

The Significance of Gift Exchange in the Maltese Islands



by LINO BIANCO*

The phenomenon of gift exchange has left a mark on linguistic usage and thus may be examined from the semantic dimension. Besides, it also has anthropological connotations which can be fitted within the context of Malta's national identity. The practice itself is seen by the Maltese people as carrying both positive and negative connotations. A distinction is put forward between gift giving and gift exchange. Gifts may be a manifestation of 'social solidarity'. The giving of gifts to establish hegemony over other individuals for the sake of humiliate him/her socially is not a common practice.

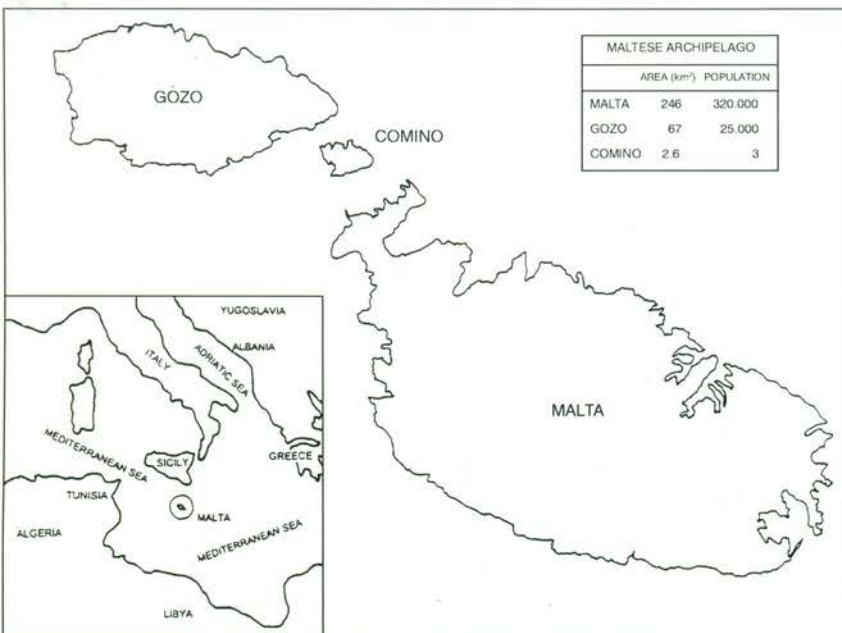
It is however a recognised mode of 'buying off someone's favour as a form of bribery.

The Maltese archipelago consists of Malta, Gozo and Comino with an area of 246 km², 67 km² and 2.6 km² respectively. Malta lies in a strategic position in the central Mediterranean, about 290 km north of Libya and 93 km south of Sicily. Its strategic location at the cross-roads between Italy and North Africa strongly dictated its fate historically. Its potential as a trading centre was exploited since the Neolithic Revolution. The numerous invasions and foreign domination to which the Island

was subjected by the world powers of the time were vigorous attempts to control trade and power in the Mediterranean. The population is ethnically a mixture absorbing Phoenician, Arab, Italian and British heritages. With an area of 316 km² and a population of over a third of a million, the population density of the Islands is significantly high as compared to other Island States.

The inhabitants are descendants of the ancient Phoenicians who came to Malta circa 800B.C. The Phoenician occupation was subsequently followed by the Carthaginian and the Roman. It was conquered by the Arabs (870A.D.), the Normans (1090A.D.), and the Spanish (1282) and occupied by the Knights of the Order of St. John (1530A.D.), the French (1798A.D.) and annexed to the British Empire (1814A.D. until 1964A.D.).

Historically, the roots of the Maltese national identity are grounded in a linguistic-cultural dichotomy. Malta's geographical position is vital in studying the interplay between the North and South of the Mediterranean, between Christianity and Islam. The native language, Maltese, is not European. It is essentially a Semitic language with



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strong Romance elements and using Latin alphabet, and it is believed to be grounded in ancient Phoenician. As a language, it is older than either Arabic or Italian, which have both greatly influenced it. Although, the language is mainly of the South, the official religion is of the North. In this geocultural context, the dichotomy between language and culture widens as the entire population is staunchly Roman Catholic rather than Muslim. Sant Cassia (1989 pp. 88) argues that the emphasis on Malta's Catholic identity has been deliberately used to counterbalance Malta's linguistic ties with the Arab world. The merging of European Christian and Arabic Islamic traits is evident also in Maltese traditional townscapes. Secular vernacular architecture is typically regional Arabic in outlook while religious architecture is baroque - a legacy of Christian culture on the Continent imported in Malta by the Knights of St. John. Parish churches are usually at the centre of the town with secular architecture growing organically around them. Building forms are cubic save for the circular/oval forms of the baroque churches which dominate the urban fabric.

