The majority of the guests present in church for the wedding ceremony are relatives or friends of the couple. Those invited by the groom sit on the right hand side. In addition to, or instead of bridesmaids, the bride may have one or more flower girls.

The groom, bestman, the father of the bride and groom and the ushers all wear tails. The groom carries a top hat and gloves during much of the ceremony and the reception. In the church the hired photographer or, nowadays, video cameraman and his assistant are busy shooting the most important scenes for the wedding film.

The same writer observes that in most cases the reception takes place at the local club or other hired premises. After changing into their going away clothes the couple are carried shoulder high by relatives and friends and are encouraged to catch hold of each other and kiss three times. Finally they drive off, generally in the groom's car, which his friends have covered with wet flour or foamy shaving cream, etc. The guests then leave after congratulating the bride's parents and thanking them for inviting them. Upper class couples generally spend their honeymoon abroad.

Death and Funeral Customs

The death and funeral customs of the ancient Maltese presented various features that look rather strange to our modern way of thought. When a man died, hired women mourners known as *newwieħa*, dressed in long mourning cloaks, entered the house, singing the praises of the deceased in low, surrowful voices. They would cut vine branches and run through all the rooms, overturning the flower-pots on the window-sills and smashing some of the ornamental furniture. They then went into the room where the corpse lay, surrounded by female relatives dressed in black and heavily veiled. The *newwieħa* wept, beat their breasts, and cut off locks

of their own hair, which they placed in the coffin. Boiled corn was distributed on that day to all the relatives, and they cut off the hair of their horses' tails. For three days they would light no fire in the kitchen, but relatives and friends or neighbours sent meals in to the family. The women remained indoors for forty days; the men went out, unshaven, on the eighth day. The mourning period lasted one or two years, according to the degree of consanguinity.

Although the general practice of these rituals was not resumed after the plague of 1676, some of them survived, in transmuted form, up to the present century especially in Gozo and in some villages in Malta. Mirrors and looking glasses in the room where the body was lying were covered, and some families even removed, or turned round both furniture and pictures hanging on the walls. Door knockers were also removed, or draped with black crepe; housedoors were kept closed for several days, while neighbours half shut their own out of respect for the bereaved family. Window blinds were pulled down for some months or else linen sheets replaced window curtains. A dish of salt was usually placed on the belly of the dead body in the belief that the salt in the dish prevented the corpse from swelling through early decomposition. This custom, first noted by A. Cremona in 1922, is shared with other ethnographically unconnected people, for it was not only practised by the Arabs of Algeria but also survived in a corresponding usage in Cumberland rural districts up to the present century.

For more than a century now mourning customs have tended to become simpler and less complex. The Maltese word for mourning is *vistu*, whence *vistuż*, 'in mourning', obviously derived from Sicilian *visitu* with its twofold meaning, i.e. *purtari lu visitu*, 'to put on mourning', and *tiniri visitu*, 'to receive complimentary visits of sympathy''. This latter custom has now practically gone out of use in Malta.

Wearing of a full mourning dress on the death of parents, formerly observed for two years, has now been reduced to some few days, or weeks. Business premises are sometimes closed, and a notice affixed to the door with English and, formerly, Italian wording: *Family mourning – Lutto di famiglia*. In rural areas some people still keep away from festas, theatres, dances and merrymaking. For many years the coffin was carried in a horse-drawn carriage. Class distinctions were reflected in the kind of funeral chosen by the family of the deceased – *tal-prima*, 'first class', with richly decorated carriage drawn by four horses sporting a black feather on their head; *tas-sekonda*, 'second class', providing only a carriage and pair, and *tal-povri*, for the poorer classes, having just the bare essentials. White coffins, indicating purity or chastity, were used for unmarried women. Black carriages were invariably used, but babies were laid in a white coffin and carried in a white carriage. As from April, 1970 the motor hearse replaced all other funeral conveyances.

Wreath laying on the graves is generally practised, but some people object to these floral tributes at the funeral and they try to discourage the custom by including, in the obituary notice published in the Press, the words: ''No flowers by requests, but donations to (a charity) will be appreciated''. Sympathy cards are sent by friends to the family of the deceased, who acknowledge the condolences by sending them printed epitaphs often carrying a photograph of the deceased.

Costume

Dress and costume are another important feature of ancient folk-life in Malta. Early travellers' accounts contain many allusions to peculiarities of Maltese dress, a common feature being that, until well into the latter half of the 18th century, the women of Malta went about veiled, like Oriental women. In 1776, Maltese

ladies, who were always attended by a black slave, dressed exactly like her mistress but in inferior quality material, plotted to discard the old-fashioned, Sicilian-style dress and to adopt French fashions. The *faldetta*, or *għonnella*, which was considered the national head-dress up to the period between the Wars, has now gone out of use. In his book *Malta: An Account and an Appreciation* (Harrap, 1949, p.26), Sir Harry Luke described it as

"a voluminous hood of rich silk – black everywhere save in the villages of Żabbar and Żejtun, where it is blue and is called *xurqana* – stiffened inside the top edge by a piece of cardboard about a yard long, one end of which rests on the head, while the other end has to be held. Originally, it was really, like the Turkish *charshaf*, a skirt or petticoat (which is what the word *għonnella* means) thrown up over the head. Later it was curtailed, for which reason it is sometimes called *nofs għonnella*, a half skirt; but it is still cut to show the placket-hole – in point of fact, half the placket-hole – of the garment from which it has sprung".

Cookery

Turning to Maltese cookery, we find that the vocabulary of local food presents the pattern of Semitic words for primitive kinds of food and Romance loan-words for the more refined cooked foods: exx. *ħobż*, 'bread' (Ar. *khubz*); *ftira*, 'any disc-like bakery product that is flat and round' (Ar. *fatira*); *ġobon*, 'cheese' (Ar. *gubn*); *sfinġa*, 'battered fish portions fried in oil' (Ar. *'asfanġa*); *maqrut*, 'date-filled pastry fried in oil' (Ar. *maqrūt*); *kawlata*, 'a kind of vegetable soup with pork' (It. *cavolata*); *imqarrun*, 'macaroni' (It. *maccheroni*); *torta*, 'pie' (It. *torta*); *qubbajt*, 'nougat' (Sic. *cubbaitu*); *irkotta*, 'a milk substance resembling cottage cheese' (Sic. and It. *ricotta*); *pudina*, 'pudding' (Eng. *pudding*) and *minestra*, 'vegetable soup' (It. *minestra*). The ever-popular *pastizz*, known locally in English as "cheesecake", derives from Italian *pasticcio*.

The late Vincent Bugeja stressed the eclectic character of the dishes laid on Maltese tables. Writing on "Maltese Style of Cooking" in the *Times of Malta* of March 22, 1955, he said

"During my long residence in France I discovered that the majority of our dishes are the specialities of one French province or another, and in my travels through Spain, Italy, Austria and Southern Germany I was always struck by the similarity between the fare of country inns and our own culinary productions sometimes considered as specifically Maltese".

