

Living on Fishing, Caught in the Market: The Maltese fishing communities, 1860s-1920.

John Chircop

Department of History, *University of Malta*

The absence of the fishing folk, of their daily livelihood, communal ways of life and culture, characterizes modern Maltese historiography.¹ This conspicuous neglect must be treated as a serious omission indeed, particularly when one considers the fact that we are dealing with the history of a small archipelago. Certainly, the lack of early official quantitative and qualitative sources on Maltese fishing culture, apart that is from the rudimentary annotations in censuses or colonial reports published from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, has definitely not assisted the generation of research interest in this field of inquiry. More disturbingly still, conventional authors have interpreted this scarcity of official records on the fishing people as proof of their irrelevance to Maltese history. This is indeed an essentially linear view of history, narrowly positivist in nature, which alas still structures the bulk of Maltese historical productions. In contrast, to the critical historiographer, it is immediately apparent that the causes of such a surprising neglect are of a methodological, historiographical as much as of a historical nature.

Adopting this critical historical approach, the present study treats the exclusion of these coastal labouring people and their daily work activities from modern Maltese historiography as replicating the *laissez-faire* attitude and practice of the colonial state during most of the nineteenth century, which discarded domestic fishing culture. It was only on some occasions that the administration gave a fleeting look to this sector, airing the idea that this indigenous economic activity was insignificant, and thus inconsequential to Malta's 'modern' colonial economy, if anything because of a supposed low productivity of the surrounding seas. This long-standing stance, expressed in various official comments, was employed as a legitimizing device for the actual abandonment of this economic sector, and of the fishing population, by the governing establishment, whose principal task was to secure Malta's role as a strategic imperial outpost in the Mediterranean. In the context of the resulting economic system, imperial spending and native capital flows were directed into the naval-military infrastructure and the trade facilities located in the Grand Harbour area, while most indigenous productive activities were starved of capital. The impact left on the fishing sector by this economic

¹ For a critique of Maltese maritime historiography, see J. Chircop, 'Maltese Maritime Historiography: A Critical Assessment' in G. Harlaftis and C. Vassallo (eds.), *New Directions in Mediterranean Maritime History. Research in Maritime History*, No.28, St John's Newfoundland, 2004, 83-101.

system, managed by the colonial state and articulated with the dominant market relations, during the period under review, forms the central concern of this study.

Against this structural economic backdrop, this work will focus on the nodal problems actually faced by the fishers in their daily exertions. Extensive space is here allocated to an investigation of the inequitable market relations occurring in the wholesale fish-market (*Pixkerija*). The ways in which this market institution hindered the transformation of domestic fishing from a traditional and low productivity activity into a viable commercialized sector, and how it kept the fishers' standards of living at subsistence level, are discussed in some detail. Certainly, investigating in some depth the structure and operations of this institution, and particularly the dominant role of the middlemen, will trigger a further inquiry on how these coastal fishing people managed to survive as households and as communities in coastal villages in the long term, considering their total exclusion from any state assistance or legal protection from market exploitation. Moreover, to add to their proverbial burdens, the state, during the period under review, was gradually making itself present in the lives of the fishing people but only through the imposition of restrictions on traditional fishing and by curbing, or strictly prohibiting, access to large stretches of the sea and coastal areas, particularly in the Grand Harbour, officially in order to protect spawning fish from depletion.

The present study reads this official 'fish protection' claim as being employed by the colonial establishment to justify its greater encroachments and control over increasingly larger extensions of sea waters and coastline which had previously been common or public property. In this context one needs to interpret the non-customary, or unlawful, fishing methods employed by numerous fishers during these times as part of a shared survival strategy. In this way, of course, the fishing people themselves are brought to the centre of analysis. Their own world-views, perceptions, indigenous knowledge as much as their endurance, collective acts of dissent, and persistent resistance to increasing restrictions are examined as strategies which they employed during hard times, when poverty gave way to destitution. Throughout this work, the fishing folk are not only considered as victims but also shown as protagonists in a relentless, daily struggle for existence, trying to forge ways and means to make ends meet, improve their everyday living conditions and to mitigate total impoverishment in a landscape of high risk, vulnerability, and routine exploitation.