In many cultures and civilisations one encounters the phenomenon which social anthropologists have labelled as gift exchange. In all societies, a gift is a mode of maintaining social relationships. "Material objects are the chains along which social relationships run" (Evans-Pritchard, 1940 pp. 89). In Western societies, gift exchange is not a voluntary statement of affection by the giver but a socially anticipated dimension of certain relationships. A theory of the significance of gift exchange was first put forward by Mauss (1925). His study on simple societies stimulated anthropologists to study other systems of gift exchange. This short paper is concerned with this phenomenon as it occurs in Maltese society, with particular reference to semantic and anthropological connotations.



The word 'gift' is translated into Maltese as *ghoti*, *haga moghtija*, ...*rigal* (Psaila, 1947 pp. 532). Also, Maltese distinguishes between *ghoti b'xejn* and *ghoti 'lura* (Serracino Inglott, 1976 pp. 232). The first signifying a gift given *gratis*, usually referred to as *rigal*, while the other signifies a gift given in return for something else, that is, a counter gift, as a *radd*, *hlas*, *tpattija* (Serracino Inglott, 1976 pp. 232). Thus, the action of giving is classified in terms of what the giver is going to gain.

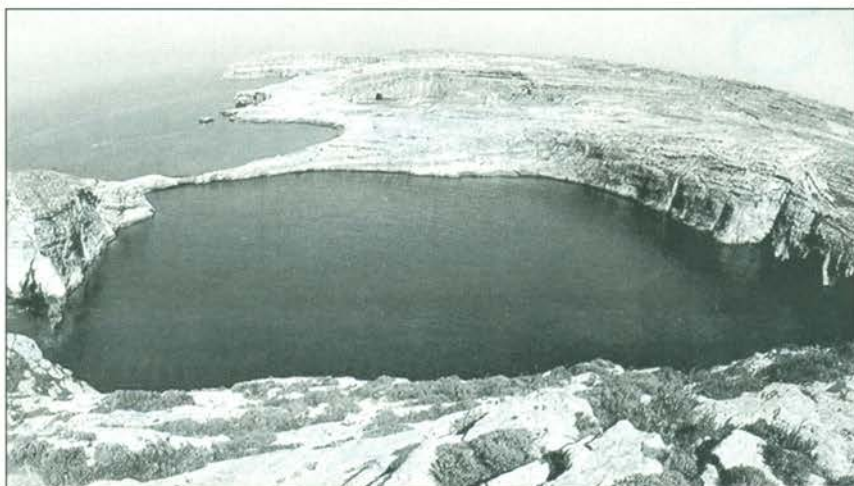
Rigal is a voluntary giving of a gift whereby the giver is not expecting anything in return. The giving of a *rigal* is a demonstration of friendship, respect, and/or love. Such is the case when the godfather gives a *rigal* to his godson on his Confirmation. The second meaning which *Il-Miklem Malti* (Serracino Inglott, 1981 pp. 355) gives is *kull haga moghtija ta' xejn, b'xejn, jew mibjugha wisq inqas minn kemm tiswa, jew tkun meqjusa li tiswa, fis-suq*; which essentially means something free or sold at a token price. This meaning, together with the former, further shows that the



offering is done in a generous manner and that no haggling is present between the giver and the receiver.