The historical explanation he suggested is that these savoury dishes from so many different countries of Western Europe came to us

"from the kitchens of the Knights' auberges, the Grand Master's palaces and the country residences of the dignitaries of the Order. The Knights, noblemen brought up on large country estates, naturally preferred their regional cooking to what Malta had to offer in this respect. So it seems quite likely that they brought over their own cooks, especially for the auberges where they were bound by their rule to dine in hall three or four times a week,... These cooks had Maltese aids, and these in turn passed on the recipes of the best regional dishes of the Continent to Maltese families..."

One may add that, according to the *Notizia della Sacra Infermeria* published in Rome in 1713, the hospital diets prescribed to the Infirmary patients contained various items – soups, meat and poultry, vegetables and sweet dishes – that survive to this day in many a humble household in the villages of Malta and Gozo. And after the Knights left Malta in 1798, as a result of trade and travel links with Sicily and Italy, of contacts with Italian political refugees during and after the *Risorgimento*, and of direct British influence, fresh elements have been added, including the English Christmas turkey, cakes and puddings, to make up the rich variety of Maltese cooking that we have today.

The 'Festa'

The Maltese *festa* is an occasion of great rejoicing, enlivened by illuminations, feastings, fireworks, water regattas and other open air entertainments. No other aspect of Maltese life is as full of warm external appeal as the *festa*, which is a

flourishing institution that has evolved gradually in the course of the last four centuries.

In every town and village of Malta and Gozo special celebrations are held each year in honour of the patron saint. With the exception of a few localities, these festivities nowadays take place between May and September, the so-called "*festa*-season". As a result of this arrangement the *festa* is generally celebrated on a different date from that assigned to the Saint in the Church's liturgical calendar.

Its organization is the result of the people's efforts, voluntary work and contributions. Feverish preparations for the *festa* are fanned by the rivalries of the *każini* or band-clubs of which there are two in most towns and villages. The local bands play on two or more days during the week preceding the feast, while visiting bands play on the eve and on the feast day proper. They march through the main streets and finally take their place on a stand built in the middle of the square, surrounded by a crowd anxious to hear the musical excerpts selected for the occasion.

There is an unmistakable festive air about the place on *festa*-day. The bells ring merrily. Walking through the streets, hung with flags, banners, paper decorations and baskets of flowers one notices that the facades of the houses have been neatly whitewashed recently for the occasion, and that the doors and windows as well as the balconies are freshly decorated.

In a few localities which were particularly affected by the Great Sieges of 1565 and 1940-45 one can see wooden pillars, topped by life-sized statues, arms and other trophies recalling the two sieges. However, the majority of statues which surmount the wooden pillars lining the streets in most places in Malta are those of angels painted in attractive colours, holding electric brackets and emblems of the saint whose *festa* is being celebrated. Other statues portray saints, popes, bishops, Doctors of the Church, etc. who were in some way connected with the saint. Others depict the next of kin of saints, or statuary groups representing some episode in the saint's life.

Here and there, at improvised counters or from fast-food vehicles, nougat (M. *qubbajt*) and other dainties are sold. On the eve of the feast a great display of fireworks starts at about 11 p.m., to the admiration of thousands of spectators who pack the square and the overlooking terraces and balconies or, in certain places, watch the spectacle from the sea in boats.

On the day of the feast the whole family and one or more guests of honour assemble at noon to partake of the specially rich fare prepared for the occasion. And people put on a new dress, or a new pair of shoes, for the feast!

The great event of the *festa* is the procession with the Patron Saint's statue through the streets of the town or village. There is a good deal of noise and glare, but the rejoicing reaches its peak when the statue is about to re-enter the church. This is called the *briju*. There are deafening shouts of *evviva*, 'long live'; the bands play, while the firing of crackers, rockets and petards mix with the peal of the church bells and the cries of the vendors of nougat, ice-cream and cheesecakes.

Since the last war the *festa* celebrations in many localities have been expanded so as to include a noon band-march and parade during which youths and others demonstrate wildly. It has also become customary for families and friends from the same neighbourhood to go to the seaside on the morrow of the feast. This outing is often an elaborate form of picnic (M. *xalata*) with decorated cars and buses, and enlivened with the playing of guitars or accordions, lots of fun, loud singing, dancing and plenty to drink.

Carnival

In addition to the *festa* there are calendar customs whose recurrence ensures a break in the routine of daily life during

the year. Carnival is undoubtedly the most colourful of all public entertainments in Malta – an officially sponsored period of carefree merrymaking. Historically it can be traced back to the early 1400's. Encouraged in various ways by the Grand Masters of the Order of St John of Jerusalem (1530-1798) Carnival declined in the 19th century but its revival in 1926 made it possible for the folk entertainment to survive the period of British Rule (1800-1964) as a strong living tradition.

The outdoor festivities in Valletta are organised by the National Festivities Committee appointed each year by the Ministry of Youth and Culture, and over the years Carnival has become a major tourist attraction. Prizes are awarded for the best artistic dances, costumes, floats and grotesque masks. Between 1972 and 1987 Carnival was held in May, but in 1988 it was restored to its traditional period, and celebrations now take place during the five days immediately preceding Lent. Some innovations have also been introduced in recent years, including the shifting of merrymaking on the last Carnival day (Tuesday) from Valletta to Floriana. Carnival festivities in Gozo, first organized in 1952, follow the main lines of the Malta Carnival.

During the Merry Monarch's reign Valletta presents a unique spectacle. Grotesque masks and triumphal cars follow the majestic float of King Carnival in a regular train through the main streets of the capital. The balconies and roofs of the houses are full to overcrowding, while the streets below are thronged with people from all over Malta eagerly watching the Carnival defile. The boisterous enthusiasm of the young men and women manning the floats infect with carefree mirth the spectators lining the route or occupying vantage points. Small groups of men dressed as females, and vice-versa, or clad in other carnivalesque attire, indulge in fun and frolic among the bystanders.

Beneath the surface of the present spectacle older motifs linger on, folk elements that helped to maintain and spread the tentacles of the Carnival tradition in the past. A few have been retained, or are being revived, though their significance has been lost. Up to some years ago this folk festival was ushered in by the *Parata* dance on the morning of Carnival Saturday. This is an ancient Maltese sword-dance commemorating the Maltese victory over the Turks in the Great Siege of 1565. The dance was once concluded by raising a little girl, known as the 'Bride', splendidly arrayed and girt with a small dagger – as a sign of the Christian victory. Under the Knights the *Parata* had a special significance because the rule was "No *Parata*, no Carnival". As soon as the Grand Master granted permission to hold Carnival and signified his approval to the Maltese waiting in the Palace Square through a Knight of the Grand Cross, various companies of dancers ranged through the City and performed their mock fight to the accompaniment of strolling music. Every effort should be made to restore the *Parata* to its pristine importance as it is one of the few surviving links in the chain of *Moresca* dances that were once popular throughout most countries of Southern and Central Europe.