Abandoning an indigenous fishing culture: Official practice and discourse

The Mediterranean Sea has not been considered as particularly productive in terms of fish when compared to other seas and oceans,² even though the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 initiated a process termed Lessepsian migration, which caused an inflow of fish from the Red Sea and the India Ocean, thus increasing the variety of species to be found in the Mediterranean waters.³ It was only those coastal zones bordering the Atlantic Ocean, together with the main straits – those of Gibraltar, Messina, and the Bosphorus, that have been

² F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, New York, 1972, i, 138.

³ S. Anderson, *The Encircling Sea. The Mediterranean Maritime Civilisation*, London, 1990, 29.

reputed to have access to the wider varieties of fish.⁴ In the inner seas, the waters off the Tunisian, Sardinian, and Sicilian coasts have been renowned for specialized fishing, the latter for their traditional tuna *mattanza*. At the same time, the Andalusians, the French, and the Genoese specialized in fishing and processing anchovy. Against this backdrop, in the central Mediterranean, Maltese fishers have not been renowned in the region for any specialized fishing.

In Malta itself, at least by the early nineteenth century, the idea that the surrounding sea was not so productive in fish had gained ground in government discourse. The state's long-standing silence on the fisheries was occasionally punctuated by marginal comments, and the issuing of sparse official documents and colonial literature,⁵ backed by little real investigation, propounding that fishing was insignificant to the Maltese economy, also because – from what was officially known – the surrounding sea did not yield the fish required to satisfy the demands of the local population.⁶ This claim rested on the officially recorded low catches made by the visibly ill-organized domestic fishing economy. All in all the state's attitude and sparse official comments reflected the prevalent British colonial attitude that looked on the surrounding seas as a geo-strategic asset: a powerful conception which accompanied, and obviously sanctioned, the stepping-up of Malta as an imperial naval-military outpost and commercial centre but which at the same time relegated all traditional coastal economic activities to the margins of the state's political-economic agenda. Accordingly, with the development of the island's imperial naval-military role in the 1840s, and more assertively after the Crimean War (1854-56), British imperial capital expenditure was injected into the construction, modernization and maintenance of the fortifications and defensive system, and the building of an internal colonial infrastructure located within the Grand Harbour parameters. This same process drew the bulk of available native capital into less risky concerns, principally in trade, shipping and ancillary services. Consequently, capital allocations intended to stimulate local production, were thin and far in between, and indeed almost non-existent when it came to the fishing sector. Not surprisingly it was only in 1895 that one shipping family-owned business, Messrs Gollcher – established in Malta during the early nineteenth century – made a tentative investment in a deep-sea trawling venture.⁷ The main attraction which induced Gollcher to go for this enterprise was in fact the low cost of the fixed capital involved, owing to the purchasing of trawling equipment 'at a very good price' from the government,⁸ following the failed experiments made by an officially sponsored British trawler expedition earlier that year.⁹ But even with the advantage of such a low-risk head-start, the Gollcher trawling venture collapsed, reportedly due to the extensive 'wear and tear costs' involved.¹⁰ It would take some 36 more years for a Maltese

⁴ E. Bradford, *The Mediterranean Portrait of a Sea*, Malta, 1989, 48.

⁵ Cf. For instance E. Blacquiere, *Letters from the Mediterranean, containing a civil and political account of Sicily, Tripoli and Malta*, London, 1812, ii, 279.

⁶ Cf. H. Bowen-Jones et. al., *Malta. Background for Development*, Durham, 1962, 117.

⁷ *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 23 July 1895.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 22 Mar. 1895.

⁹ W.H. Burns, *Report on the Trawling experiments*, Malta, 1895.

