Gozitan Christmas Lore and Traditions

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Pasturi for Sale

During the month of November in the shops of Rabat, Gozo there appeared for sale many kinds of small and interesting pasturi. The word pasturi is derived from Italian pastori which means shepherds. The Maltese pasturi were very small statuettes made by local Gozitan craftsmen which represented the shepherds and people of Bethlehem at the time of Christ’s birth.

These pasturi were made of local clay brought from a hillock known as La Veċċa (meaning ‘the old hill’) near the small village of Għasri. The clay was dug out of the ground just after the first heavy rains. The craftsmen had special moulds to make the basic bodies of the statues and then they would add the hands and the feet to represent different characters in various poses. Some of the craftsmen would model their pasturi with their hands and a small instrument like a knife. These pasturi were then hand painted according to two traditions: either the local tradition which represented the folk costumes of local people at the time the statues were made or the Holy Land tradition which represented the folk costumes worn by the shepherds and the people of Palestine at the time of Christ. These pasturi were painted with lime colours (żebgħa tal-ġir) and when dry they were painted with shellac (bil-lakka) or with wax to make them shine.

In Gozo there were several craftsmen who practiced this local tradition. Among the best known were Thomas Ţahra known as Majsi, Gori, Joseph Meilak known as Ġużepp tal-Belt (Joseph of the Citadel), Joseph Pace (Suxxipjat), Lorenzo Farrugia (ta’ Garawelli), Michelangelo Camilleri (Gaŋgu) and his wife Mary Josephine, her father Michelangelo Bajada (ta’ Lalajja), Toni Agius (tal-Brejbex), Ignaizio Cauchi (ta’ l-Argentier), Wistin Camilleri (Gozo’s well know statue maker), and others. Michelangelo Camilleri (Gaŋgu) was also very good at making wax Baby Jesus figures in pink colour.

These pasturi were sold at a very low price: a farthing each, or a half penny but not more than two pence. People coming to Rabat from the villages on Sunday used to take sets of pasturi back with them according to their needs or to meet the demands of their little children who were crib enthusiasts. Besides the pasturi one could also find small earthenware lamps (msiebah) to lighten up the crib. These earthenware lamps could be bought from the open market at Savina Square.

The Making of the Crib

During the Novena children used to prepare the crib (il-presepju) for Christmas. In Gozo the crib used to be made from hard stones gathered from the rocky cliffs around the hilltops. The hills of Gozo have slanting clayey sides but rocky caps covering the flat tops. These two upper geological layers are made of greensand and upper coralline limestone. The lower part of the strata is highly fragmented giving rise to small hard stones of strange but beautiful shapes. Both children and adults would select the best and most beautiful examples to build their cribs.

The colour of these stones varies around yellowish grey. Gozitan children were quite choosy and very good at building small cribs with these stones. Those who could not go to the hills made use of the remains of burnt up charcoal known locally as gagazza. Sometimes the natural hard stones are
also called gagazza but the real gagazza is black.
From the greensand hills they used to gather yellowish sand known as rina (from arena meaning sand) to make the small fields of the crib. For trees they used to pick wild thyme plants (saghtar) from the flat hilltops or from some rocky surface or garigue known locally as xagħra or qortin. This practice is no longer allowed since wild thyme has become a protected species. For small shrubs they used to pick a small Mediterranean heath plant known locally as leħjet ix-xiħ, (old man’s beard). These tiny plants grow on the stones of rubble walls and also on the thick trunks of palm trees but only on the side facing north.

