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WITCHCRAFT BELIEFS AND SOCIAL CONTROL IN SEVENTEENTH CENTURY MALTA

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This paper analyzes two and a half years of witchcraft accusations in mid-seventeenth century Malta before the Inquisition Tribunal. Several individual cases are described and discussed in the light of a particular pattern of behaviour which demonstrate how magic gave the individual confidence in the face of fear and provided an outlet for hostility, by attempting to explain misfortune, failure and reveal the causes of illness. Although often unsuccessful, magic assigned a human explanation to terrifying events and in so doing converted these events into a human rather than an extra human context. Socially magic provided an outlet for aggression engendered by the antagonism and frustration of social living. Witchcraft served to regulate sex antagonism and to provide a means of demanding cultural conformity by furnishing a criminal act of which deviants may be accused. The witches served as convenient scape goats for such offences.

The post-Tridentine Catholic Church responded to the 'ignorance and superstition' of the faithful with a mixture of catechesis and repression. Preachers, schoolmasters and Church courts all participated in an intense effort to raise the religious and moral levels of society by enforcing stricter standards of belief and behaviour. While active mediation with supernatural forces for human benefit remained basic to the sacramental and ceremonial core of Catholicism, there was a move to redirect popular attempts at independent access to the supernatural into orthodox channels, thus consolidating its monopoly on dealing with positive and negative supernatural forces alike (Delumeau 1977: 161–174).

The Catholic Church attempted to solve the problem by setting up a Roman Inquisition Tribunal. More commonly known as the Holy Office, the Tribunal of the Inquisition was originally intended to oppose the doctrines of Luther and the other flourishing Protestants sects. By the early seventeenth century, however, the Inquisition became more concerned with folk religious beliefs and sexual morality. On its part the Maltese Tribunal, set up in 1562, continued to operate and check all forms of unethical behaviour, until the end of the rule of the Hospitaller Order of St. John in June 1798.

This study will attempt to analyze folk religious beliefs for two and a half years of the records, namely those pertaining to Mgr. Antonio Pignatelli (18 December 1646 to May 1649), who was elected Pontiff of the Catholic church on 12 July 1691 (Bonnici 1990: 308).

Clearly this is not a history of the Inquisition and the various changes it underwent and ultimately the effects it had on social, religious and political issues. However judging from this short recorded period of activities one is able to provide insights into

the categories used by the Inquisition in order to classify religious practices as orthodox or heretical, and to grasp the nature of religious practices at a popular level. Clearly the Inquisition records suffer from the disability that they deal with deviant practices, and therefore cannot encompass the whole range of religious sentiments and practices.

Religion in seventeenth century Malta seems to have had very little to do with belief in the theorization of norms and the so called 'guilt culture', but had much more to do with semi-magical practices like healing, divination the evil eye and love charms. Of paramount importance is the strong addiction to the magical resources of literacy. Writing was often used to communicate with supernatural forces, without the need to go through official channels.

Pignatelli heard a total of 211 cases of which only 187 survive. Twenty eight per cent of the documented cases deal with folk religious beliefs and practices. The last sixteen cases, of which one is missing, were heard by the Deputy Inquisitor and Assessor of the Tribunal, Don Francesco Pontremoli (Bonnici 1977: 70).

The Inquisition Tribunal made no distinction between one type of magic and another. Indeed such accusations were classified under the title *de sortilegio* (concerning sorcery), without ever defining their nature throughout the long history of the Maltese Tribunal.[1] For the sake of clarity, I have classified the *de sortilegio* cases of the Pignatelli period into four sections basing myself on M. Marwick's classification of magic cases among the Cewa of central Africa (1967: 101–126): healing; evil eye; popular magic; divination, or rather fortune-telling. Since a few cases include two or more different practices, the trial number of offences for our analysis rises to 64. Nevertheless, only a minority of these cases were ever terminated.

The procedure adopted for concluded cases usually included evidence by a small number of witnesses, followed by a scrutiny of the accused. Whoever was found guilty of a minor offence was always admonished and given penance. On his or her part the accused had to promise to keep silent on the matter, abjure, express contrition and recite a few prayers for a number of months. A light penance could indicate that by the mid-seventeenth century witchcraft accusations were in decline (Foucault 1970: 54).