¹⁰ *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 12 Dec. 1911.

trawling company to be established, in 1931, on firmer grounds. Operating in waters between Tunisia and Lampedusa, the latter would achieve a measure of solvency.¹¹

Apart from such rare and ill-planned attempts, during the period under review the domestic fishing economy was left languishing in a primitive, unorganized and severely undercapitalized condition. Meanwhile, the expanding domestic demand for fish was being increasingly serviced by Maltese business firms through the importation of frozen and tinned fish.¹² At different times of the year, fresh and salted fish, including mackerel, sardines, and tuna, was also brought to the local market from North African and Italian fishing centres.¹³ Moreover, modern trawlers, mainly those registered in southern Italian ports which exploited fishing grounds traditionally used by the Maltese, frequently landed large volumes of fish in Malta.¹⁴ The clustering of all these difficulties showed the extent to which Maltese traditional fishing was becoming exposed to a myriad of uncontrollable variables, but at the same time made it clear that the chief problem lay with the abandoned, unorganised, primitive state of the local fishing culture.

The sustained presence of fishing villages in specific coastal zones of the archipelago, with a distinct traditional social formation and unique culture of their own, indicated the sustainability of fishing as an occupation in the long term. This can be said at least in connection to the larger fishing villages of Marsaxlokk, Wied iz-Zurrieq, Marsascala, Marsamxett, St Julian's Bay, St Paul's Bay, Mellieha, and Marsalforn in Malta, and Xlendi (Dwejra) and Mgarr (Hondoq ir-Rummien and Nadur) in Gozo, and these apart from the presence of various other fishing groups in other towns or hamlets.¹⁵ Lacking any written records by these fishing communities themselves, most of whose members were illiterate, the nearest one can get to any written descriptions of their life-style and livelihood is through contemporary narratives by Maltese chroniclers who had some direct encounters with them. The work of P.P. Castagna, written in the Maltese language, paid direct attention to the common people's knowledge and practical wisdom (which on many occasions contradicted official government discourse) affirming, for instance, that Maltese seas produced sufficient quantities of fish and sea food to feed substantial proportions of the population.¹⁶ This claim would be corroborated during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when ichthyologists and fishing experts, followed by popular writers and reporters, confirmed that in effect the waters surrounding the Maltese islands were 'comparatively rich' in varieties of fish and other fauna.¹⁷ Come early twentieth century, studies by expert Joseph Borg catalogued some 240 species of fish in Maltese waters¹⁸ while Giuseppe Despott listed 272.¹⁹ Such accumulating scientific evidence also indirectly pointed to the disorganized, undercapitalized, and primitive condition of Maltese fishing itself as the real causes for the usually modest

¹¹ J. Hornell, *The Fishing Industry in Malta and Suggestions for its development*, Malta, 1933, 21.

¹² J. Borg, 'Fisheries of Malta', in A. MacMillan (ed.), *Malta and Gibraltar. Illustrated, Historical and Descriptive. Commercial and Industrial Facts, Figures and Resources*, London, 1915, 243.

¹³ Cf. *Custom House Report*, Malta, 1906; J. Borg, 'Notes on Agriculture' in *Report of the Royal Commission 1911-1912*, London, 1912, Appendix B, 20.

¹⁴ Hornell, 21.

¹⁵ *Censuses of the Maltese Islands, 1861-1891*.

¹⁶ P.P. Castagna, *Lis-Storia ta Malta bil Gzejer Tahha*, Malta, 1888, i, 323-24.

¹⁷ Borg, 'Fisheries of Malta', 243; G. Despott, *The Ichthyology of Malta*, Malta, 1919.

¹⁸ Borg, 'Fisheries of Malta', 243.

¹⁹ Despott, *passim*.

catches made by Maltese fishers, rather than any particularly low fertility of the surrounding sea waters.