Another entertainment known as *Kukkanja* (Cockaigne) was introduced by Grand Master Zondadari in 1721 but did not outlive the Order. A crowd assembled on the Palace Square on Carnival Monday and at a given signal attacked the sausages, hams and live animals tied to the long beams fixed against the guard house and covered over with branches of trees in leaf. The provisions became the property of those who, having seized them, were able to carry them off in safety through the crowd. Revivals of this folk-entertainment took place in 1960-1962 and, more successfully, in 1992 and 1993.

Traces of an ancient folk-drama known as *Qarċilla*, together with the burning of King Carnival on the last day of the festivities, survived up to some years ago. Although these and other folk elements

belong to the past now, the Carnival spirit lives on unabated.

Holy Week

Holy Week traditions in the Maltese Islands present features of strong vitality and of ever-expanding popular ritual. Apart from the offices of the church, the people visit the *sepulkri* or altars of repose found in practically every church, going from one church to another on what is known as the Round of the Seven Churches. V. Busuttil in *Holiday Customs in Malta* (6th ed., 1922, p.30) describes this custom as "a very striking scene" and adds: "Hundreds, from every rank and class of the people, generally in couples or in groups, are seen most devoutly performing the visit of the churches; reciting prayers all the time as they move from one church to another".

In many localities, following the example of the Oratory of the Dominican (Blackfriars) priory in Valletta and of the Pius X Oratory in Cospicua, a replica of the Last Supper scene is put up for public viewing. In some localities a Passion Play is staged, with actors drawn mostly from the village community or from among the membership of the club or other organisation concerned. As a folk production, the one at Għarb, in Gozo, which featured regularly for some years (1940-48) deserves special mention.

However, the Good Friday processions with life-sized images representing the main events of the Passion and Death of Our Lord form the characteristic feature of Holy Week celebrations in Malta and Gozo. There is an air of accentuated suffering and martyrdom about these statuary groups recalling similar scenes in Southern Italy, Sicily and Spain. Their effectiveness is heightened by the grim realism of the gory wounds and ghastly pallor of the suffering Christ no less than by the daggers in the bleeding heart of the *Mater Dolorosa*. As specimens of Maltese popular art, these statues represent the highest form achieved in the *papier mâché* technique which is believed to have been introduced to Malta by a Sicilian lay brother whose name has not come down to us.

This tradition has evolved over a long period. By the end of the 16th century the lay confraternity of St Joseph attached to the Friary of Franciscan Minors in Rabat was the first to organize such a procession in Malta, followed by its counterpart attached to the Valletta friary in 1645. During the 18th century the custom spread to eight other localities, i.e. Vittoriosa (c.1700), Senglea (c.1719), Żebbuġ (c.1742), Żejtun (c.1742), Cospicua (c.1700), Naxxar (c.1750), Qormi (c.1764), and Luqa (c.1795). In the 19th century similar progress was recorded in four parishes, i.e. Għaxaq (c.1820), Rabat, in Gozo (c.1830), Mosta (1866) and Ħal Għargħur (1866). During the present century this development continued both in Gozo – Nadur (1913), Xagħra (1914), Żebbuġ (1918) and at the Gozo Cathedral (1968) – and at Paola, in Malta, between 1944-1976. A set of statues commissioned for Xewkija, in Gozo, between 1922 and 1924, has never been taken out in procession.

These "mystery groups" were successfully grafted on to an already existing, deep-routed local tradition, for the Passion drama had, since the Middle Ages, exercised the mind of our folk and found expression in the form of a considerable repertoire of folk-prayers built on rich imagery and unsophisticated language, which reflect the people's reaction to the events of the Passion Drama. Nowadays these folk-prayers are all but forgotten, but they link with similar compositions and traditions from Sicily, Central Italy and Spain.

Christmas

The modern Christmas scene in Malta includes brightly-lit shop windows, a variety of toys and sweets, artificial

Christmas trees and carol singing mingled with a profuse exchange of greetings. Honey ring-cakes (M. *qagħaq tal-għasel*) are displayed everywhere as a local Christmas speciality. One can see artistic, often mechanised cribs in various localities and, since 1964, street decorations and illuminations in Valletta and other centres have been introduced. More characteristic, and of local growth, is the procession, held for the first time in 1921, staged in most towns and villages, in which children take part, carrying an image of the Baby Jesus and singing sweet carols in Maltese. A talk on the Nativity is then recited by a boy – a custom mentioned in the local Press as a novelty in 1883.

The Christmas tradition in Malta centres round the *presepju*, or crib. Every year the M.U.S.E.U.M. Christian Doctrine Society distributes some 20,000 small cribs to children who attend their religious doctrine classes. Exhibitions of cribs are held annually in Valletta and other localities, while the National Festivities Committee organizes crib competitions every year. Since the early Sixties a Live Crib at Lija has provided a unique attraction, with children dressed as shepherds, and with live donkeys, lambs, hens, ducks, pigeons etc.

After the Second World War the use of artificial Christmas trees spread to the homes of the Maltese, together with Father Christmas, as an added decoration for the festive season. Previously their use was generally restricted to families of British Service personnel and to some Maltese hospitals. The custom had been slowly gaining ground since at least 1887, when it is recorded that Prince George, later King George V, attended a Christmas Tree gathering held at the Governor's Palace of San Anton. The presence of convalescing British and Allied troops in Malta, not to mention the many German prisoners of war during the First World War, also helped to boost the custom.

The Christmas festival in the past was characterised by the music of bagpipes. Folk memory in Gozo records that for the midnight service on Christmas Eve bagpipers played in the principal churches, striking a genuinely pastoral note, while during the *novena* preceding Christmas they performed in the streets. There were also rustic games in which players used nuts and other seasonal produce, while age-old proverbs relating to the Christmas period in the agricultural year have withstood the test of centuries.

Some country people still indulge in a curious form of weather-forecasting. From St Lucy's Day (Dec. 13) till Christmas Eve they regard the sky with attention, note the way of the wind and other signs known only to themselves. In this way they believe they can establish a reliable forecast for the coming year, the weather on December 13 ruling the proximate months of January, and so on until December 24, which is believed to rule the weather of December twelve months later. The signs observed on these twelve days are called *l-irwiegel*, 'the rules'. Analogous beliefs and usages are found in Sicily and various other countries.

Finally, a surviving custom associated with the Christmas crib links up with certain pre-Christian rites known among scholars as "Gardens of Adonis". Each year, with the approach of Christmas, and generally on December 8, Maltese children sow wheat, barley, vetch and canary seed in plates, which they keep in the dark and water every two or three days. The plants soon shoot up, and the plates containing them are then placed near the Child Jesus in churches and in the cribs set up in the homes. Similar practices, observed also in Sicily, in Calabria and in Sardinia on different occasions, have been described as a continuation, under a different name, of the worship of Adonis, who was a deity of vegetation and especially of the corn.