The fact that a good number of cases were never concluded may suggest that the Tribunal was often manipulated by some, often neighbours, in pursuit of 'political' strategies.

Table 1. Types of Explanations Offered for 64 Categories

Explanation	Total
1. Acts of healing	10
2. Acts of evil eye	10
3. Acts of sorcery	40
4. Acts of divination	4
	64

Evidence that the single largest category of popular religion was sorcery leads to a further classification of such cases.

Table 2. Types of Sorcery Accusations

Explanation	Total
1. Love charms and aphrodisiacs	30
2. Talismans and amulets	6
3. Other	4
	40

The witches themselves could be divided into the following nine categories:

Table 3. Witches Distributed by Status/Origin and Sex

Classification	Male	Female	Total
1. Maltese	13	21	34
2. Sicilian	4	5	9
3. Jewish	–	2	2
4. Greek	1	–	1
5. Calabrian	–	1	1
6. Neapolitan	1	–	1
7. French	1	–	1
8. Muslim slaves	21	3	24
9. Priests/friars	5	–	5
	46	32	78
10. Unidentified witch			1
			79

The techniques employed by witches were various and included: the mixing of magical potions with food or drink; the making of concoctions that incorporated the intended victim's nail pairings, bodily excretions and other; the recitation of prayers and other rites and formulas; the making of omens; the use of talismans and amulets for protection against all odds which the victim faced in everyday life.

In official quarters these practices were mostly imputed to the activity of slaves who exerted direct influence on weaker members of Maltese society, especially women and 'simpletons'—a view upheld by Inquisitor Federico Borromeo (1653–1654) (NLM Libr. 23: 258; *Malta letteraria*, II 1927: 189). Yet in line with the large majority of cases heard by Spanish and Roman inquisitors, especially in the southern parts of both peninsulas it was,

> Peasants and town dwellers (who) were accused of performing various types of magic, and their magic was viewed as heretical, but it was thought of much more as pagan superstition than as diabolical apostasy. These superstitious people were to be prosecuted of course, but the purpose was to correct and purify the faith, not to protect society from a conspiratoral menace (Levack 1987: 201–202).

Nonetheless it would be misleading to assume that the uneducated were the only section of society to believe in these practices. Whereas a sound education could control excessive credulity, it did not completely destroy faith in popular beliefs. Thus the literate were sometimes so keen about magic that they had whole sections of their private libraries dedicated to the topic (AIM 2A, 31 f.338v: 19 September, 1574).

Throughout the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the Catholic Church intensified efforts to eliminate notions of popular religion. A clear statement of 'orthodox' responsibility for combatting the effects commonly attributed to negative supernatural forces is presented in a directive of 1625 when the clergy were obliged to denounce anyone who practised magic, or complied to it, to the Bishop or the Inquisitor. Similar instructions were repeated in 1646 (Cassar 1964: 426). But as the ex-consultant of the Malta Inquisition Tribunal, the Jesuit Sebastiano Salelles remarks, 'Inquisition proceedings agains magic spread by infidels and prostitutes and witches will hardly ever come to an end' (Salelles 1651: 62).

Salelles's work forms part of the post-Tridentine effort to reform various aspects of popular belief and behaviour, an effort that involved clergy of all levels against popular error. Yet magic remained widespread for a long time after Salelles. In spite of official prohibitions and the lapse of many centuries, some forms of magic, like healing and the trust in charms against the evil eye, still persist among some sectors of Maltese society (Cassar-Pullicino 1947: 35).