At the very least experts were also acknowledging that the structure of the domestic fish-market was hindering the modernization of the fishing economy and was keeping the fishing population in poverty. Instead of generating substantial income from their fresh supplies, which would enable the fishers themselves to invest in the upgrading of their archaic small boats and implements, the wholesale market took all surplus profit away from them, continuously depressing their standard of living. Throughout the period framing this study, the principal fishing boats in use were the *ferilla*, the *luzzu*, the *kajjik*, and the *frejgatina* – equipped with traditional fishing equipment, including an ample variety of traps (*nasses*), fishnets (*xbieki*), or long-lines (*konzijiet*).²⁰ While all craft and other equipment used were not capital intensive, substantial investment was beyond the reach of most fisher-folk, given the generally low incomes. The locally-manufactured *luzzu* or *kajjik*, for example, represented hefty sums of money which only a few could afford, while their repair and maintenance proved even more burdensome.²¹ Maltese fishers were therefore constrained to continue short-term fishing of pelagic fish on their traditional sailing boats, unable to increase in any substantial way their usually modest catches. In this way, very large catches of fish were rare. Popular stories about exceptionally large catches were told and retold and are still transmitted orally, in fishing villages, mainly by their elderly.²² Exceptionally good catches brought in by Maltese boats were also noted by the local press. One such instance occurred on 22 March 1895, when an observer described the excitement created at Marsamxett, when news of a large catch spread:

In one instance alone, no less than 400 [fish] were caught in the same net, the average weight per fish being down at 5 lbs. If this state of affairs continues, we shall honestly hope that, Lent though it be, our table will shortly be supplied with delicacy for next to a mere nothing ... The fish were eagerly bought up at half a crown a piece.²³

This was a good catch at the right time: when consumer demand was at its peak for Lent.

Traditional fishing was certainly determined by the season, with the most important catches being landed during summer up till November/early December with the *lampuki* season, to which the fisher folk devoted extensive, time-consuming, preparation. The swordfish season, extending from April to mid-August (with June usually being the best month), was also significant. It was this seasonal fishing which timed the expectations of the Maltese consumers for specific fish:

Garfish (*msell*): from September to November

coryphaene (*lampuki*): from September to November/December

bream and Spanish mackerel: from May to August

swordfish and horse mackerel (*kavalli*): from April to August

²⁰ Castagna, i, 324.

²¹ Borg, 'Fisheries of Malta', 243; *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 7 Mar. 1914.

²² Cf. G. Orlando Smith, 'It-Tunnara 11', *Is-Sajd*, no.17, Malta, 1953.

²³ 'A Good catch', *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 22 Mar. 1895.

sardines: from March to September.²⁴

Besides being influenced by the seasonality of fresh supplies, traditionally consumer demand was also determined by the religious calendar. Being central to the people's way of life, religious culture played an important part in shaping weekly fluctuations in demand for fish. Most people were usually very observant of their obligations to abstain from meat on Fridays and Wednesdays, opting instead to consume fish, as they also did on an annual cycle during Lent and other vigils. Market prices of fish went up marginally during abstention days and rose by an average of 30 to 35 per cent during Lent, when demand for fish soared.²⁵ But this rise in retail prices for the consumers did not result in increased earnings for the fishers, as it did for the middlemen and, to a lower degree, for the numerous fish mongers and hawkers, a substantial number of whom were women.

Afflicted by the middlemen at the Pixkerija market

The majority of the fishers came to rely on the middlemen or brokers (*sensara*),²⁶ who controlled the wholesale fish market, if they wanted to secure a basic living from their catches. Identifiable brokers had cash readily available to buy directly and in bulk from fishers landing their catches at the *Pixkerija*. Cash in hand, they negotiated sales, keeping firm control on all the transactions going on in the market. Apart from their role as official mediators between fishers and retailers, before the 1906 regulations and hence throughout the nineteenth century, the middlemen were also responsible for the physical control and supervision of the fish-market, a role which greatly enhanced their monopoly over all dealings, activities, and transfers within the *Pixkerija* space. In this way, they had unrestricted room to use manipulative strategies to consolidate their power and influence over the fisher folk. As knowledge and management of movement, entry to and exit from the market was crucial for the middlemen, paid agents were employed. The latter were always 'on the spot', even making it a habit to sleep there, in order to be the first to take hold of the catches brought during the night and early morning. Agents also assisted the middlemen in practically everything, including the handling and shifting of crates full of fish from the main stalls to reserved, or 'hidden', locations for a specific time, and to make them available at the right time when prices had gone up.²⁷

The middlemen made their profits through face-to-face negotiations with the fishers. Although fish was officially sold by 'open' auction, bidding was customarily carried out *sotto voce*, at low voice, or whispering 'in the ears'. Uninformed of the real prices – or profit margins – which their catches were actually fetching on the market, and having no other option available, fishers had to accept the lowest possible (usually pre-stipulated) returns and came out of the market extremely demoralized. Through these inequitable market relations and practices, most of the profits made were accumulated in the middleman's pockets with no

²⁴ Castagna, i, 223.