Other Customs

These customs include the blessing of animals, which takes place on the Sunday nearest to the 17th January (feast of St

Antony Abbot) at the door of St Augustine's church at Rabat. Here the animals, mostly quadrupeds, are blessed by an Augustinian friar and they partake of some barley, which is placed in a tray for them. In the time of the Knights the first animals that came up for the blessing were the horses drawing the Grand Master's stately carriage. Nowadays a blessing ceremony also takes place at Xagħra, in Gozo. At Mosta the blessing is held a week later, on the parvis of the old church of St Antony, built in 1608, while at Naxxar it takes place in front of the oratory on one of the Sundays preceding the feast. Since 1987 the blessing of animals at Lija has been held near the old parish church in Saviour Street. In recent years the custom has also spread to other localities but not necessarily linked to the cult of St Antony.

Easter is associated with a special kind of pastry, known as *figolla*, which has been described as "a flat baked dough, cut in the shape of a woman, a Turk, an eagle, a horse, a star, or a basket, with one or more eggs, having the shell stained red or some other colour, embedded in its centre..." On Easter Sunday, processions with the statue of the Risen Christ are held in several parishes. From Vittoriosa and Cospicua, which have a deep-rooted Easter tradition influenced by the Greek Rhodiotes who followed the Order to Malta from Rhodes in 1530, the practice of carrying the statue at a run at certain specified spots of the traditional route has spread to various localities in recent years.

On the first Wednesday after Easter, people flock to the fishing village of Marsaxlokk to picnic there after witnessing at Żejtun a procession which, according to tradition, was instituted centuries ago in fulfilment of a vow for the deliverance of Malta. Up to some years ago bonfires were lighted on St John's Eve (June 23), while Ascension Day (M. *Lapsi*) sees the opening of the swimming season. The folk-festival of *L-Imnarja* on June 29 is marked by folk-singing at Buskett on the eve of the feast, an Agricultural Show organized by the Agrarian Society since 1854, and by traditional horseraces in which the animals are ridden bare-backed. On the feast of St Martin (first Sunday after November 12) children receive a bag full of autumn produce – figs, nuts, chestnuts and oranges. Space does not allow more than a passing mention here of other periodical ceremonies such as those on 8th September or on Candlemas Day, of popular iconography, including *ex-votos* found in various churches and rural chapels, or of *Blason Populaire*, (collective nicknames).

Primitive Beliefs and Practices

Various primitive seasonal customs and beliefs still survive in folk-memory. According to an old tradition, the oldest woman (M. *l-għagużа*) living in the parish was thrown from the church steeple on the mid-Lent Thursday. This corresponds to the notions behind the beliefs in *La Vecchia di Quaresima* and the practice of *sega-Vecchia* in Sicily and Italy. Up to a few years ago, the figure of a child stuffed with straw (M. *trajbu*) was cast into the flames of the bonfires lit on the eve of the Feast of St John. On St John's Day (June 24) village girls used to melt some lead and then pour it into a vessel filled with water. According to the shape assumed by the lead when it cooled down and solidified, it was foretold whether the girl would be happy in her choice of a husband.

In addition to these customs, which are linked with various midsummer and divination practices in other countries, there are some survivals of fertility rites. A heap of manure is often left standing in Maltese fields until it is carried away by the first rains. To this is given the symbolic name of *l-għarus*, 'the bridegroom'. Peasants sometimes leave a ring, the symbol of marriage, on the branch of a pear-tree in the belief that the tree will become more fruitful. Farmers were used to hang two puppets, representing a

Turkish man and woman, on their vines to ensure an abundant yield.

Fear of the moon and its influence on human beings lies behind various folk-beliefs and practices. It is firmly believed that one should never curse the moon; rather, one should propitiate it, for otherwise it may cause a great deal of unhappiness. Various tasks connected with animals and husbandry are regulated by the phases of the moon. The March and August moons are particularly recommended as a time to place eggs under brooding hens. Olives should be picked with the new moon or during its first phase – and only when the North wind is blowing. The best time for planting palm-trees is when the moon is waxing. Unmarried girls were advised to comb their hair in the light of the moon, and in order to find a rich husband they were to hold a coin in their hand while they looked at the moon. There are various sayings connected with the moon's mysterious power.

The Evil Eye

The cause of evils such as misfortunes, accidents, illness or death is often attributed to the agency of a mischief-maker known as *l-għajn*, 'the evil eye'. In 1923 A. Cremona wrote at some length about "Some Myths and Beliefs in Maltese Folklore" (*Melita*, Vol.III, pp.111-120). He considers the Maltese custom of fumigating with olive leaves which have been blessed on Palm Sunday as "a typical christianized counterpart" of an old heathen charm. The exorcism is commonly carried out

"to free the house from the evil of a haunting spirit or from an illness afflicting a patient. It is also done after the recovery of the patient from a serious illness. Prayers are in the meantime also offered...".

The same writer explained that

"the Maltese word *seħer*, meaning witchcraft, sorcery, answers to the Arabic *seħer*, meaning also witchcraft, sorcery, seduction, while the term *għajn*, 'eye' and the derivative verb *għajjen*, 'to bewitch' are correspondingly the Arabic forms *għajn* and *għajjen*, having respectively the same meaning".

As for the Maltese word *magħmul*, also meaning witchcraft and charm, this is

"a synonym of the primitive *seħer* and appears to be a mere version of the Italo-Sicilian word *fattura* and of not such an old type as the former designation".

Ancient Maltese myths are still designated by a Semitic terminology, examples being *ħâres*, 'a ghostly guardian of the house or of any property', *għafrid*, 'evil spirit', *għul*, 'wild beast', *waħx*, 'ogre, monster', *Iblis*, 'Satan'. Recalling that the Arabic imprecatory expression *Ħamsa f'għajnek*, 'five fingers in your eye' is also known by the Maltese, i.e. *Għajnek f'għajnek*, 'your eye in your eye', Cremona concludes that

"it is evident that... all the Maltese expressions indicating an elementary knowledge of the belief must have been chiefly derived from or highly influenced by a Semitic tradition".

Riddles (*Ħaġa Moħġaġa*)

The art of riddling, at one time indulged in by adults of all classes and looked upon as an accomplishment of royalty in biblical times, has nowadays survived mostly among children. A 'true' riddle is a composition in which some creature or object is described in an intentionally obscure manner, the solution fitting all the characteristics of the description in the question, and usually resolving a paradox. The following examples come to mind straightaway:

Ħaġa moħġaġa:
Aktar ma tiekol minnha
Aktar tikber.
(Tarxien)

Me riddle, me riddle,:
The more you eat (take) from it
The bigger it gets.
(Solution: a hole in the ground)

Hawn ħaġa:
Dejjem timxi rasha 'l isfel.
(Birżebbuġa)

A riddle:
Always walks on its head.
(Solution: A nail in your boot)

Haġa moħġaġa:
Ħamra ħamra – nar m'hijiex
Ħadra ħadra – ħaxix m'hijiex
Tarmi l-ilma – għajn m'hijiex.