**Placing the Pasturi**

When the crib was ready, it was time to set the pasturi in their right places to represent the Christmas story as told in the Gospels and according to tradition which came down to us from the Apocryphal New Testament books. The pasturi consisted of different characters. There were different kinds of shepherds; some carrying a lamb, others carrying some wood, others walking with a staff, the sleeping shepherd (ir-rieqed), the climber (ix-xabbati or xabbatur) climbing on the crib to get a better view, the companion (ix-xrik) and even the astonished shepherd (il-mistagħġeb or l-għaġeb tal-presepju) standing right in the middle of the crib in a familiar posture. The astonished shepherd was so marveled by the beauty of Baby Jesus that he became a Christmas legend and a crib without him is not complete. There were also angels and putti (a putto is just the head of an angel and two wings) hanging over the crib to remind us of the angels who gave the news to the shepherds on the first Christmas night. Small white sheep were scattered all over the area and inside the crib just behind the manger there were the ox and the donkey warming up Baby Jesus with their warm breath as suggested by an Apocryphal Gospel. Joseph and Mary stood on each side of the holy manger. The figure of Baby Jesus was made of pinkish wax. On the top of the crib they used to put the star of Bethlehem and coming from afar the three wise men or slaten maġi on their camels. Other elaborate cribs used to contain many other characters or objects taken from the ordinary life surrounding Gozitan people; women carrying different objects on their heads, people working in the fields, windmills and other buildings, and someone playing the Gozitan traditional bagpipe.

**Christmas Carols**

Once the crib was ready the children would enjoy themselves gazing at the unusual beauty and romance of the story of the birth of Jesus, every now and then singing the old traditional song or carol:

*Ninni la tibkix iżjed, Sleep and cry no more,*
*Ninni Ġesù Bambin. Sleep, Baby Jesus.*
*Ħallih għalina l-biki Leave the crying for us*  
*Għax aħna midinbin. Because we are sinners.*

**Folk Games at Christmas Time**

There were no cars in the streets of Gozo a hundred years ago. Children could play as much as they
wanted in the middle of the streets. The streets were the children’s theatre where they could play all sorts of games all the year round.

Some games were seasonal and Christmas time was an ideal period of time for special games. Hazelnuts (ġellewż), known in Gozo as Christmas almonds (lewż tal-Millied), were imported from abroad in large quantities and children eagerly acquired as many as possible. With hazelnuts the children could play all sorts of games; Castles (Kastelli), made of four hazelnuts, three on the ground and one on top, Slanting Plank (Żurzieqa); Hitting the Penny or the Shilling (Nolqtu s-Sold); Nine Holes or Five Holes (Kuklu ta’ b’Disgha or Kuklu ta’ b’Ħamsa) and many other games which at other times of the year the children would play with marbles (Attard, 1969).

Other games were played with coins, especially with the old British coins which were withdrawn from circulation following decimalization in 1972. Women and young girls preferred to play the tectotum or little top with four sides marked with different letters showing wins or losses: T = Tutto, win all; M = Mezzo, win one half; N = Niente, win nothing; P = Paga, pay another share.

Getting the ring-cake was another folk game played mostly in the village of Xagħra. A honey ring-cake used to be hung by a thread from a high branch of a carob tree. Teenagers would compete with each other to get hold of the ring-cake with their mouths only. He who got hold of the ring-cake with his mouth would win the game and eat the ring-cake.

**Christmas Food and Desserts**

Christmas was a time when people prepared special lunches and dinners and typical sweet desserts served only at this time of the year. Poultry, bred on Gozo’s farmsteads, was popular at Christmas. A typical delicacy for this time of the year was the *imboljuta* which consists of peeled chestnuts boiled and cooked in hot chocolate flavoured with fragmented orange peel. Honey ring cakes (qaghaq tal-ghasel) are also associated with this festive season. Similar ring cakes (qaghaq tal-gastanija) are filled with honey and flour flavoured with spices.

On Christmas Eve housewives were kept busy preparing pastry to make another special kind of ring cake known as *qaghaq tal-kavatelli* which is a small ring cake covered or smeared with honey.