²⁵ Hornell, 27.

²⁶ Borg, 'Fisheries of Malta', 243.

²⁷ Hornell, 25.

possibility of any portion being reinvested into the fishing sector or in any related productive activity, while the fishers themselves never made enough to raise their low standard of living and reinvest in their occupation. For fishery expert Joseph Borg, even as late as 1914, these market conditions and middlemen practices were ‘objectionable methods ... which victimised the fishers’²⁸ on all counts.

The fisher folk, most of whom were illiterate,²⁹ uncultivated in business practice, lacking a profit-seeking acumen and deprived of legal protection, found themselves exposed and repeatedly exploited in the *Pixkerija*. Living in a subsistence economy, they were in constant need of cash to purchase provisions and other essentials for their households. Frequently, fishers became indebted to particular middlemen who advanced cash for the purchase of fishing gear or for boat repair or maintenance, or simply to cover living expenses during bad seasons when fishers found themselves penniless. It was this constant need for cash in hand which kept the fishing folk in a state of subjugation to the middlemen:

Like the farmer the fisherman has to deal with the middleman. He has to be content with what is offered for his catch by the person who has the money in his pocket and can buy wholesale. Profits there are gained at the fish market, they are not gained by the man who supplies the market.³⁰

However, this should not be taken to mean that the fishing people were totally ignorant of what was happening around them in the market place, and especially of the blatant abuse by the middlemen. On the contrary, the growing volume of oral history recordings of personal narratives, recollections, life histories, and interviews with members of fishing communities on the history of their families’ experiences in the *Pixkerija* presents a shared collective memory of unrelenting mistreatment and direct exploitation by the middlemen, especially by those who supplied credit.³¹ Episodes of relatives, neighbours or friends having been compelled to hand over to an identified middleman most of their catch for a set time and others who had to sell their craft and fishing implements to pay back debt, are still vividly recounted. This widespread sense of mistreatment provides the background for narratives of shared survival strategies employed by households and neighbourhood, resting on a combination of self-help and forms of reciprocal assistance, which are stressed as having been fundamental for their continued existence and collective sense of identity as village communities.³²

With no legal protection, and even less financial assistance from the government or any other institution, the fisher folk, even more than the peasantry who were identically afflicted by the middlemen in the *Pitkali*,³³ continued to be subjugated to the dictates of the fish-

²⁸ Borg, ‘Fisheries of Malta’, 243.

²⁹ *Report on the Working of the Government Departments during the Financial year, 1920-1921*, Malta, 1921.

³⁰ *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 7 Dec.1911.

³¹ Oral history interviews conducted by R. Callus (2003-04); J. Chircop (1993, 2006) in various Maltese fishing villages; H. Galea and P. Vella with Gozitan fisher folks (2003, 2004) deposited at the Public Memory Centre, Department of History, University of Malta.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ J. Chircop, ‘Underdevelopment: The Maltese Experience 1880-1914; Unpublished MA thesis University of Malta, 1987, 25-7.

market system. Even during the 1870s, at a time when the colonial state was modifying its previous *laissez-faire* policy and increasing its intervention in the domestic social, economic, and cultural spheres, the administration did not interfere with the middlemen. It was only in 1896 that the first attempts were made to partially check the workings of the traditional *Pixkerija* system. Yet, then again, the regulations issued in June of that year, which restricted the sale of fish to no longer than one hour after sunset of the day in which these were caught,³⁴ were immediately revoked four days later,³⁵ most probably owing to pressures made by the powerful business and brokers' lobby. The fishing people's predicament being totally ignored, the colonial state waited until the first decade of the twentieth century to launch another attempt to partially modify the operations of the traditional wholesale fish market. To be more precise, this effort would form part of the state's consolidation of an internal regulatory infrastructure, which was intended to intensify the imposition of social control and 'order' over the labouring population, starting with public gathering spaces such as the central markets.³⁶ At this juncture in time, the June 1906 Fish Markets Sanitary Regulations redefined the role of the middlemen in the wholesale fish market, confining it to that of mediator between the fishers and the retailers³⁷ and removing from them all other responsibilities in the market space which came to be viewed as crucial for the maintenance of public health.³⁸ Notwithstanding, these regulations had very little impact on the vulnerable position of the fishers in the market, as they did nothing to protect them from the middlemen system. As a contemporary journalist incisively put it late in 1911, in the *Pixkerija* the Maltese fishers were still at the mercy of the middlemen. They were 'not free to sell what they are free to get'.³⁹