(Tarxien)

Me riddle, me riddle:
Though red as fire it is not fire,
Green as grass but it is not grass,
Gives out water but it is not a spring.
(Solution: Water Melon)

The descriptions which the rhyming riddles give of their solutions are usually phrased highly imaginatively in terms of something else. Thus, a bed is seen as a person who gets tired at night and rests all day; the sky is a basket full of pears (roses) which, when turned upside down, will not fall; the clouds look like a bed sheet with patches but without any threads; the sea is thought of as an old grumbler who makes love, or as a garden without trees or leaves or flowers, whose fruit tastes exquisitely good; an onion is likened to a pretty white-faced girl wearing a pink dress who will make you cry if you ill-treat her; a cabbage is conceived as made up of numerous carpets set on top of each other, each more beautiful than the one before it. Such images are perhaps the fittest introduction to poetry that a child can have.

Many notions underlying Maltese riddles are similar to those adopted by riddlers both inside and outside Europe. In this respect one has to underline the historical importance of Sicilian and Arabic influences in the formation of Maltese riddling. Certain correspondences, verbal or other, appear to be so close as to call for particular mention. Thus, the notion "Mother begets and kills Daughter (Son)" appears in the following Maltese riddle:

Haġa moħġaġa:
Imwieled minn ommu,
Jitrabba bix-xemx,
Jekk imiss m'ommu jerġa' jmut.

Me riddle, me riddle:
Born of Mother,
Reared by the sun,
If he touches his mother again he dies.
(Solution: Salt)

Archer Taylor (*English riddles from oral tradition*, University of California Press, 1951, pp.394, 790) explains that

"the Levantine – Modern Greek, Arabic and Syriac versions exemplify best the ideas of begetting and killing, and are probably derived from a common source... These parallels are: Modern Greek: 'Water begets me and I feed in the sun; yet if I see my mother, I die'; Arabic: 'Son of water and it dies on touching water'; Syriac: 'It lives when taken out of water, it dies when put into water'."

The Maltese riddle for "Doors" runs as follows:

Haġa moħġaġa:
Bil-lejl ibusu 'l xulxin,
Bi nhar miġġeldin.

Riddle me riddle:
They kiss one another at night,
They separate (lit. quarrel) during the day.

With this one may compare the corresponding Sicilian versions: (a) *Lu juorno si talianu, La sira si vasanu.* "By day they look at one another, by night they kiss one another", and (b) *Lu juornu su' spartuti, La sira 'nzimmulati*, "By day they are separated, at night they come together". The Tunisian version given by J. Quemeneur (*Enigmes Tunisiennes*, Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes, Tunis, 1944) is close enough: *'ala zweyz akhwa / fel lîl it'anquou / fen-nhâr itfârqou.* "Two brothers / By night they embrace / By day they separate". Unlike proverbs, local riddles do not set out to teach or to lay down rules of conduct; their intention nowadays is only to amuse.

Proverbs

A rich legacy of proverbial lore has been handed down orally, and age-old sayings are used frequently in everyday conversation, in which they are quoted with the persuasive force of established tradition and with the authority of an unwritten law. A few examples in English translation are given here to illustrate this branch of Maltese folklore: 1. The older you grow, the more you learn; 2. Don't pollute the spring from which you may

want to drink; 3. One man dies of drunkenness, and another dies for want of a drop; 4. A sleeping man catches no fish; 5. If a man spits towards the sky, it will come down in his own face; 6. See whose daughter she is, and you will know what she is; 7. For the sake of rings and ear-rings today she has eaten nothing; 8. He who is born round will not die square; 9. A new bride whatever she touches smells sweet; 10. What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over; 11. He who eats the meat must also gnaw the bone; 12. Not everyone who beats his breast is a saint.

In 1972 the University of Malta published Professor J. Aquilina's *A Comparative Dictionary of Maltese Proverbs* containing more than 4,630 proverbs collected from oral and written sources. In the Introduction he pointed out that some Arabic proverbs are still current in the spoken language "in spite of the nearly 1,000-year-old discontinuation of direct contact with the Arabic world". Five years before he had already referred to the similarity between some Maltese and Arabic proverbs.

In his paper, written in 1967, entitled "Comparative Maltese and Arabic Proverbs" (in *Maltese Linguistic Surveys*, University of Malta, 1976, p.142), he wrote:

"Of the whole collection of proverbs, comparatively very few are of Arabic origin, but the total list of correspondences in all the work is fairly impressive. Some of these proverbs are mixed in the sense that they may be Arabic and European at the same time, sometimes literally and sometimes approximately. Here arises the question as to the criteria that must be adopted to establish which is the original version. Comparatively only a small number of Maltese proverbs corresponds to Arabic ones because since 1090, when the Normans conquered Malta, the social context of our country moved in the direction of Sicily..."

Further on in his paper Aquilina explained that

"many Maltese proverbs, though couched in a completely Arabic vocabulary, are the translation of Italian, and generally Sicilian proverbs, many of which can be compared with those collected by the famous Sicilian paremiologist Giuseppe Pitrè (1841-1916)". His final conclusion is that "when all is said there is no doubt that the greater paremiological heritage reached Malta via Sicily".

Oral Poetry

Oral poetry survives as a living tradition in Malta. It is still one of the main sources of popular folk-entertainment. The Maltese word designating orally performed poetry is *għana*, or song, which covers a wide range of poems in sung form with musical accompaniment by guitarists. These folk compositions are of three types:

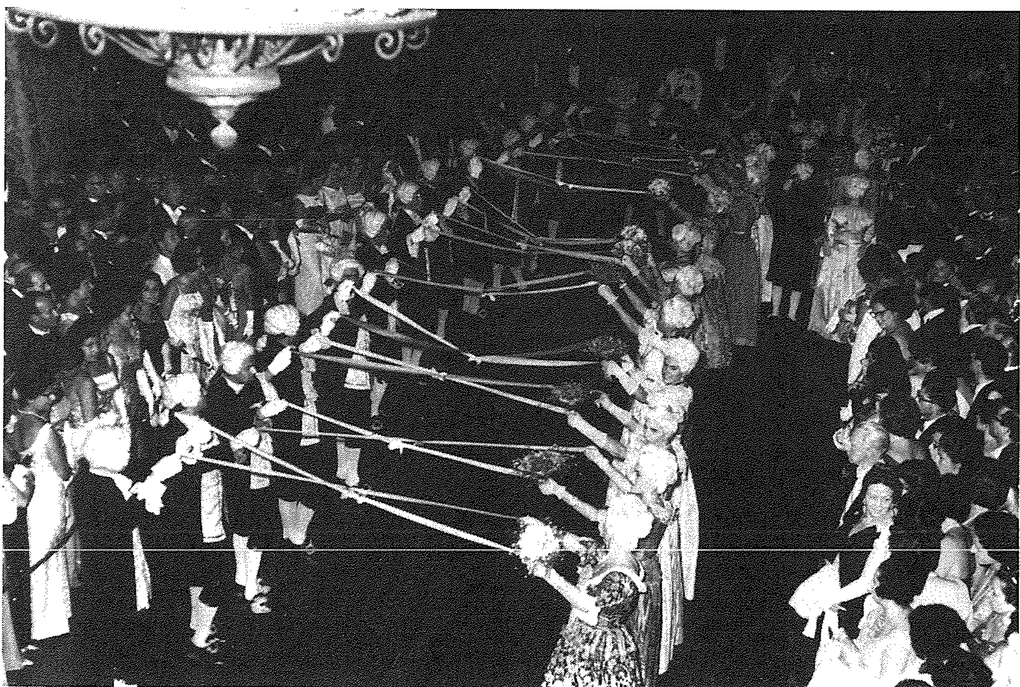
1) extemporised (M. *spirtu pront*) short (four-line) stanzas normally sung by individuals, or by a group of two or more singers as a song-duel which can take various forms – for example (a) hitting back, stanza for stanza, with guitar interludes, or (b) an impromptu reply by the second man within the same quatrain immediately after the two lines presented by the first singer – this is called *għanja maqsuma*, or 'broken or shared song';