**Christmas Time and Weather Lore**

The word *Millied* in Maltese is a mimated noun from the verb *wiled* meaning to give birth, so *Millied* means birthday, the birthday of Christ which is celebrated on this day. The feast of Christmas, commemorating the birth of Christ, took the place of the ancient pagan festival of the birth of the Sun and it falls very close to the winter solstice. The Maltese proverb states that until Christmas we neither have cool windy weather nor biting cold (*Sal-Milied la bard u langas ksieħ*). Another Gozitan proverb warns us that in the period between the feast of the Immaculate Conception (*Tal-Qala*, the feast celebrated in Qala) and Christmas we should take off the plough from its furrow and put the bird-shooting gun on its pegs, meaning that we should neither plough the fields nor go for bird shooting during this period (*Bejn tal-Qala u l-Milied, erfa’ l-mohriet minn halq il-wied u qiegħed xubettitex fuq l-utied*). The vigil of Christmas Day was a vigil of obligation and Catholics until some time ago were expected to fast, otherwise they would die like dogs: *Min ma jsumx lejllet il-Milied imut bħall-klieb*.

The type of weather we have on Christmas Day gives an indication of what kind of weather we shall be having around Easter: *Milied fuq il-bejt, l-Għid taħt il-bejt; Milied taħt il-bejt, l-Għid fuq il-bejt*, meaning; Christmas on the roof (fine weather on Christmas Day) Easter under the roof (a stormy Easter) and vice versa.
Christmas and the Weather Calendar

The twelve days preceding Christmas were considered as a type of calendar forecasting the weather of each corresponding month of the coming year. Starting from December 13th (St. Lucy’s Feast), the weather of each day, carefully observed throughout the day, is believed to be the same as that of the corresponding month. So the weather of the 13th December is said to correspond to that of the month of January, the 14th December to February and so on. These are called l-Irwiegel, meaning the rules, plural form for riegla or regola, rule observation of the weather should be carried out from morning till night in terms of wind, rain, clouds and sunny periods.

Christmas Day and the Weather Stars

‘Weather Stars’ or ‘Stars of Stormy Weather’ (stilel tal-maltemp) are special feast days that fall between September and January. The original number of weather stars was said to have been seven and were the days which corresponded to those dedicated to the seven female virgin saints and which fell on days just preceding Christmas Day. These were: St. Rose of Viterbo (9th September), St. Theresa of Avila (15th October), St. Ursula (21st October), St. Cecilia (22nd November), St. Catherine of Alexandria (25th November), St. Barbara (4th December) and St. Lucy (13th December). Our forebearers expected rainy weather on these feast days. Later on the idea was extended to more feast days to include, for example, Michaelmas on 29th September, Our Lady of the Pillar on 10th October, St. Raphael the Archangel on 24th October and the Immaculate Conception on 8th December. In time the whole list of the weather stars was changed to include further feast days before and after Christmas, while some of the original feast days were discarded altogether. By Candlemas (February 2nd) the weather stars are gone: Il-Kandlora, stilli fora.

The Phantom of Christmas Night

Tradition has it that Christ was born at midnight on Christmas night and our ancestors believed that it was unlucky to be born at the same time as Christ. The unfortunate fellow who happened to be born at that time was said to change into a phantom, called a gawgaw or qawqaw, on each Christmas night of his life. It was believed that he would leave his bed and go out carrying a large agricultural implement called a harrow (xatba) with much noise and toil between midnight and four o’clock the next morning when the first church bell would ring. He would then return to his bed very much exhausted. Some believed that only the spirit became a gawgaw, but others were quite sure that both body and spirit became a gawgaw because wives would not find their husbands in bed between midnight and four o’clock on Christmas night. The only remedy for these unfortunate fellows to avoid becoming a gawgaw was to remain awake counting the holes in a sieve between midnight and four o’clock the next morning!

Gawgaw and Mlejka

Another tradition says that a gawgaw’s wife was called mlejka meaning ‘a small queen’, a phantom queen who visited homes on New Year’s Eve. If she found a fragrance of flowers and the good smell of food being cooked, then she would bring good luck to that house during the coming year, if not bad luck would fall on that household.