Such meanings of the word *rigal* are rather positive. They do not reflect the negative connotation which is linked with it and otherwise manifested in Maltese proverbs, the reflection of folk culture and tradition. Two such proverbs are *Ir-rigali ktajjen fi-idejn u bzar fl-ghajnejn* and *Ir-rigali jaghmull-ghajn* (Aquilina, 1972 pp. 52). The former proverb is translated as "Presents are [like] chains on the hands and pepper in the eyes" while the latter is translated as "Presents blind the eye", that is, presents are given as a price for conniving at abuses (Aquilina, 1972 pp. 52). These are the only proverbs on *rigal(i)* given in this Dictionary and they are found in the chapter entitled 'Craft and Evil'. The position of these proverbs with respect to the above meaning of *rigal* throws light and elaborates on this transfer where the giver apparently 'doesn't get anything'. Its elaboration partly states what the giver does in fact get - In this context *rigal* is a form of bribe. It is essentially a means of corruption. In agreement with the current usage of the word bribe in 1535, a *rigal* can be said to signify "a reward given to pervert the judgement or corrupt the conduct" (Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, cited in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*). Hence, here, for a *rigal* the giver does in fact get something in return.

Often, the same proverb may be found in other variants. In Malta this may be due to the national currency of Classical and Biblical sayings. In the Old Testament one finds at least two instances, both cited in Aquilina's Dictionary (1972 pp. 52), which express a spirit found in the above mentioned proverbs. These are "A man's gift enlargeth his way and maketh him room before princes" (*Proverbs, XVIII.16*) and "Presents and gifts blind the eyes of judges" (*Ecclesiasticus, XX.31*). These are striking not only when contrasted with the



contemporary positive meaning of *rigal*, but also in view of the fact that the positive ways of looking at gift giving also found in the Bible such as “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35) are left unnoticed.

Ghoti 'l'ura is clearly a transaction. Such a transaction may have various grounds - the main ones are social, economic and/or political. Friends expect to give and receive help when this is needed. Exchange of gifts to establish or renew existing social relationships is manifested in presents given on appropriate occasions such as birthdays, Christmas, etc. It is a social event where people broaden and revive relationships with one another.

Also, in this social fact one notices that although the receiver does not make a money repayment of a gift, his counter gift financially will be worth the gift given, to maintain a balance between the value of the two. Implicitly, and maybe unconsciously, there is an element of challenge present - A challenge not in the sense that the receiver is in competition with the giver but rather a return of a gift to cancel obligation. Furthermore, if the counter gift is not at least a balancing one, the receiver of the first gift will be ‘shamed’. Yet this is not the case where the first gift is given on purpose to ‘shame’ the receiver. Within the Maltese context, refusal to accept a gift is a refusal of social relations or a protest.

In Malta there still existed the entrenched notion that gift exchange en-

hances social relationships and prestige rather than being an advantage in material, economic wealth. Although this further contributes to a fairer distribution of wealth, the donor’s position was strengthened - it was one of the roads to leadership. In this setting the giver not only ‘buys’ friendship but also glory.

“Giving implies friendship not hostility”. To a certain extent, this is true. Yet, it is also true that sometimes, in certain cultures, one gives in order to gain prestige and ‘shame’ the receiver. The giver does not only give presents to his friend but also to his opponent in order to ‘shame’ him. In turn, not to remain ‘shamed’, the opponent presents the giver with an even more prestigious gift. He who is not able to make an equal or larger gift, loses prestige and becomes a ‘client’ of the more



A vernacular street in Rabat, the capital city of Gozo showing a typical urban setting of Semitic origin.

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powerful donor. It is the man who has given who seeks out his opponent. The giver ‘gets his back on’ at his opponent by giving him so much that the giver crushes him, and he cannot make a larger return gift (Sant Cassia, 1985 pp. 12). This sort of gift exchange ‘game’ which is maintained in various societies is not present in Malta.

In modern usage, gift exchange in Malta is governed by social considerations. In fact it is nowadays a mutual expression of ‘social solidarity’ between partners. However, there still persists a certain negative connotation which implies the ‘buying’ of favours, especially in dealing with the wielders of power. ‘Buying off’ favours is usually through either gifts or money (as distinguished from *strina* [French: *étrennes*], a traditional money gift, already customary in mid-eighteenth century, given to children and members of the household on New Year’s day). Furthermore, through gifts, one may ‘buy over’ a person. In these negative respects, gift exchange acquires the significance of clientelism and bribery.