



MALTESE FOLKLORE IN A MEDITERRANEAN CONTEXT

CASSAR-PULLICINO, JOSEPH, *Studies in Maltese Folklore*. Malta: The University of Malta, 1976. xiii + 279pp. £M1.70.

THE publication of this book of Ġużè Cassar-Pullicino's should produce different reactions here in Malta. The descriptive sections of the book, such as 'A New Look at Old Customs', 'Criteria of Physical Attraction and Sex Concepts' and 'Beliefs and Practices Relating to Birth and Infancy', as well as the twenty-three illustrations, some of which have been reproduced from references of the last century, must appeal to the Maltese who cherish our folk culture. For foreigners it is of value as one of the best glimpses of Maltese culture, to satisfy their curiosity as to who the Maltese really are.

However, for the scholar, used to the science of Maltese folklore as content and study, therein lies the compilation of new customs and the author's comments on them and on customs we have long known of, and also a new and positive twentieth century approach of how Cassar-Pullicino regards folklore for its own sake and a further development in the comparative treatment from a European context (mostly Italy and Sicily), as handled so well by Ninu Cremona (1880-1972) and on whose steps Cassar-Pullicino followed for a time, to a wholly Mediterranean context as the author would have now ideally preferred to do. (For the Mediterranean context is nearer to us and a part of us: as regards this, Cassar-Pullicino has already made mention in his editorial to the first edition of the *Maltese Folklore Review* I i, 1962, p. 2.)

The bulk of *Studies in Maltese Folklore* consists primarily in studies published since 1956, some of which have been organized and rendered up-to-date with the latest historical and scientific discoveries and ideas, as well as recent studies touching subjects which the author has been dealing with since 1940 – that is, the science and history of Maltese folklore (see, 'Maltese Folklore Now' and 'Determining the Semitic Element in Maltese Folklore'), popular literature (see, 'The Study of Maltese Folktales, Fr. Magri's Collection of Folktales', 'Comparative Data on Some Maltese Riddles' and large sections of the two studies 'Animals in Maltese Folklore' and 'Criteria of Physical Attraction and Sex Concepts'), childlore (see, 'Beliefs and Practices Related to

Birth and Infancy') and customs, among which seasonal feasts, fixed and movable (see, 'A New Look at Old Customs'), nicknames (see, 'Social Aspects of Maltese Nicknames') and traditional costume (see, 'Notes for a History of Maltese Costume').

This does not lessen the book's merits. Studies such as 'Notes for a History of Maltese Costume', 'Animals in Maltese Folklore' and 'Comparative Data on some Maltese Riddles', serve as an introduction or assume a different outlook since they had to be abridged as regards documentation for the lack of space. Cassar-Pullicino's self-confidence springs from the fact that his unflinching pioneering work has orientated the Maltese to the meaning of folklore. He no longer needs to advertise his subject, as had been done in the forties and fifties through the articles in Maltese and English, his broadcasts and published books such as *An Introduction to Maltese Folklore* (1947) and *Il-Folklore Malti* (1960). The second enlarged edition (1975) of this last work shows how much this popular end had to be passed over to adopt a scientific outlook.

The work we are dealing with, however, should remain widely known as the very best we have ever had as yet as far as concerns the scientific dynamics of folklore – an objective treatment initiated in the beginning of the century by Hans Stumme, resumed by Ninu Cremona for its romance element and widened to Semitic, Romance and British influences by Ġuzè Cassar-Pullicino. Cremona had to insist on the close relationship between Europe and Malta, following the gross mistakes of Manwel Magri S.J.'s Phoenician Theory (pp. 83-90), though he did not deny the Semitic elements and there are instances in his studies where a demonstration of them may be found. Cassar-Pullicino could rely on him, broaden the comparative study to the Mediterranean basin and draw intelligent conclusions.

In this respect, the study 'A New Look at Old Customs', written in 1968, is of vital importance: whereas in previous studies such as *An Introduction to Maltese Folklore* (1947), 'Christmas Maltese Folklore' (*The Sundial* III ix-xii, 1943, 251-61) and 'The Inner Life of the People of Malta' (*Sunday Times of Malta* 21.9.-26.10.1958), the author dwells on the descriptive, when he does compare it is always within a European context on Cremona's lines and in Tylor's Anthropological School tradition which regards folklore as the reminiscences of the past and on Giuseppe Pitrè's who delves into the subject for ancient history.

Since the sixties, Cassar-Pullicino has been following the views

of modern British and American Schools of Folklore, accepting their principles and making use of their mechanics as evident in *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1965) (pp. 58-63) by Stith Thompson and *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (1951) (pp. 94ff.) by Archer Taylor. That is to say, classification of riddles should not be according to solutions but according to similar descriptions (p. 94) and that in critical folklore '... one has to proceed on the assumption that if one knows enough about a custom or belief which has survived from the past one could deduce the cultural setting from which it comes to us. At the same time, however, one should bear in mind that Man was not necessarily very different in the past from what he is today, that the past was as unromantic to the previous generations as the present is to ours, that just as there is a tide in the affairs of man, so specific customs tend to ebb and flow, and, finally, that while one tradition may wither away and its memory become romantic to us, others may prosper to such an extent that they become ordinary, even tawdry, and perhaps commercialised.