Popular Magic I: Healing and Bewitchment

Popular healers were to be found in many parts of Europe with different names but using similar techniques. 'In England', remarks Peter Burke, 'they were known as "cunning men" and "wise women", . . . in Spain as *saludadores* (healers), in Sicily as *giravoli* (wanderers). . . . They treated patients with herbs, . . . and not least, with a variety of charms, prayers and rituals in which candles and (in Catholic countries) even consecrated wafers had their part' (Burke 1978: 106). This seems to have been widespread. In Malta there is even reference to similar practices by churchmen. Among the 28 individuals who were brought before the Bishop in 1546 two persons, a nun and a Dominican Prior at the Borgo were accused of *magaria* (magic). The friar was further denounced for writing the words, *Hoc est corpus meum* (This is my body) on consecrated wafers before distributing them to the sick (AIM 1A, 1 April 1546).

In their attempts to counter such practices and Protestant heresies, the Bishops assembled at Trent, issued decrees to reform the Catholic Church. Throughout its sessions it had often condemned the moral faults of the clergy and abuses in the administration of the sacraments (Burke 1978: 220). During this period of institutional change, long standing beliefs in witchcraft became entangled in these new religious issues. Hence witches were identified with heretics especially after the setting up of the Inquisition tribunal followed by extensive witch trials particularly between the 1570s and the 1660s (Monter & Tedeschi 1987: 134). Witch beliefs became widespread when medical knowledge proved inadequate, while magic was always put forward as an explanation. It consisted of a mixture of remedies based on the accumulated experience of nursing combined with the inherited lore about healing properties of herbs accompanied by prayers, charms and spells.

In Malta the standard treatment for healing diseases was the 'fumigation' of the patient with burnt ingredients, healing by touch, or by bathing parts of the body (Cassar

1976: 83–85). Practically all cases of magical healing under study contain one or a combination of these cures. K. Thomas detected three basic beliefs behind folk medicine in this period, namely: the fact that disease was considered a foreign presence; religious language was thought to possess mystical powers which could be deployed for practical purposes; while charms and potions owed their power to the healer (1971: 215).

The belief that disease was a foreign presence in the body, which had to be conjured or exorcised out, was a common belief in seventeenth century Malta. Theresia Mallia explained how a female slave healed her aunt's headache.

> . . . this slave picked a small stone and broke a fresh egg against it, which she threw into a pot of fresh water. When the egg was cooked. . . . She covered the utensil with a napkin and ordered that the contents should be thrown into the sea, on condition, that the person who threw it away would not look. In this way, the sickness would be thrown into the sea, and the patient would heal. The day after, I went to see my aunt . . . who said that she was feeling better (AIM 61A, 40: f.223).

The popularity of these healers is nowhere shown so well as in the case of Chag Hali of Damietta (Egypt), better known as Chag Chut. In January 1648 he confessed that he had been imprisoned twice and on the two occasions he was flogged and warned to keep away from the homes of Christian women (AIM 61A, 94: f. 440v). On one occasion Chag Chut tried to cure the daughter of Paolina Hagius by whispering some words over a pot full of water. At the second attempt he found a tuft of hair which the slave associated with evil (*Ibid.* f. 437).The most distinctive feature of the healer's medical dealings was thus his readiness to diagnose a supernatural cause for the patient's malady, by saying that he or she had been bewitched (Thomas 1971: 219).

The use of magical language helped to create emotional tensions of particular situations while the spells, ritual acts and gestures a spontaneous flow of emotions (Malinowski 1974: 71). This assertion leads to another theme proposed by Thomas, that of religious language for healing purposes. According to Skorupski, 'words can feature in magic in three ways: in utterances, in inscriptions and as supposed entitles . . .' Hence, 'there is distinction between magic which draws on language in as much as it involves the casting of spells, and magical action which operates specifically on, or with words without necessarily involving words' (1974: 145).

Nearly all the cases under study include the mumbling of a few words on the afflicted part of the body or the writing of a curative formula on a scrap of paper. When Honorio Rosato could not be cured by a drink given to him by a healer slave, he was given a piece of wax which the healer obliged him to put under his tongue. On breaking it Rosato found a piece of paper written in Arabic script (AIM 6B, 126: f. 632). Incantations tended therefore to have one goal that of curing a disease.[2]

As a religion, Islam, has a considerable magico-religious appeal and its practices are often incorporated in ritual activities. The use of writing as a mode of communication was thought to possess pragmatic value while divination by the book spread far outside the boundaries of Islam (Goody 1987: 130–133). The formation of Islamic inscriptions therefore suggest a North African veneration for the Qur'an which was a 'closed book' due to the wide-spread illiteracy in the area. Even among the faithful, magical appeal is often one of its main attractions today (Goody & Watt 1972: 326–327).