2) long elaborate narratives in verse, generally known as *fatt* (It. *fatto*, 'deed, event'), either on well-known local heroes as well as on sensational or tragic events (ballad type), or on recent humorous topics, and

3) songs in high register (M. *għanja fil-għoli*), also known as *la bormliża*, i.e. Bormla style – Bormla being one of the three historic cities facing Valletta across the Grand Harbour – short haiku-like poems normally sung by two persons and requiring a full voice capable of sustaining long phrases. This style of singing has now practically died out.

The characteristic form of Maltese folk quatrains is the four-line stanza, rhyming *a b c b*, each line consisting mostly of eight, sometimes seven syllables. The argument used, whether serious or humorous, is followed closely by the audience; clarity of expression in the performance is expected, no less than correct rhyming and maintenance of subject. Assonance rather than rhyme is sometimes employed. In this respect Maltese quatrains have no connection with the songs of Sicily, consisting mainly of eight hendecasyllabic lines. Giuseppe Pitrè,

Folk musical instruments – the Rabbâba, Tambourine and Żaqq (Bagpipes) – which have now gone out of use.



A traditional dance during the Independence festivities in 1964.

the well-known Sicilian folklorist, admitted this and asserted that 'the lyric of the Maltese people ... recalls faintly that of Sardinia, and has nothing in common with the *canzuna* of Sicily'. However, the four-line single stanza is not unknown in Sicily, and sometimes occurs in Greek and Spanish popular poetry, while the same form and rhyme-scheme are employed by the boatmen of Rabat and Salè in Morocco.

In 1953 a Folksong Competition organised by the present writer was held on the occasion of the popular *Imnarja* folk-festival. It continued to be held over the following years and it is now recognised that it had a lasting, salutary effect. Quoting from Ranier Fsadni's perceptive article "The Modernity of Maltese *Għana*" (*Sunday Times*, August 30, 1992):

... It (i.e. *għana* singing) became more elaborate ... This formal elaboration was a consequence of the first Maltese Folklore festival, held in 1953, which not only inspired the new rules (and conventions governing the composition of the extemporized quatrains) but also changed the way the *għannej* regarded himself... 1953 is the decisive date, for it set off a process which changed the way *għana* was perceived by the middle classes and how the *għannejja* came to see themselves and the role they played ... They were now the subject of some attention from intellectuals, asked to sing at festivals and hotels, and even sent abroad to represent Malta on cross-cultural exchanges. *Għana* as en entity became mythologised, the soul of tradition which had to be preserved..."

A new generation of folksingers and guitarrists has indeed modernised the folk-art and raised the standard of *għana* performances. Many singers, or their supporters, possess their own tape-recorders and exchange tapes containing recordings of their extemporised songs with emigrated friends in America, Canada or Australia. Occasionally, local singers tour towns and cities in Australia or Canada at the invitation of Maltese migrant communities. Tourism and modern mass media, such as cassettes, radio and TV also contribute to keep the tradition alive.

Folk-Dance

From folk-singing to folk-dancing it is but one short step. Two traditional folk-dances have survived. One of them, known as *Il-Parata*, has already been mentioned. The dancers, making up two concentric circles, represent the besieging Turks and the defenders (Maltese and Knights). The dance has three main movements. The leader, dressed up as Grand Master, directs the dance by means of a whistle. *Il-Parata* was concluded with a final movement whereby the Turks knelt down as a sign of defeat, the Maltese (or Knights) placing their swords over the heads of the Turks. The 'Bride' was then carried round on a platform while she threw kisses all around.

Il-Maltija is considered to be Malta's national dance. It is danced either in peasant costume, known as *Ta' Żepp u Grezz*, these being characteristic peasant names, or, for formal occasions such as a royal visit, celebrations of national importance, or charity balls at the President's Palace, in 18th century costume, the ladies wearing brocade dresses, with full skirts and bodices with battlements, and the gentlemen wearing black velvet tights, long coats of the same period, lace fichus and white satin waistcoats. All the dancers – a leading couple and sixteen other couples – wear white wigs. As the various movements are called, couples do not move until the leader calls *Imxu* (Forward). At the conclusion of the dance each couple in turn approaches the dais to honour the President.

The *Maltija* was most probably introduced to Malta as a Court dance in the later years of the 18th century. When the Knights left it was taken up by the 'folk' where it lingered on until it was revived by Maltese officers of the Royal Malta Fencibles Regiment at the Fancy Dress Ball given at the Palace by Lady Stuart, the Governor's wife, on February 18, 1844.

Folk-Tales

A rich heritage of folk-tales and legends has come down from the past. Unfortunately, the popular art of story-telling

has very much degenerated but enough texts have been collected in the present century, especially by the Jesuit Fr E. Magri, to establish the variety of types and motifs of the local folk-narrative material. Most impressive are the tales of magic in which, as in the household tales of the Brothers Grimm, we meet supernatural adversaries and helpers, enchanted princes and talking animals. Open-eyed dragons, guarding fair maidens or golden apples, are fast asleep, while lions with closed eyes are fully awake. We shudder at seven-headed dragons and admire the Maltese Samson, whose strength lies not in his hair but in his tail – a belief still common in these islands where the general opinion is that a baby born with a hairy growth at the lower end of the spine will grow to be a very strong man. There are interesting parallels with the Hercules cycle of Greek stories in the tales of the Wise Woman's Son (M. *Bin il-Għarfa*) and also specimens of the tales of King Solomon, so widespread in Mediterranean countries. One of these attributes to the boy Solomon, assisted by his much wiser sister, the use of the first boat formed of the upturned skeleton of a horse.

Numerous jokes and anecdotes (M. *praspar*) are also told. Among the numskull stories stand out the humorous adventures of 'Ġaħan', a lovable character who does things topsy-turvy but invariably manages to come out all the better for his experience. His amusing adventures are still related to children: how he lost a chicken pea and earned a fortune, how he poured boiling water on his sister, how he sat on a grimy pot because his mother told him not to sit where other usually sit, so as to keep his suit clean, and, finally, how he pulled the door off its hinges and dragged it all the way to the church looking for his mother, whose instructions to shut (lit. to pull) the door behind him he had obeyed so literally. 'Ġaħan' is a Mediterranean folk-hero, called *Si-Ġoħa* or *Ġoħa* by the Arabs, *Gha* in North Africa, *Ġuħa* by the Persians, *Ġoħħa* in Palestine, *Giucca* in Tuscany, and *Giufa* in Sicily.