Another old tradition states that if when going out a gawgaw found the ground wet and dipped his moustaches into the wet drops of the night, then it meant that winter was over; if not then winter was still coming.
**Il-Fizzju or the Christmas Religious Service**

A hundred years ago the Christmas church service known as *l-Uffizzju* or *il-Fizzju* was held only at the Cathedral Church situated within the fortifications of the ancient Citadel. Crowds of people from all the villages in Gozo would gather at Rabat on Christmas Eve accompanied by men playing traditional instruments. Some of them would go round the town to view the Christmas cribs on show at different houses. Many others used to gather on Castle Hill on the stairs leading to the old town of Gozo. There they waited until it was time for the service. In the meantime they played all sorts of games and listened to the bagpipe and tambourine players entertaining the crowd. When in church, women would stay in the central part or the main aisle of the church, while men stayed under the naves on both sides of the main aisle. Some of the young men would not hesitate to throw hazelnuts at pretty young girls who might have happened to be within their reach.

**After the Service and Midnight Mass**

After the church service and the midnight mass it was customary for Gozitan men to find their way to one of the shops in St. Joseph Street in Rabat to order a hot plate of baked macaroni. After the long Christmas fast the macaroni must have tasted most delicious and it was washed down with a glass or two of local homemade wine. The women used to go straight home to prepare the Christmas lunch.

**On Christmas Day**

Early in the morning on Christmas Day children used to wake up to see what gifts they had received from Baby Jesus during the night. They used to go out noisily into the streets to play together and show each other what gifts they had received. There were no gifts for naughty boys but instead a piece of black charcoal which, much to their astonishment, was made of a sweet substance. When people met each other on Christmas morning they would wish each other *il-Milied it-Tajjeb* (Merry Christmas) and friends would meet in wine shops to have a drink together. It was customary in Gozo to have all the extended family gathered together at the parents’ home for lunch on Christmas Day. Christmas time was always the ideal time for reunions.

**Christmas Legends**

Following are some legends that are still told in Gozo.

**Baby Jesus and the goat**

It is said that Baby Jesus was a puer senes, that is, he could speak even when he was still a newborn baby. In fact we find in the Infancy Gospel of the High Priest Joseph Caiphas that Jesus spoke even when he was still in the cradle and said to his mother: Mary, I am Jesus the Son of God, the word which thou didst bring forth according to the declaration of the Angel Gabriel to thee, and my father hath sent me for the salvation of the world. (Infancy: I, 2-3). The legend of the goat and Baby Jesus says that a goat followed the shepherds and went into the cave where Jesus was born but while the sheep behaved themselves very well and kept quiet, the noisy goat went in front of Baby Jesus who was sound asleep and uttered such a loud bleat that it woke up Jesus who started crying. One version of the legend says that when the goat turned round to go away, Jesus took hold of her tail and pulled it up. So the goat’s tail remained in an upward position ever since. Another version of the same legend says that Jesus spoke and cursed the goat and told her that from that day onward her milk will be half water. That is why the goat’s milk is very light and contains very little cream when compared to the milk of the sheep or the cow.

**The Holy Family and the fig tree**

When the wise men did not return to Herod who lived in Jerusalem, the king Judea was furious and sent his soldiers to look for Baby Jesus. They went to Bethlehem and there, according to the Gospels, they killed all the babies of two years of age or under. The Holy Family was already on their way to Egypt when Herod’s soldiers nearly overtook them and caught them. There was nowhere to hide except for a large fig tree which grew in a field on the way. The fig tree was very high so Mary asked the tree, “O kind tree, that gives us such delicious fruit, please hide us from the soldiers’ eyes!” The fig tree immediately bent down and all its branches touched the ground. Several spiders quickly wove cobwebs all around. Then, Herod’s
soldiers arrived.  
“They must be hiding under that fig tree!” said one of the soldiers. 
“Don’t be stupid!” said the captain. “Can’t you see that all the branches are covered with cobwebs? How could they hide there without tearing down the cobwebs?”
So Herod’s soldiers turned round and went to look for them in another direction.