'Another consideration is that Society, like Nature, abhors a vacuum and if people have forgotten the real meaning of custom they are apt to invent an exploration. This makes it all the more important, in trying to ascertain the origin and modes of transmission of folklore, that one must always seek to trace the sociological and psychological pressures which may have been responsible for its observance and maintenance' (p. 15).

All this is well-worth mentioning because whereas Cassar-Pullicino progressed along these principles, other dilettante Maltese contributors to local newspapers still promote last century's conventionalism. Thus 'A New Look at Old Customs' consists in more or less the same descriptive material about Christmas, Carnival, New Year's Day and Holy Week customs and the patron saint's feast which the author published in previous studies and articles in newspapers such as 'The Sunday Times of Malta' and 'L-Orizzont', but now, adopting recent principles, analyses them and traces their evolution from the past to the present day, also with the help of the comparative method. About these customs he concludes: '... the fountain heads of the type of tradition we have been dealing with have been mainly Sicily and Spain, but ... there is also a British contribution, hitherto unsuspected or unknown, in the development of some Maltese traditions' (p. 39).

The most daring study establishing Cassar-Pullicino as a pioneer in the Mediterranean comparative method in Malta, is found in

'Determining the Semitic Element in Maltese Folklore'. In substance he certainly does not mean to describe who the Maltese are. (The same holds good for 'Comparative Data on Some Maltese Riddles'.) However, he mentions the three principal causes of the maintenance and/or infiltration of Semitic influence on the Maltese even after the Arabs left the island and mostly during the Order's stay: 1. the contacts and the official relations between the Order and the Arabs of North Africa, 2. the slave population in Malta and 3. the emigration of Maltese to North Africa and their frequent repatriations with the assimilation of some Arabo-Berber material. All three are historical reasons. As appropriate evidence to these influences he picks up childlore, death and marriage customs and ventures to suggest that the linguistic criterion regarding Semitic vocabulary in certain customs, rites and beliefs may be a determining factor in qualifying the Semitic element in Maltese folklore. It goes without saying, as Cassar-Pullicino often repeats, this is not an easy task and it takes a lot of research and study throughout the whole of the Mediterranean basin before some definite conclusion is reached.

Moreover, as much as Cassar-Pullicino finds help from Semitic Maltese vocabulary to determine the Semitic element in folklore, so Ninu Cremona found help through the Semitic element in the language to determine the Romance element in folklore, as shows what Cremona wrote in 1921 in 'Race, Language and Myth' (*Melita X*): 'Modern beliefs and customs in the Maltese Islands, as independent of the local language, are the outcome of the same Christian civilization which from pagan times down to the present era has marked the psychological evolution of European nations, and that ethnographically in this special direction they belong to those of Sicily and Italy. It is in this aspect that the most ancient myths which are still designated by a Semitic terminology, are found to answer to identical puppetries or ghostly symbols ...' (p. 404).

The same problem arises in 'The Study of Maltese Folktales', 'Fr. Magri's Collection of Folktales' and 'Comparative Data on Some Maltese Riddles'. These may be considered as the best studies (the first two quite comprehensive) in Maltese popular literature so far. Above all, the classification of folktales Magri collected (pp. 68-71) and the comparative texts (Semitic and Romance) in the stylistics of the folktale the Maltese riddle (pp. 75-83; 106-109) constitute a good starting-point for serious study in oral literature as has been taken up abroad quite some time ago and which still has to be assiduously carried out in Malta.

The last two studies in the book widen two new branches of Maltese folklore about which little has been written so far. 'Criteria of Physical and Sex Concepts' brings to light the beliefs of the Maltese as regards physical features of men and women, such as complexion, height, eyes, hair and nose and ... something about kissing. In 'Beliefs and Practices Relating to Birth and Infancy' Cassar-Pullicino enlarges on the material he had gathered systematically before 1947 and that of Carmelo Penza, Dr. Paul Cassar and Guido Lanfranco regarding customs related to conception of the child, pregnancy, birth and infancy which he compares with those of other Mediterranean countries. This is a very delicate subject indeed because it concerns the personal life of the woman and explains why, as the author himself says, 'the preparation of this study progressed very slowly ...' (p. 204 fn. 4).

What struck me very much was the fact that not a single reference to the 'couvade' is found, as in other countries, except that Dr. Cassar says he knows of pregnant women who stayed in the 'arkova' during labour and the husband had to sleep by himself on the 'kanapè' in the anteroom (p. 222). (In this respect, it is also worth mentioning that at Mosta and in its neighbourhood previous to the last forty years, the 'kanapè' was still in use for the midwife to rest on in cases of prolonged labour or in cases where the labour set on during the night. Besides the wooden skeleton, the 'kanapè' consisted also of a mattress covered in Malta weave. It was placed in a smaller room adjacent to the larger one of the confined woman. In the upper storey, these two rooms, characteristic of Maltese village architecture, had a communicating door and their windows overlooked the street.)

All in all one might say that *Studies in Maltese Folklore* follows up well the second edition of *Il-Folklore Malti* (1975) by the same author. The vast bibliography (pp. 257-68) and the analytic index at the end (pp. 269-79) add credit to the scientific level of this work. With the works which Cassar-Pullicino has in preparation for future publication such as 'A Handbook of Maltese Folklore', 'Folktales of Malta and Gozo' and 'Loghob tat-Tfal ta' Malta u Għawdex' (Children's Games in Malta and Gozo) he would be confirming his place as one of the pioneers of Maltese folklore in this century.

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