In uttering a spell it is the content which is important, while the exact words used may vary. 'Such spells follow the logic of giving instructions to a magical agency'

(Skorupski 1976: 147). At one time, a Sicilian woman, Narda, in her belief of the magical power of prayers 'fumigated' herself with palm branches and olive leaves while praying to the Holy Trinity (AIM 61B, 143: f. 721). The widespread use of curative symbols on patients is embedded, according to Levi-Strauss, in the cultural context and influence the ways in which illness is perceived and dealt with.[3]

Early modern European healers believed that they could attain supernatural powers which involved mystery. A hardly achieved process of healing is an acknowledgement both of the power of the healer who prescribes it, and the need of the necessary steps to counteract disease. Meanwhile, as pointed out previously, the patient was often not informed of the treatment (Larner 1984: 148).

Such practices seem to prevail in modern marabout divination which is being increasingly consulted. In a study on the effect of African divination in Paris, L. Kuczynski argues that amulets, usually spells on sheets of paper are received without the questioning of contents by patients. Instructions are at most times fairly scrupulously observed. Thus amulets become surrogate objects whose possession helps to overcome the problem while the ritual used reintroduces order in daily life and constantly reactivates hope (Anthropology Today 1988: 8). The marabout, like the early modern healer, is therefore a mediator whose job is to resolve the problem in the name of the patient.

Some healers specialized in particular diseases while others tended to cure any disease that sprung up, although no one was foolish enough to pretend to cure mortal diseases like plague. No doubt a good number of diseases went undiagnosed as a wasting sickness of some sort. The healers however often managed to persuade their patients that time heals.

During the Inquisitorship of Mgr. Pignatelli, Chag Hali's healing activities seems to have been widespread; he is reported to have practised his arts in the Harbour area as well as in villages. He was called in for all sorts of diseases and used different methods for different maladies. One can call Chag Hali a master healer in popular medicine. The many denunciations against him, include descriptions not only of mystical rituals, fumigation, bathing and means to ward off the evil eye, but even charms and potions. One of his favourite ones was a potion of mixed leaves which used to be mixed with water used for the bathing of the sick person (AIM 61A, 70: f. 336).

Supernatural ability was always thought to be acquired with the aid of the devil. This was an occupational hazard of the healers who could be accused of magic on the grounds that 'whoever knows how to cure, knows how to harm' (*qui scit sanare, scit destruere*) (Burke 1978: 107). In Malta, like elsewhere, very few healers confined themselves to healing practices only. Special powers were special powers, and a healer could become a harmer, or even more likely, could initiate curses and vengeances in his or her behalf if crossed or refused payment. Clara Delia admitted that,

> My wish was to free my daughter from her illness in order to know what had caused it I accepted . . . (the advice of healers) judging that the Infidels (Muslim slaves) are those who harm persons with their magic, and that they are the ones who know how to heal them (AIM 61A, 81: f. 260).

Hence at a popular level healers were above all depicted as people who harmed others by occult means (Cohn 1982: 152). The belief that healers were able to practise both good and bad magic was greatly increased by the hostility of the authorities to anyone claiming special powers. As the healer's greatest asset was the client's

imagination both his patient and himself had to have complete faith in the ritual. This faith was so great that patients and relatives would observe all procedures a healer might ask for. When Salvo de Nicolai asked his wife about the medicaments a slave healer used in order to cure his mother-in-law, the wife refused to utter a word on the grounds that the slave had admonished her not to tell anyone or else the illness would pass on to her (AIM 61A, 100: f. 497). Whether maleficient magic was commonly practised, or whether it was the result of neurotic fantasies, fear of bodily harm was particularly acute. Wherever genuine belief in the effectiveness of magic existed, there was always a sharp fear of magical injury, which in turn engendered a ready suspicion that often resulted in unfounded accusations of *maleficium* (Hole 1957: 139).