Legends

The legendary material falls under three main headings: (a) historical, (b) religious, and (c) treasure stories. Historical legends are by far the most numerous as well as the most important. They present the popular version of history, that is, history not as it actually was but as the ordinary people would like it to be, retaining only the kernel of historical fact. Legends are often attached to particular place-names and other features of the landscape and sometimes they are only an attempt to explain the origin of a particular place-name (folk-etymology) which cannot otherwise be accounted for.

A crop of such legends preserves the memory of St Paul's Shipwreck, connected with such place-names as *San Pawl il-Baħar* (St Paul's Bay), *San Pawl Milqi* (St Paul's Welcome), and *Għajn Rażul* (The Apostle's Fountain). Another cycle of legends centre on the figure of Count Roger the Norman, who freed Malta from the rule of the Arabs. The period of Turkish ascendancy and of Moslem corsair activity – the days of the notorious Rajjes Dragut – has contributed a good number of legends, especially in Gozo, while the rule of the Knights of St John (1530-1798), together with the Inquisition, also figure in Maltese folk-memory. The hurly-burly days of the French Revolution (1798-1800) are still remembered in legend and folk-song while the period of British Rule (1800-1964) has produced mainly stories of ghostly apparitions haunting old houses and fortified buildings such as Verdala Castle and Fort St Angelo.

There are legends which centre on a religious personage, and stories told against a religious background with saints, church sites, street crosses, niches and statues as their subject-matter. In some of these one notes a popular attempt to attribute the

present site of a church to supernatural intervention prevailing over human decisions, examples being the site of the parish church at Qormi, that of the chapel of Our Lady of Loreto in the limits of Gudja, in Malta and, in Gozo, the site of the Cathedral Church and of Nadur parish church.

In yet another type of legends we learn of treasure troves discovered through the help of the family spirit (*Il-Ħares*). Such legends are generally connected with old houses dating from the days of the Knights, houses in which a hidden treasure is associated with a murdered Knight who lived in the house. The disclosure of the treasure may be subject to conditions that make it practically impossible to unearth it. Thus, 20 *skudi* lie buried under the principal gate of Imdina, destined to be taken by that couple who after a long period of married life find nothing to complain of. Needless to say, no one has ever taken the money, and the legend has given rise to the following humorous expression when referring to an unhappy couple: *Ma jmorrux għall-għoxrin skud!* (They won't go for the 20 *skudi*!)

By and large, the majority of Maltese folktales and legends follow the main stream of the European folk-tale but the subject calls for further analysis on a comparative basis.

Conclusion

We have covered much of the ground making up the field of Maltese Folklore and we have shown that Malta's folkloristic heritage is definitely rooted in a Mediterranean context. Its main constituent elements are (i) Semitic, i.e. Arabic and (ii) European. The latter element pervades practically all aspects of present-day folk-life, being of more recent origin and moulded over the past six centuries or so by contact mostly with Sicily, Italy and Spain, and with a lesser English strain introduced under British rule.

The European element is also much easier to identify, for the formative contacts with Arab culture during the 9th-13th centuries were then interrupted and under the Knights (1530-1798) exchanges could only take place in some measure through the local slave population, through piracy or trade. Emigration to North Africa in the 19th century re-opened possible routes for cultural transmission at the folk level. Otherwise, all outward traces of the preceding Arab heritage – this of course does not apply to the language – were practically obliterated by the superimposition of richer and more varied layers of European cultural elements. The influence of the Catholic Church has also been a vital factor linking Malta to Europe.

Over the past 50 years or so the present writer has studied the Maltese folklore material within the context of similar traditions recorded in countries on both sides of the Mediterranean. His general conclusion is that the affinities of Maltese folklore, already clearly established with Sicily, Italy and Spain, can also be traced in the Arabic-speaking countries of the Magħreb and the Middle East. The examples included in this chapter show that the identification of other surviving Semitic elements is important for a better appreciation of the unique synthesis with the European cultures that has occurred in these islands.

Bibliography

ATTARD, A.F., *Logħob folkloristiku ta' Għawdex*, Union Press, Valletta, 1969.
Mill-Folklor ta' Għawdex – ġabra ta' taqbil u għana folkloristiku, Għawdex, 1986.
Mill-Ħajja ta' l-Imgħoddi – Tagħrif folkloristiku minn Għawdex, Għawdex, 1991.

BERNARDY, A.A., "Forme e colori della tradizione maltese" (IV Congresso Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari, Venezia, 8-12 Settembre 1940). Estratto dalla rivista *Lares* (N. 4-5, agosto-ottobre 1940).

BEZZINA, J., *Forty Legends from Gozo – stories of bygone times*, Bugelli, Valletta, 1991.

BOISSEVAIN, J.F., *Saints and Fireworks: Religion and Politics in Rural Malta*, The Athlone Press, University of London, 1965.
Ħal Farruġ: A Village in Malta, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1969.

BONELLI, L., "Saggi del folklore dell'isola di Malta", con prefazione di G. Pitrè, *Giornale di Sicilia*, Palermo, 1895.

CASSAR, P., "Medical Folklore", in *Medical History of Malta*, Wellcome Historical Medical Library, London, 1964, pp.421-436.
"Pregnancy and Birth in Maltese Tradition", in *The Chestpiece – Journal of the Malta Medical Students Association*, April, 1976, pp.25-29.

CASSAR PULLICINO, J., *Introduction to Maltese Folklore*, Allied Malta Newspapers Ltd., Malta, 1947.
"Usi e costumi della Settimana Santa a Malta", in *Phoenix – Rivista Trimestrale di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti*, Bari, Anno II, Nos.1-2, 1956, pp.1-24.
"Nursery Vocabulary of the Maltese Archipelago", in *Orbis – Bulletin International de Documentation Linguistique*, Centre International de Dialectologie Générale, Louvain, Tome VI, No.1, 1957, pp.192-198.
Ħaġa Moħġaġa u Taħbil il-Moħħ Ieħor, Parts I-IV, Central Office of Information, Malta, 1957-1959.
Il-Folklor Malti, Malta University Press, 1960; 2nd ed. enlarged, 1975.
"Song and Dance in Malta and Gozo", in *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, London, 1961, pp.63-71.
Il-Bennejja tal-Folklor Malti, University of Malta, 1964.
Stejjer ta' Niesna, Department of Information, Malta, 1967.
(Ed), *Maltese Folklore Review*, Nos. 1-4, Giov. Muscat Printers, Valletta, 1962-1973.
Studies in Maltese Folklore, University of Malta, 1976; 2nd ed. rev. and enl., Malta University Press, 1992.
Studi di tradizioni popolari maltesi, University of Malta, 1989.
"Documentary Material relating to 'L-Imnarja' ", in *Littérature Orale Arabo-Berbère*, Association pour l'Étude des Civilisations et des Littératures de l'Afrique Septentrionale, Paris, Bulletin No.14, 1983, pp.1-98.
"Revival and Decline of 'Il-Maltija': 1844-1875", in CLEWS, H.A., (Ed): *The Year Book*, De La Salle Brothers Publications, Sliema, Malta, 1984, pp.359-364.
"Some Parallels between Maltese and Arabic Folklore", in *Acta Ethnographica*, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Ethnographical Institute, Budapest, Vol.34 (1-4), 1986-1988, pp.143-175.

