

The Weaving Trade: In the Olden Days and Now

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Introduction

Weaving is an ancient traditional craft. We do not know when this trade was introduced in Malta. A. Mayr (1909:21), without producing any evidence, states that cotton was introduced into Malta in the 9th century by the Arabs. Hand weaving remained an important industry for many centuries. Later, after the 14th century, we find documented that Maltese cotton found good foreign markets and King Ferdinand ordered that two officials be nominated to carefully examine the cotton exported by the Maltese, ensuring good quality (Mifsud, 1913: 228-229). The export of cotton flourished increasingly, so much so that in 1472 a tax of two per cent was raised on the exported product, the money going towards the upkeep of the walls of Mdina (Mifsud, 1913: 129). The cultivation of cotton and its exportation was already a thriving industry and controlled by the local government of that time, the Università, by fixing prices and levy taxes on the spun material (Mifsud, 1913: 129). These regulations were issued from time to time by means of statutes called *Bandi*, and one of these was specifically intended to prevent the cotton seed from being exported to other countries.

The Cotton Industry

The cotton industry thrived during the 18th century. On 15th January 1776 Grand Master de Rohan reinstituted the chamber of commerce expressing in detail its formation and aims. The chamber was to seek and examine the best way to improve external trade in cotton cloth and yarn. The chamber had also to supervise the business in all its aspects so that the farmer and the spinner could obtain the best prices (Debono, 2024). The cotton industry remained the main source of income for most farmers and workers (including women) in the industry. During the period 1838-1841, according to Temistocles Zammit, “scarcely any rain fell” (Zammit, 1931: 1-46:13). This prompted a group of prominent people from *Rabato* Gozo to petition the Imperial Government to help the population by building an aqueduct to bring

water from the western part of Gozo to the town. In their petition they mentioned that the water was being carried in small vessels by women who were being forced to abandon their work from which they derived their miserable subsistence.

The women’s work to which the petitioners were referring, consisted in the spinning and weaving of cotton (Refalo, 2023: 21). Grand Master Hompesch nominated a commission to determine whether, for 1797, the cotton industry was prosperous enough to keep the whole population of Malta and Gozo occupied and ensure that the industry was profitable all round (Vella, 1996: 211). Up till the 18th century, bulk-grown cotton was exported to Spain and other places like Greece, Italy, and France. The French and later, the first British Commissioner in Malta, Sir Alexander Ball, also did their utmost to ensure that the industry continued to flourish (Mifsud, 1913: 193).

Colonial Era

Over time, during the British Rule, the diversification of the Maltese economy, which then became totally depended on the British military and navy, led to the disappearance of the cotton industry. Fewer and fewer people kept working the land and relying on agriculture for their livelihoods. In Malta various infrastructural projects were initiated including the building of the breakwater at the Grand Harbour. The work of the land required many hours exposed to the sun in summer and cold and rain in winter and there was a lot of suffering because the work was done entirely by hand.

By 1911, the cotton industry especially in Malta was almost completely finished, so much so that in the 1911 census, 80% of women became unemployed and were registered as non-productive people. In Gozo the effect of the British occupation was not felt as much as in Malta and farming remained the most common industry in all villages. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century,

the weaving industry started to decline sharply even in Gozo.

Weaving work on the loom was conducted by women, but cotton was sewn and cut by men. Many Gozitan women took part in traditional crafts like lace-making and weaving.

Various categories of people worked in the cotton industry: the farmers who sowed it, the cotton gin (*il-hallieġa*), the ones who beat or thrashed it (*id-daqqaqqa*), those who spun it (*l-ġhażżiela*), and the women who wove it (*in-nissieġa*). Before being woven, the spun yarn was sometimes dyed by the person to give it a colour (*iż-żebbieġh*). However, its importance dwindled, and in the 1911 census no women were registered as working in this job. Those who kept working on the loom used to do it for themselves and not as a cash income job.

Internationally, cotton production on a large scale began during the Industrial Revolution, particularly in the late 18th century and early 19th centuries. The invention of the cotton gin in the United States by Eli Whitney (Petruzzello, 2007), in 1793, revolutionised cotton processing, making it much more efficient to separate cotton fibres from seeds. This invention significantly increased the productivity of cotton farming and enabled the expansion of cotton cultivation across large areas. The combination of the cotton gin and advancements in textile manufacturing technology led to the growth of the cotton industry in regions like the Southern United States, India, Syria, Egypt, and other parts of the world with suitable climates for cotton cultivation. Our producers could not compete with these because of economies of scale. People started demanding machine made garments as they were neater and more attractive and luxury textile manufacturing took over the traditional product.