Inquisition cases abound with such accusations including the popular belief that some people had the power to fly through the air due to bewitchment. Giacoba, wife of Berto Borg, was reported to have said, 'I do not know what I'm doing because I am bewitched'. On many a night Berto looked for her in bed, but could not find her, reputedly because she flew away. When she returned, she would not say where she had been (AIM 61A, 62: f. 292).

Widespread belief in the baneful influences of the evil eye are a common feature still recurring today notably in Southern Europe. In Malta the 'evil eye' refers to the power alleged to be possessed by some individuals, of inflicting injury, or producing illness by merely looking at a person whom they wish to harm (Busuttil 1922: 138). This practice is nowhere better demonstrated than in the case of Giovanni Francesco Gauci, a seemingly well off gentleman who seeked the advice of healers not only in Malta but even in Sicily and Tunisia in order to cure his wife. The importance of this particular case lies in the similarity of the ritual used in the three neighbouring states for the curing of the evil eye. Apart from Malta based healers who asked for some of his wife's clothing, Gauci asked the expert advice of a priest healer in Catania, and a woman healer in Syracuse both of whom were offered a free passage to Malta, and both of whom declined the offer, although they also suggested that he should send some of the sick person's clothing to them. Finally he asked a Maltese friend, that while in Tunisia, he would consult a Jewess, renowned for her healing abilities. Yet again the Jewess asked for some clothing of the sick person and sent a root of a plant and a small jug of water which had to be sprinkled on the sick person's face. Gauci is reported to have spent a long time tyring to cure his wife and only after continual futile advice by healers did he give up (AIM 61B, 195: ff. 956–957).

Such theories were magnified by the potential efficacy of secret, herbal or chemical preparations which seemed to be effective therapy to calm the mind but ineffective to heal the body. While official medicine was more interventionist, and the doctor was prepared to explain and justify his methods in scientific terms, the healer was always able to explain any apparent failure by suggesting that the patient had applied the potion wrongly or did not come in time, or else did not believe in the efficacy of his powers.

Nonetheless there was always the possibility to go for advice to a more experienced healer, as many often did. In this way a healer could never be challenged even if a particular oracle would not work, and besides other clients were always at hand. Fortunately for the healers consultations were semi-clandestine and they always warned their clients not to divulge the matter for fear of prosecution. The belief in the power of the healer, the use of ardous cures, some of which work better than others, and the withholding of information as 'a need to know' basis is still with us. The essential difference nowadays lies neither in knowledge nor in practice, but in the authority of medical doctors (Larner 1984: 152).

Popular Magic II: Charms and Divination

The use of charms and widespread belief in divination has been constant throughout the history of mankind. Due to the increasing control by religious authorities, and the organized compilation of data, one is able to get a much better insight of society in early modern Europe. These practices were interrelated with customs of everyday life, to such an extent, that charms of obvious Christian origins were used side by side with 'magnets' of an astrological character. Charms were used to win the love of members of the opposite sex; for the reconciliaton with one's beloved or spouse; for immunity from fire-arms; for protection against violence; for fortune; to win friendship or to avoid any sort of harm or misfortune.

It seems that the Roman Inquisition was already preoccupied with these magic practices well before 1600, although it was on the increase after that date. This is confirmed from the fact that seventeenth-century Italian Tribunals were highly concerned with the use of magical arts. It is reported that love magic alone constituted over 40% of all cases in Venice and the Friuli and close to that amount in Naples. In Sicily, where it accounted for only 25% of Holy Office activity, after 1615, it was the single largest category (Monter & Tedeschi 1987: 134–135). After 1600, prosecution of magicians dominated the business of the Italian Inquisition, supplanting the Protestant heresy which in the sixteenth century had dominated the scene. Since such data has not yet been compiled on the Maltese Tribunal, it is not possible to compare the data with that of other Tribunals. For the Pignatelli period, magic cases constitute 28% of the total, half of which deal with love charms (see p. 318).

