

MALTESE DEATH MOURNING AND FUNERAL CUSTOMS*

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Sir James Frazer's communication of a coroner's note about "Beliefs Regarding Death in Cumberland" has suggested to me that I might put on record Maltese funeral customs now extant, some of which are analogous to those noticed in Cumberland.

Amongst our middle and lower classes the practice still lingers of placing a dish of salt on the stomach of the corpse, whether male or female. The popular belief in Malta is that salt prevents early decomposition. Certeux and Carnoy give the following interpretation of a practice by Arabs in Algeria: "Il est de convenance religieuse. . . de lui poser sur le ventre (of a dead person) quelque chose de pesant afin de prévenir le gonflement." One of our Maltese sayings runs:

"Imut il-ghani u jmut il-fqir
It-tnejn jitmellhu ghal gewwa l-bir."

i.e. "Both the rich man and the poor man die, and both are salted for the pit" (a common rock tomb). This may, however, refer to the pickling or preservation of bodies in a saline solution.

The covering over of looking-glasses in the rooms where the body is lying is also practiced by several Maltese families. Some go so far as to remove the furniture, and turn round or take down pictures, in the death chamber and passages.

The following are the most characteristic features of existing Maltese practices, many of which are comparable to those of Sicily, while a few show some Eastern influence:—

(a) The washing of the dead body before shrouding. This is not a religious rite, and has no connection with that of Islam.

(b) The shutting of the eyelids, if open, and the raising of the chin by means of a band, usually a white kerchief, tied on the head.

(c) The removal of door knockers and knobs; house doors are kept closed for several days; neighbours half shut their own. In some districts doors or knockers are draped with black crape.

(d) The lowering of the window blinds for some months. Some people, who follow old customs, replace all window curtains by linen sheets.

(e) The hiring of poor women and beggars to pray over and watch the corpse for the whole night. This custom prevails mostly in Gozo. In old days official female mourners named *newwieha* (from *newwah*, "to cry") were employed. The practice was abolished in Malta during the plague of A.D. 1676. Sicilians employed mourners called *Praeficae* or *Reputatrices*, a custom of Greek and Roman origin and practised by the Irish until A.D. 1849. It still prevails among the Corsicans and the Sahara tribes of Algeria. The old ceremonial of the Maltese female mourners is described by Abela as follows:—

They wore trailing veils (*kurkâr*), and when they entered the premises of the deceased they cut down the bower vines in the yard and threw the

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flower pots from the balconies and windows into the street. They searched the house for the finest piece of china, dashed it on the floor, and mixed the fragments with ashes from the hearth. They boiled the whole together in a pot, and with the mixture washed the door posts and windows' shutters of the house. During these proceedings they sang couplets which ended in long-drawn sighs and lamentations. Then they gathered round the corpse and knelt down, extolling the virtues of the deceased, and the relations joining in their mourning.

(f) An oil lamp is often lit and left for forty days before the Crucifix or the image of the Madonna in the death chamber. This is supposed to please the soul of the departed, whose ghost is in this way prevented from haunting the house. In some of the Gozo villages the persons attending the corpse to the burial-ground return in procession after the funeral mass to the room of the deceased, where they kneel down and say the rosary before the Crucifix, placed on a chest covered with white cloth, and between two lighted candles which are afterwards replaced by the devotional oil lamps. The belief still exists that the lamp must remain lighted for forty days, during which the soul of the departed remains above the flame.

(g) Some families give the poor bread. The love-feasts of the primitive Christians were in mediæval times replaced in both Malta and Sicily by the distribution of meat and boiled wheat mixed with sesame. Distributions of meat and bread to the poor came also to be a custom at some *festas*, but were continued in Sicily mainly by the giving of beans and bread on All Souls' Day. In Malta on that day, however, the old custom has been replaced by the free kitchens or the "Potage for the Poor" (Borma tal-Fqar).

Mourning customs in Malta have during the last century passed through wide changes and, as in other European countries, have reverted to a more simple type. Some are purely mediæval, and are influenced by the prolonged intercourse with Sicily and Italy during the rule of the Grand Masters. The vernacular term for mourning is *vistu*, corresponding to the Sicilian *visitusu* ("to be in mourning").

The wearing of special mourning clothes was general in the fourteenth century, but became less marked by the year 1700. Women used to wear woollen trailing skirts and dark shawls over their heads. Some better-class people wore one black transparent veil over the head and another veil of black silk taffeta over the gown, reaching to the waist. A sort of Majorca woollen cloth is prescribed for mourning wear to the heirs under a will of A.D. 1543. The Grand Master's suite wore a special garment called *Scoto*, of thin light serge. Although it is nowadays customary with some families to put on as little mourning as possible and to shorten its period, a full mourning dress is worn by others for two full years after the death of parents. The simplest style of mourning, a black necktie and a crape arm band, is in general use after the death of a distant relative.