Social formation, shared economy, and survival strategies

Structural market disadvantages kept the fishing people's principal form of income artificially low, generating conditions of poverty which gave way to destitution with a bad fishing season or the sickness or death of a breadwinner. Nonetheless, in contrast to the received historical perceptions of these fishers as laid-back subjects, these people operated their own strategies in attempts to lessen dependence on the middlemen, to secure supplementary income and other provisions for themselves and their household, and to mitigate destitution. They relied on a combination of self-help and shifting reciprocal assistance from household, extended family, and neighbours, not only when in need, but also habitually in order to reduce total dependence on the market system, even though the latter could not but remain a basic source of income. Traditional fishing practices rested on the

³⁴ *Malta Government Gazette*, 1 June 1896.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5 June 1896.

³⁶ J. Chircop, 'Brokers, Collectors and Collaborators: Mediating Colonial Modernisation in Malta, 1880-1914', *Proceedings of History Week 2003*, Malta, 2004, 43-56.

³⁷ *Malta Government Gazette*, 22 June 1906.

³⁸ As late as 1933, the prevailing conditions in the *Pixkerija* and the smaller local fish markets were still very unhygienic. James Hornell describes the conditions and utensils used at the Valletta *Pixkerija* as 'hotbeds of putrificative bacteria' (Hornell, 25).

³⁹ *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 7 Dec. 1911.

extensive use of the social capital and the abilities and skills found in their household and their community. The fishing venture itself was essentially a shared economy, characterized by its own particular internal social structure and customs. Usually involving a core fishing crew of five to nine,⁴⁰ and sometimes up to twelve fishers, most of whom were members of the same extended family, expeditions were managed by the *padrun*, who owned the fishing boat and most of the implements. Each individual member of the crew would take a share of the catch, which was divided in quotas,⁴¹ while the *padrun* would get the larger portion, at least one-and-a-half times over and above his individual share. Certainly there were variations on this typical sharing arrangement, with cases of boats owned in common not being infrequent.⁴² When members from the same household or extended family (skippers and sometimes in-laws) owned the boat and the fishing equipment, the fish yield was partaken in equal quotas, but with the largest portion going for the upkeep, repair, or purchase of individual craft and implements.

In this kind of economic culture, members of the household, relatives and neighbours shared in the incessant toil which the fishing occupation involved. The mending of fishing nets and rigging, the repair and the maintenance of the craft, sails, traps, and equipment, particularly outside the main fishing seasons, involved the direct participation of all, including women and children. But aside from their involvement in the fishing venture itself, all household members also generated supplementary income from skilled occupations ancillary to fishing, including some traditional petty-manufacture, the most worthy being the making of fishing lines and tackle. Considered to be of 'superb quality and strength',⁴³ these were constantly in demand by several fishing communities located on the North African coast, and remained an item of export until the maritime havoc created during the First World War. When war ended, many of those who were skilled in this manufacture started abandoning their occupation, if not the fishing mode of living altogether, and very few skilled others were found to take their place.⁴⁴

To supplement the income-generating activities of the different household members, fishers themselves, apart from their primary occupation, found some other employment. It needs to be stressed that employment opportunities in the formal economy for the fisher folk were very restricted, as most of them were illiterate and considered unable to take on skilled jobs needed in urban areas. The majority found it difficult to leave the coastal communities where they had been born and bred and to change their daily habits and customary life style. Even the first report of the newly-established Maltese government Fisheries Department, in 1921, would view 'the bulk of [the fishers as] totally illiterate and practically unable to take up any other occupation, besides being unquestionably unfit for emigration'.⁴⁵

With most of the more secure employment opportunities closed to them, living on meagre returns and in harsh material conditions, totally exposed to the exploitation on the wholesale market, fisher folks utilized all means at their disposal to generate some other income or

⁴⁰ Borg, 'Fisheries of Malta', 243.