The table below explains why love charms were adoperated, dividing those who practised it by sex. Women were in a majority, although men seem to have occasionally used magic to win the love of females, while employing it for other reasons as well. Love magic was mostly resorted to by desirable women referred to as 'courtesans' whose main intention was to reconcile with their 'carnal friend'.[4] On the other hand, men generally resorted to love magic in order to win the love of any woman without distinction.

Table 4. Resort to Magic for the love of:

	Male	Female	Total
Friend	5	14	19
Spouse	1	3	4
Unknown	6	1	7
Totals:	12	18	30

In the performance of such magical rites, the individual concerned usually made use of his or her own hair or nails, or some bodily secretion, which may be complemented by some object belonging to the person he or she was seeking to attract. Books on necromancy, then very much in demand, contained recipes for all sorts of magic and were avidly read by any literate person, who could then divulge the information to anyone willing to hear.

Reference to the great popularity of these writings is made in a case involving two 32 year old priests who confessed that, at the age of sixteen, they had practised some

experiments read in a manuscript. Amongst other recipes, the book included some for immunity against fire-arms and others on love magic. They tried love magic experiments by throwing fingernail pairings, and nut leaves, inscribed with blood-written words, in boiling oil (AIM 61A, 45: f. 219).

The belief that magical ingredients can be used for such purposes existed in the Middle Ages but gained a temporary boost in the early modern period. Such doctrines could explain, to the satisfaction of intellectuals, why consequences might follow after tampering with a wax image of a person or with some of his clothing (Thomas 1971: 520). Flaminio Zammit was taught how to make a wax image of his beloved and thrust a small stick in it and even to mix incense, the blood of a bat, and other ingredients in order to attract her to him (AIM 61A, 81: f. 384). Likewise Domenica Darmanin, recommended the mixing of menstrual blood with the lover's wine to ensure that he remains faithful (AIM 61A, 72: f. 342)—a practice seemingly common in southern Europe (De Rosa 1971: 65).

Although utilized by men and women alike, love charms, including incantations, were particularly popular among desperate lonely women. A common method was the sprinkling of salt in fire (see Appendix II) followed by: the tying of knots; the lighting of candles; the thrusting of a black handled dagger or nail in the floor, or in a flower pot; and the bean-pairing prophecy. They were all preceeded by rituals to the actual spell in which, at times, a saint, a star or even the devil were invoked.

They are practices resembling magic beliefs among tribal societies which according to Levi-Strauss have three complimentary aspects: the sorcerer's belief in the effectiveness of his techniques; the victim's belief in the sorcerer's power; the faith and expectations of society which constantly act as a sort of gravitational field within which relationship between sorcerer and bewitched is located and defined (1963: ch. IX). Thus, Levi-Strauss asserts that, 'magical behaviour is the response of a situation which is revealed to the mind through emotional manifestations but whose essence is intellectual. Man asks magical thinking to provide him with a new system of reference within which the thus-far contradictory elements can be integrated' (*Ibid.*).

Seventeenth century Maltese clients had recourse to a fortune-teller, whenever they had a serious matter weighing on the mind. Paulina Vella took her sick daughter Gratia to a diviner to learn about the girl's future health (AIM 61A, 79: f. 356), while Angeluccia Vella resorted to divination for a prognostication of her husband's return from abroad (AIM 61A, 53: f. 265). But these are prophecies where predictions are derived from accidental happenings. A more deliberate method of divination widely practised was fortune-telling with the aid of beans as a prelude to a spell for love magic. Usually nine pairs of beans were used although they seem to have varied in number (AIM 61B, 165: f. 875).

Antonia *La Siciliana* explained how:

> I have taught (girls seeking advice), how to throw salt in fire and say—Satan burn the heart of N. and bring him to me— . . . I taught (girls) how to place twenty beans (in a sieve), mark two of them, and cut one in half, (include) a *grano* (coin), a piece of coal, and a small piece of bread while repeating two Ave Maria and a Pater Noster in honour of St. Helen. The marked beans represented the lover and his beloved, and the divided bean, the heart of the lover and the house of the beloved. From the new positions taken up when the beans are thrown, one could gather either whether the two lovers would reconcile and stay on, or else whether a definite separation would ensue (AIM 61B, 131: ff. 660–661).