CASSAR PULLICINO, J., and GALLEY, M., *Femmes de Malte dans les chants traditionnels*, Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, Paris, 1981.
"Oral Poetry in the Maltese Islands: Imagery relating to Love", in NEWALL, V., (Ed.), *International Folklore Review – Folklore Studies from Overseas*, New Abbey Publications, London, Vol.7, 1990, pp.97-101.

CIANTAR, G., "Appendice in cui si da una breve notizia d'alcune antiche usanze dei Maltesi, e della indole e dei costumi loro in generale", in ABELA, G.F., *Malta Illustrata, ovvero Descrizione di Malta ...* corretta, accresciuta e continovata dal Conte Giovannantonio CIANTAR, Stamperia del Palazzo, Malta, Libro Primo e Secondo, 1772, pp.770-813.

CORSO, R., "Malta e le sue feste", in *Maltese Folklore Review*, Vol.1, No.1, 1962, pp.3-7.

CREMONA, A., "Race, Language and Myth", in *Melita – an English and Italian Monthly Periodical*, Valletta, Vol.1, September 1921, pp.394-405.

"Maltese Funeral Customs", *op. cit.*, Vol.II, June 1922, pp.249-259.

"Weather and Husbandry Lore in the Isles of Malta", in *Archivum Melitense*, Società Storico-Scientifica Maltese, Valletta, Vol.VI, No.1, 1922, pp.1-41.

Is the Maid of Mosta a Myth? Reprinted from *The Journal of the Malta University Literary Society*, No.10, March 1934.

Folklor u Lsien Malti. Reprinted from *Leħen il-Malti*, Nos.158-160 and 161-162, Għaqda tal-Malti (Università), Valletta, 1944.

"Folklore Maltese – Lingua, Credenze e Costumi", in *Folklore*, No.1-2, R. Pironti e Figli, Napoli, 1954.

"Le relazioni etnografiche del folklore narrativo e leggendario delle isole di Malta", in *Maltese Folklore Review*, Vol.1, Nos.1-3, 1962-1966, Giov. Muscat & Co. Ltd Printers, Valletta, 1966.

DE GUIGNARD, F.E., Comte de Saint Priest, *Malte, par un voyageur françois*, Malte, 1791.

FARINI, A., *Fiabe, leggende e tradizioni maltesi*, 3 vols., Tipografia Casa di San Giuseppe, Ħamrun, 1934-1936.

GALANTI, B.M., *La Danza della Spada in Italia*, R. Università di Roma e R. Museo di Etnografia Italiana, Roma, 1946.

GALEA, L., and MURRAY, M.A., *Maltese Folk Tales*, Empire Press, Malta, 1932.

GALLEY, M., "A Mediterranean Hero", in *Journal of Maltese Studies*, University of Malta, No.7, 1971, pp.64-70.

ILG, B., *Maltesische Märchen und Schwänke*, 2 vols., G. Schönfeld's Verlagsbuchhandlung, Leipzig, 1906.

ILG, B., and STUMME, H., *Maltesische Volkslieder im Urtext mit Deutscher Übersetzung*, J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, Leipzig, 1909.

KOESSLER-ILG, B., and CASSAR PULLICINO, J., "200 Maltese Folksongs", collected in 1909-1912 and edited, with translation and introduction by J. Cassar Pullicino, in *Maltese Folklore Review*, No.1, 1962, pp.1-39.

LANFRANCO, G., *Duwa u Semm fil-Ħxejjex Maltin*, Klabb Kotba Maltin, Valletta, 1975.

LEGEY, F., *Folklore of Morocco*, translated by Lucy Holtz, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1935.

MAGRI, E., *Ħrejjef Missirijietna*, "Kotba tal-Mogħdija taż-Żmien", Nos 15, 18, 29, 38-39, A.M. Galea, Valletta, 1902-1904.

X'Jgħid il-Malti fuq id-Dinja ta' Taħt u fuq ir-Rjieħ, "Kotba tal-Mogħdija taż-Żmien", No.44, A.M. Galea, Valletta, 1905.

X'Jgħid il-Malti jew l-Għerf bla Miktub tal-Maltin, Stamperija tas-Salesjani, Malta, 1925.

"Précis de Mythologie Maltaise", *Actes du XIV Congrés International des Orientalistes*, Alger, 1905 – Deuxieme Section, Paris, 1907, pp.23-55. Reproduced in *Maltese Folklore Review*, Vol.1, No.2, 1963, pp.102-109.

MIFSUD-CHIRCOP, G., *A Type-Index of the Maltese Folktale within the Mediterranean Tradition Area*, Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Malta, 1978.

MIFSUD-CHIRCOP, M., *Motif-Index of the Maltese Folktale*, Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Malta, 1981.
MUSCAT-AZZOPARDI, I., " 'Il-Maltija' – Maltese National Dance", Malta Carnival Committee, *Malta Carnival Programme 1957*, pp.19-28.
NASELLI C., "Manto Siciliano e 'Faldetta' Maltese", in *Bollettino Storico Catanese*, Anno V, 1940. Reproduced in *Maltese Folklore Review*, Vol.1., No.3, 1966, pp.217-225.
PISANI, Ġ., *Għawdex joħlom fil-leġġendi*, Gozo Press, Għawdex, 1980.
PITRÈ, G., *Indovinelli, dubbi, scioglilingua del popolo siciliano*, Carlo Clausen, Torino-Palermo, 1897.
Medicina popolare siciliana, Edizione Nazionale XIX – G. Barbera, Firenze, 1940.
PRINS, A.H.J., *In Peril on the Sea – Marine Votive Paintings in the Maltese Islands*, Said International Ltd., Valletta, 1989.
SCHIAVONE, M. (ed.), *Il-Purċissjonijiet tal-Ġimgħa l-Kbira f'Malta u Għawdex* bi preżentazzjoni ta' Alexander Bonnici OFM Conv. Pubblikazzjonijiet Indipendenza, Pietà, 1992.
Il-Knejjes Parrokkjali ta' Malta u l-Festi tagħhom, Vol. I u II, bi preżentazzjoni ta' Alexander Bonnici OFM Conv., Pubblikazzjonijiet Indipendenza, Pietà, 1993.
STUMME, H., *Maltesische Studien. Eine Sammlung prosaischer und poetischer Texte in maltesische Sprache nebst Erläuterungen*, J.C. Hinrichs, Leipzig, 1904.
WETTINGER, G., "The Arabs in Malta", in *Mid-Med Bank Limited: Report and Accounts 1984*, pp.23-37.
ZAMMIT MAEMPEL, G., "The Evil Eye and Protective Cattle Horns in Malta", in *Folklore*, The Folklore Society, London, Vol.79, 1968, pp.1-16.