⁴¹ *Report of the Royal Commission 1911-1912*, London 1912, 140.

⁴² A.H.J. Prins, *In Peril On the Sea – marine votive paintings in the Maltese Islands*, Malta, 1986, 27.

⁴³ Chamber of Commerce Archive, Valletta, 'Corrispondenza Ricevuta 1922', 'Re. Manufacture of Fishing Lines, Report from W. Camilleri to Secretary Committee for Development of Local Industries, 27 April 1922'.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Report on the Department of Fisheries for year 1920-21*, Malta, 1921, 51.

procure provisions. During particularly hard times, many turned to non-customary, even unlawful, fishing practices which, though unsustainable in the long-term, must have helped them to make a living. Fishers employed net-dragging and other methods which caught fish indiscriminately and in the shortest time possible off coast, but also in the inner Grand Harbour waters and at the mouths of public sewers.⁴⁶ The damage caused by dragging nets came to be surpassed by the use of dynamite which became more common during the first decade or so of the twentieth century, causing great destruction of fish not only off the coast but also in the ports.⁴⁷ The continuous use of these non-customary fishing methods indicates these peoples' narrowing options to make a decent living, particularly during hard times, which the last years of the nineteenth and the early ones of the twentieth centuries proved to be.

For the colonial state, these unconventional methods of fishing provided a further pretext to restrict, and even prohibit, fishing and other coastal customs from the various locations which were coming under the Admiralty's control, or becoming adjacent to waters and coastal terrain that it controlled. Chiefly concerned with keeping the Grand Harbour waters clear and safe primarily for the Royal Navy, the colonial authorities started to limit access to and public usage of larger extents of the coastline and patches of sea in the Grand Harbour and other ports. Regulations on customary fishing had already been issued with the 1861 draft ordinance 'for the protection of spawning fish', which made it possible only to holders of government-issued licences to utilize specified fishing implements in the ports and along the shallow waters around the island.⁴⁸ With the new 1873 regulations (made stricter still in 1875), a substantial list of fishing implements which could be used in specified creeks, coastal beaches, and ports, and during specific times, was issued. These regulations, the administration claimed, were to be taken as preventive measures against the destruction of fish stocks before maturity.⁴⁹ Sanctioning these state regulations was the real concern by Maltese middle class groups resident in these zones over the depletion of fish in the harbour creeks. They solicited enforcement of the law through petitions, such as the one of 1892 by 'interested' residents living in the Grand Harbour area, which requested the prohibition of fishing in those waters and asked for more measures to be adopted to prevent the 'destruction of small fry'.⁵⁰ But, as with other policies, it was as part of the previously mentioned colonial state regulatory regime, unleashed in the first decade of the twentieth century, that strict regulations and their enforcement really started with the regulations of 1904 and 1909/10. These followed the recommendations of a commission⁵¹ which had been appointed to examine the 'fish situation' and to present suggestions for the preservation of spawn fish. The commission had insisted on tighter rules and on sterner police enforcement, especially in the use of instruments 'dragged along the sea bottom'. With the 1910 regulations adopted by the Council of Government, restrictions on access and fishing usage were extended over larger areas of what came to be defined as 'protected waters' and coastline. Fishing was

⁴⁶ *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 20 April 1894; 8 Nov. 1892.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 11 Nov. 1913.

⁴⁸ *Malta Government Gazette*, 10 May 1861.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 14 Nov. 1873; 29 Jan. 1875.

⁵⁰ *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 13 Jan. 1892.