The Cotton Plant

In Botany, the cotton plant is known as *Gossypium*. In Malta mainly three types of cotton used to be cultivated. The most common was the white cotton with a yellow tinge or *Gossypium hirsutum*. This



Gossypium hirsutum with flowers.

required deep, fertile, and humid soil. This type of cotton was known as *Ta' Gallipoli* and its leaf was patterned differently from the native cotton brand. A second type was the red cotton or *Gossypium religiosum* which our ancestors used to describe as “a wonder of nature”. It kept its red colour even after washing. The Maltese called it *Tan-Nankin*. This plant disappeared from the island a long time ago. The third type was called *Gossypium herbaccum*. It is coarser and the spun yarn is rather fibrous. It needed less water than the other two. It was said that the merchants from Barcelona sought this kind of cotton because it was best suited for dyeing purposes. Later, at the beginning of the 19th century, a fourth type of cotton plant was introduced in Malta, known as *Gossypium barbadense*. It was brought to Malta by Padre Carlo Giacinto who was a Discalced Carmelite and Professor of Botany at the University of Malta. The Maltese nicknamed it “*Ta' Patri Karlu*” (Vella, 1966: 212). In Malta the cotton plant does not grow as tall as in other countries.

Making the Fabric

The process of making the fabric of clothing, sheets, blankets and even the monks' habit made of double threads, is growing craft. The Maltese word *xoqqa*¹ means the plain weave. The fabric is of different thicknesses depending on how it is worked. The cotton seed requires good land, and the land must

¹ The plural of *xoqqa* is *xaqqa* a word that is no longer used today. Hand-woven cloth was expensive and was worn by pampered persons. You could tell that a man was well off by the kind of *xoqqa* (weave) that he wore.



The cotton-gin (*hallieġa*).
Photo: Daniel Cilia (<https://www.facebook.com/inquisitorspalace/>)

be worked out well. Seeds are sown by making a pit in the soil in April till May. After about a week it begins to grow and at around mid-August the cotton plant brings out the roses called a *moxt*² (comb). After some time, the comb becomes a cotton pod. This is nothing more than a seed to which the cotton has been attached. When the pods dry and open, they begin to be called *bajd* (open eggs). Finally, the farmer will separate the cotton from the rest of the dried plant. After that they remove the seed from its husk which is thrown into the fire to heat the oven.

After it is collected from the fields in September the cotton is squeezed out of the pod and then passed through a machine called a cotton-gin, *hallieġa* in Maltese, so that the seeds are separated from the cotton. This instrument has two rollers rotating in opposite directions by nuts with ridges which are run by hand. The operator used to sit down on a low bench in front of the machine. He would rotate the rollers with his right hand, while using his left hand to insert the cotton between the two rollers. The cotton would pass tight between the squeeze of the

two rollers and thus it is drained and released from the seeds. The ginned cotton or *mahlug* in Maltese, will fall on the side. The seeds and wicks that did not pass between the rollers would fall in a box that would have been underneath this appliance. With time the ridges became flattened, and they needed to be sharpened again. The seeds used to be replanted and could also be fed to livestock as well. Cotton seeds were tasty food for cows as they fattened them and rendered their meat white and palatable, especially when the cotton seeds were mixed with forage and hay. The seeds also helped sheep and goats produce creamy milk. In other countries they squeezed oil from these seeds which was not used for food, but as fat for lubrication. The rest of the husks and stalk were used for heating ovens.

This work was most likely conducted in the evening by the whole family. After dinner, the family would gather in the room where the work would take place, and everyone would play a part. This work kept the family united and gathered, often saying prayers as they worked.

² This word '*moxt*' in connection with the cotton plant is used only by Annibale Preca. Normally we refer to '*il-moxt*' as the reed of the loom. The reed holds the threads of cotton during weaving. Authors like, Aguis De Soldanis and Mikiel Anton Vassalli, who wrote in the 18th century, mentioned many words associated with this trade in their dictionaries but they are no longer used.



Ir-reddiena.