Family mourning is generally observed as follows:—

(1) Closure of business premises, a mourning notice being affixed to the door.

(2) Women keep indoors for a few weeks, only going out in the early morning to hear mass. In old times such seclusion was much more strictly

observed and the period was never less than forty days, and is now generally limited to three days. For men this sort of mourning did not exceed seven days, and is now generally limited to three days, after the funeral.

(3) Old custom prohibited cooking for three days, and the family of the deceased was provided with meals by friends or distant relatives. This rule was, and perhaps is still, followed in some districts of Sicily and amongst Arab tribes of Northern Africa. While meals were being served the bereaved family sat with folded legs on the floor, which was covered with a straw mat. The historian Ciantar relates in 1772 that these mourning dinners still took place in his early days. This custom has now been discontinued, and our village people merely abstain from having their pastry and other food prepared in a public oven for a period of some months after the death of a member of a family.

(4) Men often do not shave for a fortnight or even a month. This practice was more in favour in old times, Middle and lower class people keep away from *festas*, and the higher class from theatres, dancing, and merrymakings.

(5) People of rank wear a mourning dress for a few days following a death in their family, but country people are satisfied with wearing a black felt hat and a dark sash round the waist. Women, if wives or brides, follow the continental style of full mourning dress in crape. Some women do not wear a hat or bonnet during the first week of mourning, and go out in *faldettas*, a national head-covering which is more commonly used when attending religious services. Since the seventeenth century the Maltese *faldetta* has undergone some changes in shape and material. The old *faldetta*, as described by Ciantar, was a black veil or cowl covering the head and reaching to the heels, like the Arab and Sicilian women's trailing mantles. Apparently countrywomen wore a blue linen veil, which is still adopted, for economy's sake, in some of the eastern seaside hamlets of the island, but amongst the lower class in general the black hood, which matrons changed into silk with lace edges, was more common. Bombazine (without lace) or silk *faldettas* are now the popular style. The vernacular *culqâna* and *ghonnella* for the *faldetta* point to its probable origin; the word *ghonnella* is derived from the Italian *gonnella*. The term *falda*, with its diminutive *faldetta* (skirt), suggests that this hood or wimple represents the tail of the skirt put over the head inside out in wet weather. Black stone trinkets are worn in place of those of gold. Women in both villages and towns who cannot afford to buy special trinkets cover their ear-rings with black stuff.

The old funeral rites, described by Abela and Ciantar from extracts from wills of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, are only faint survivals of the gorgeous pseudo-pagan rites which prevailed in all parts of continental Europe up to the period of the Reformation, and in Malta when under Italian influence. Up to 1872 the burial of the dead generally took place in churches or in churchyards (Maltese *zuntier*, from French *cimetière*). This still continues in country places, where people have family vaults. A law providing for extra-mural interment was proposed by De Rohan (A.D.

1775-1797), but it was only enforced by the Police Law of 1869, when a public cemetery was provided in 1871.

Since the adoption of the new burial law, funeral customs have assumed a very simple character. Old custom required that the dead body was placed on a handbarrow or in a coffin with a cushion stuffed with laurel and orange leaves fixed under the head. The body was then conveyed to the church, with the relatives and friends following, and the wailing of the mourners accompanied by the sound of bagpipes, which in some villages are now replaced by violins and counterbases, to which lamentations are sung. Since the opening of the Addolorata Cemetery the dead are generally transported in hearses. The tolling of funeral bells was once so important that in many wills careful provision was made for it, and it even rivalled the usual charitable bequests. This corresponds to the Sicilian custom in the fifteenth century. After burial of the corpse, a black carpet of coverlet, or a velvet counterpane, was laid over the grave, and left there for some days. The offering of flowers to the dead is at present in great favour amongst the less educated, but some of the higher class object to it as a profanation. Wreaths are laid on the grave, and oil lamps are lit on it for some days. The construction and decoration of the graves in the public cemetery is much the same as on the continent. Marble slabs with inscriptions are very common. Pillars with crosses on the top and sacred statues are also erected on bases of marble, or bronze reliefs symbolising Time and Eternity. The higher class own vaults in the form of chapels, in which an altar is erected and Requiem Masses are said.

In the professional and educated classes cards expressing sympathy are sent by friends to the mourning family, but in some districts, especially in the country, people still follow the old etiquette of paying a mourning visit within nine days of the death. Photographs of the deceased, with an inscription, are sent to friends and acquaintances.

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