⁵¹ *Report of the Commission appointed to enquire on the question of the preservation of young fish and the advisability of amending the existing fishing regulations*, Malta, 1909.

prohibited in those waters, and from coastal and seashore locations which came under military or naval control, or were adjacent to the dockyards and the French Creek, and in Rinella and Kalkara which came under the jurisdiction of the Admiralty.⁵² Interpreted as unfair state impositions with a devastating effect on their daily livelihood, these fishing restrictions created a great deal of consternation, many complaints, and a lingering resistance on the part of the fishing folk who had been using these newly-enclosed spaces for generations. For sure, these series of constraints eroded the possibility of their making a living by fishing alone for most of the year. Moreover, the discourse by which the colonial state, through its bureaucrats and technicians, and relayed by a supportive press,⁵³ attempted to legitimize its encroachment on traditional coastal and marine common property and the strict regulation of traditional fishing as necessary for the protection, and the reproduction of fish, was being sharply contradicted by the pollution of the coast and waters by the toxins and other waste dumped by the naval establishments, dockyards, and other naval-military facilities, besides the power station and the unattended drainage flows. The constant naval manoeuvres in the immediate coastal waters, especially when torpedoes were used, were also devastating marine life in and out of the harbour and other ports such as Marsaxlokk.⁵⁴ Moreover, by the 1880s, the sea fauna in Kalkara Creek was already being depleted owing to the intense contamination emanating from the gas factory there.⁵⁵ With this level of pollution going on generally unrestrained, it became ever more obvious that the real purpose behind the colonial state's mounting fishing restrictions was to secure constant surveillance and direct control over large tracts of the coast and sea waters for its own strategic purposes, more than any direct interest in safeguarding the marine habitat.

From the perspective of the fishing people, spaces and waters that in living memory had been common property, accessed and used in multiple ways by themselves and other members of the public, particularly the poor, were now being taken over by the state. From that point in time onwards, entry was prohibited and customary usage of the natural resources, including fish and seafood, located there was criminalized as trespassing, as acts of theft or larceny, or infringements of state, army and admiralty security rules. This intensified the fishing people's disaffection against and negative conception of the state, bringing them to the same level as those held against the middlemen. Both were seen as repressive, making their livelihood more difficult by narrowing down their opportunities to make a living out of traditional fishing in the immediate coastal waters and thus forcing them to venture even further to remote waters, usually unprepared and ill-equipped, in their small boats. Fishing in far-off, and frequently unknown and unpredictable seas stepped up the already high risks

⁵² The 1910 Regulations were followed-up and amended during the First World War, by the September 1914, January 1918, and April 1919 Regulations which again imposed that 'It shall not be lawful to use other than these instruments: the line; eel nuose (kannicc); the shrimp-net (copp tal gambli); casting-net (terrieha); the basket-trap (nassi tal-ghalf) of not less than ½ meshes; the fish spear (foxxna); cuttle catcher (gulpara), the trap ... without a licence from the Superintendent of Ports. Such licence shall specify in which, and the time during which, the instrument may be used and shall contain any other condition that the Superintendent of Ports may deem it expedient to impose for preventing the destruction of spawn and young fish and for the protection of fish-breeding. No fishing shall be permitted in Dockyard Creek and in French Creek' (*Malta Government Gazette*, 4 April 1919).

⁵³ *The Malta Chronicle*, 8 November 1892; 20 April 1894.

⁵⁴ Castagna, ii, 474.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, i, 58-9.

faced by fishing crews. Not so infrequently, fishermen lost their lives at sea.⁵⁶ The numerous episodes orally evoked by the fisher folk, represented in votive paintings and depicted in popular literature, dramatically recall and prove the extent to which Maltese fishers, besides being exploited on land, continued to perceive themselves as being at the mercy of the sea in their efforts to make a living.

⁵⁶ The worst recorded accident at sea during the period examined here occurred in November 1895 when a fishing boat with a crew of nine 'went missing'. On this, see G. Faurè, *L'Istorja ta Malta u Ghawdex bil-gzejjer taghom u l-grajjiet li saru fihom*, Malta, 1913, iv, 376. Prins mentions some other accidents during, before and after the period reviewed here, in connection with maritime votive paintings (Prins, 86, 105).