After the cotton was separated, it was thrashed by beating – a task carried out by a person known in Maltese as a *daqqaq*. This process transformed the cotton in thin, fine, and long fibres, known as carded cotton or *tajjar* in Maltese. As a result, the final fabric would have a fuller texture and a more visually pleasing appearance. The *daqqaq* typically sat on a wooded box, with a heap of cotton laid out in front of him. The instrument on which the cotton was thrashed or beaten was called *watar*. This was a form of thin, dry nerve made up of a bull's gut or other animal like the chord of a guitar or harp mounted on a curved pole like an arc which was kept steady by a device called *id-deffa* to which both the *watar* and the pole are attached. This device was moved about over the heap of cotton in front of the beater and cotton is entangled in the chord. The beater would give blows on the *watar* by an object called *iċ-ċikk*, which was like a hammer with two heads made of lead, in quick succession, to soften the cotton. With the beating the *watar* would begin to vibrate. Every now and then the chord would have to be tightened, as does the chord of a musical instrument. From time to time, the worker would deliver a harder blow to shake off the cotton already done. The blows on the *watar* would have given rise to a sweet sound like a chord of a musical instrument. In addition to the sound, the vibrations would also create a large amount of dust that flew all over the room. Beside the dust, there would also be small pieces of fine cotton fibres and particles. As a result, the worker beating the cotton would wear only light short trousers, covering his head as well



Small weaving loom.

as his mouth and nose with a handkerchief to avoid inhaling the dust. Every exposed part of his body would be covered with dust. It was due to this that this job was probably only done by men.

After the beating of the cotton, it was taken to the women who worked on the loom, to be woven into fabrics. The weaver would moan the warp in the loom and start weaving. The weaving process was conducted by moving the shuttle holding the threads called *mekkuk* from right to left and again from left to right by pressing her foot on a treadle, in Maltese *il-mirfes*. Every time this treadle was pushed down, the warp began to rise and fall. This continued until the cloth was formed according to a pattern which was designed by the weaver beforehand.

All this equipment was hand or foot operated. The skilled weaver, with this rudimentary device, could weave threads in a rather complicated way to produce fabrics that served many needs.

Dyeing the Fabric

The cotton produced was either white or of a darker reddish colour. The cloth made from the latter type of cotton was called *lankeċ* from the Italian word *lanche*. Before the cotton threads were woven using the loom, they were given a colour according to the needs of the weaver. The dyeing of the yarn was another traditional craftsmanship made by men and which is now lost. The dyes usually obtained from the flowers of the pomegranate trees called



Alda at work on the weaving machine.

žokor were boiled in a large cauldron.³ The seeds would release a lot of substances such as tannin, koinophilia, turpentine as well as other oils.



Different types of cotton.

Through the heating process, they would release a strong extract that would give the threads the colour. The dyer, then knew how long he had to leave the yarn in the hot water to get the colour he wanted. It took a skilled worker to dry the yarn and give it a nice appearance and texture to attract the buyer. These yarns of assorted colours were mixed with the original white material to make the desired design with the loom. According to Alda Bugeja⁴, when one makes a woven product, for example a carpet, the difficult part is to plan the design before weaving because all the different threads one needs must be inserted in the reed. This part of the process is called preparing the warp or *il-medd* in Maltese.

Alda is proud that she is keeping this tradition and this ancient craft alive. It would be a pity to lose it. It is also part of our country's identity. This tradition also serves as a tourist attraction for those who want to see local traditions and customs. The raw material used can be easily grown in our country as the climate is ideal for growing. Alda says that if you believe in what you love, the future can be a good one and this

³ G.P. F. Agius De Soldanis wrote that according to Dr Bonamico, if you had enough of the parasitic flowering plant called Gherq is-Sinjur (*Cynomorium Coccineum*) found only on the General's Rock or Fungus Rock in Dwejra, Gozo, you could extract a dye from it. This was very unlikely as this plant was rare and it was protected by the Grand Master of the Knights of Malta.

⁴ Alda is a well-known weaver in Gozo, who is maintaining the weaving tradition.



Macrame.



Making of a carpet in different colours.

work gives you a certain satisfaction. She is proud to give the Maltese product more importance and to make use of it again as we have done in the past. Weaving work is not easy because you need to know the craft well, you need to be fond of the work and work willingly. According to Alda there is an interest from the younger generation and Alda, for her part, is doing her utmost to keep this craft going.

In the opinion of the author, although weaving work is not easy, and requires a good knowledge of the craft, it is important to keep this tradition and related ancient crafts alive. It is associated with Gozo's identify and, importantly, the raw material used can be easily grown in Gozo as the climate is ideal for this purpose. This tradition also serves as a tourist attraction for those who want to see local traditions and customs. Alda Bugeja, to whom reference was made above, is to be commended in this regard.

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