*The wheat that grew overnight*

Our ancestors recount the legend of the Holy Family, the peasant and Herod’s soldiers. A peasant was sowing his wheat when the Holy Family passed by. “What are you doing, my friend?” asked Joseph. 
“I am sowing wheat.” replied the peasant. 
“Well!” said Joseph, “Come again tomorrow to harvest the crop!”
“How can that be?” said the peasant.
“Yes, believe me,” reiterated Joseph with some emphasis, “Come again and harvest everything tomorrow.”

Even though the peasant was very skeptical about what Joseph had told him, he did go to his field the following day with his sickle to see if by some strange coincidence his wheat had really grown up and ripened and was ready for harvesting. When he arrived at his field he found, to his amazement, that his crop was fully grown and ready for harvesting.

While he was working Herod’s soldiers passed by. They were looking for the Holy Family to take Baby Jesus away and kill him. They stopped and asked the peasant whether he had seen a man and a woman with a child. 
“Yes,” replied the peasant. 
“When was that?” asked the soldiers. 
“Well,” replied peasant, “when I was sowing this wheat.”
“Oh! That must have been a very long time ago!” said the captain.
And they turned back and went to Herod empty handed.

*Mary spills milk on the thistle leaves*

On the road to Egypt the Holy Family met some shepherds who gave some milk to Mary for Baby Jesus. Now it happened that she accidentally spilt some of this milk on a thistle plant which grew in that place. Immediately, the leaves of that thistle plant became variegated, that is they have a white line along the midrib. In Gozo it is called ix-xewk tal-halib tal-Madonna, meaning the thistle on which Mary spilt the milk.

*The Holy Family passed from Gozo*

It is said that the Holy Family even came to Gozo and passed from Wied il-Għasri. Until about forty years ago, on a rock face on the way to Wied il-Għasri., people from the village of Għasri could show you the footprints of the child Jesus, Joseph and Mary and that of the devil who was said to have followed them and left his footprint as a big, deep hole just a few paces away.

People and children going for a swim at Wied il-Għasri would stop to measure their feet by stepping in any one of these footprints, except in the devil’s which was too huge for any human foot. Unfortunately these ‘footprints’ were destroyed when the road was covered with concrete.

*The Man who became a gawgaw*

Once there were two friends. One of them was born at midnight on Christmas night. So he was condemned to become a gawgaw every Christmas night.

One Christmas night his friend went out after midnight. Now the first friend was already turned into a gawgaw in the shape of a snake, and was roaming about in the streets. Soon he came across they saw a palm tree laden with ripe dates. Mary was hungry and asked the tree to be kind enough to give her some dates. The palm tree bent down and lowered its bunches of dates so that the Holy Mother could eat as much as she wanted. When Mary tasted the dates they were so sweet and delicious that she exclaimed: “Oh! What sweet and delicious fruit!”
Since then, on the stone inside each date is a small ‘o’.
his friend who was out on an errand and went to
greet him in his shape as a snake. His friend did
not recognize him, and thinking that he was a real
serpent, started throwing stones at him and hitting
him hard many times.

On the day following Christmas the man who was
a *gawgaw* woke up all bruised and injured. His
friend went to see him.

“Oh dear!” said his friend, “if only I were with you
I would have defended you!”

“Defend me!” said his friend angrily, “Are you
joking? It was you who threw so many stones
at me when I came to greet you as a snake last
night. Have you forgotten that on Christmas night I
change into a *gawgaw*?”

**Two Christmas Legacies from World War Two**

When World War Two broke out in 1939 thousands
of Maltese of Gozitan descent and others, living in
the harbour area, airport and military airfields, fled
as refugees to Gozo. Gozo’s population swelled
up to unusual proportions and Gozitan housing
and social problems increased immeasurably.
However Gozo’s economy was still mainly based
on agriculture and when compared to Malta, food
supply here was far more plentiful and Gozitans and
refugees alike fared better than their compatriots
living on the Mother Island.

The war refugees also brought with them to Gozo
two Christmas customs which were hitherto
unknown in Gozo. The first custom was the
sermon by a small boy dressed as an altar boy on
Christmas Eve or at the Midnight Mass. Another
Christmas custom was introduced by a certain
Mr. Bianco who was a member of the Christian
Doctrine Society, known as M.U.S.E.U.M.,
found by Saint George Preca. This custom
consisted of a procession by lay people on the
eve of Christmas with the figure of Baby Jesus in
a manger. The procession would stop at each of
the squares of Victoria where a small sermon or
a dialogue about the Christmas story took place.
The procession started and ended at it-Tokk, the
Main Square of Victoria and finally a sermon was
delivered by a small boy dressed as an altar boy.
Since then both the Christmas Eve Sermon and
the Christmas Eve Procession have spread to all
the parishes of Gozo.

**Modern Christmas Customs**

Nowadays in Gozo we see many Christmas
customs which were unknown one hundred years
ago. In the first place the Christmas Service and
the Midnight Mass spread to all the other parish
churches of Gozo. The earliest foreign custom
that was introduced here may be the sending of
Christmas greetings through the post by means of
Christmas cards. After World War II Gozo saw the
first Christmas tree. As a matter of fact the
first public one was inaugurated at it-Tokk, now
Independence Square, for Christmas 1956, on the
initiative of the Commissioner for Gozo, Major. J.
Castillo, E.D.

In the late nineteen fifties Gozo’s electricity
system was changed. The two small generators
which provided Gozo with electricity were closed
down and electric power was brought over from
Malta by a submarine cable. This enhanced
greatly the electricity supply in Gozo. In the
following years electricity was extended to all the
remote villages of Gozo. Gozitan houses became
better lighted and Christmas trees, Christmas
stars and home decorations, street decorations
and crib competitions became newly established
traditions.

The village of San Lawrenz saw the creation of an
annual Christmas Eve pageant and Gozo saw the
setting up of a society of crib enthusiasts (*Għaqda
Ħbieb tal-Presepju*) to promote and propagate
the tradition of crib making in Gozo. The playing
of recorded music, carol singing, Christmas
dinner dances in halls and nightclubs are all

Sermon being delivered by a young Gozitan boy at Marsalforn
during the midnight mass service on Christmas Eve.
Photo: http://www.thechoirconcert.com/
imported elements of Gozitan modern Christmas entertainment.

Gifts being presented to children on Christmas Eve became more and more elaborate, sophisticated and expensive. Such gifts evolved from simple tin toys in the early 50’s to modern computers and electronic games today. Father Christmas is often seen strolling in Gozo’s street delivering Christmas gifts and collecting money for charitable institutions. Cribs in Gozo are now being filled with imported pasturi which, though look more perfectly and elaborately made, more beautiful and last longer, do not have that charm and fascination of the traditional clay pasturi of Gozo’s old craftsmen, now, sad to say, all dead and gone. Luckily, they have been replaced by a few modern dedicated craftsmen who still make pasturi and teach children how to make them.

Modern Gozitans today live a busy and a hurried life. On Christmas Day public transport is temporarily suspended so that the transport workers can enjoy Christmas lunch with their families. Cooking a large turkey for Christmas lunch has also become a common imported Christmas custom.

Some modern critics say that modern Christmas in Gozo is a Christmas without Christ. However, we should never feel so pessimistic about this matter.

In Gozo Christ is still present wherever one turns his face and the Society of Crib Enthusiasts is working hard to make sure that Christ stays with us not only at Christmas but all the year round.

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