In witch trials, mention of objects used for personal protection or substitutes of the loved, which are popularly known as 'magnets', is frequent. They usually consisted

of a scrap of paper with writing on it, a stone, herb or a piece of metal. They were so popular that even people of high standing resorted to them. Lady Catherina Prevost, was advised by her son, Magnifico Giacches, to put a herb in her mouth in order to reconcile with her husband. The herb originally obtained in Palermo was believed to contain magical power (AIM 61B, 132: f. 674). Other 'magnets' were used to make friends or even to make the owner rich and powerful (AIM 61A, 63: f. 294). Others used these charms for physical protection. Gan Petro Apap was shown a piece of paper which served as a protection against fire-arms. (AIM 61A, 50: f. 257).

The use of 'magnets' and other amulets like all other magical rites and fortune-telling, reveal the inner needs, and fears of individuals who could not otherwise express themselves. They are therefore a priceless mine of information about the social constraints of a people. G. K. Park sums up that: 'For each society, in which divination is practised there is, to be sure, a proper list of its occasions, and such a list may say much about the sources of strain in that society. . . .' (1967: 234).

Popular Magic III: Prayers and Spells

The belief that earthly events could be influenced by supernatural intervention was not in itself considered to be magical by the Catholic Church. In the opinion of Malinowski, the saints become, in popular practice, passive accomplices of magic. Thus they can provide rain by being placed in a field, stop flows of lava by confronting them, halt the progress of a disease, of a blight or of a plague of insects (1979: 40).

This crude practical use of religious ritual helped to transform Christian devotions into functional magic. The Church itself, after the Council of Trent, continued to encourage the use of ritual to convince the people of its effectiveness. This mentality was so deeply felt that anyone who doubted such theories could be denounced to the Inquisition. Mastro Blasio Zammit was denounced by a neighbour for having ridiculed the mounting of the statue of St. Agatha on the walls of Mdina, at a time of increasing fears of an eventual siege (AIM 3B, 63: ff. 622–625: 18 June 1574). Catholics therefore, continued to have a religion of images rather than a religion of texts (i.e. the Protestants). In place of what was reformed during the Council, the Church offered new saints to whom Catholics could pray. The Holy Family tended to replace the traditional Virgin-Child dyad while there was more stress on the cult of the Eucharist (Burke 1978: 231–232).

The efficacy of prayer as a mechanical means to attain salvation was also widely employed. On its part the Church helped a great deal to weaken the fundamental distinction between prayer and spell (Thomas 1971: 46). Indeed people can take up both religious and magical attitudes towards the spiritual agencies, and mingle them in a single rite (Skorupski 1976: 133–134).

It is important here to define the terms prayer and spell. The essential difference between prayers and spells was that the latter claimed to work automatically while a prayer had no certainty of success and would not be granted if God chose not to concede it. As Skorupski puts it, 'Prayer consists simply of a communion with the god: it commonly takes the form of request. A man prays for the recovery of his son from illness . . . such a request presupposes that the god is able either to accede to it or to refuse it' (1976: 130).

On the other hand, a spell can never go wrong unless some detail of ritual observance had been omitted or a rival magician has practised counter magic. Nineteenth century anthropologists looked at prayer as a form of supplication, while the spell

was considered as a mechanical means of manipulation (Skorupski 1976: ch. 9). Although this term is outdated it somehow applies to Christian ethics where prayer is no guarantee for practical results.

The distinction between the two was blurred by the Church itself at a popular level by recommending the use of prayers for healing the sick, or else in order to gain other divine graces. Confessors required penitents to repeat prayers, thereby fostering the notion that recitation of prayers had a mechanical efficacy. Instructive is the case of Narda *La Siciliana*, who 'fumigated' herself with palm branches and olive leaves, while reciting prayers to the Holy Trinity (see p. 327).

Such a situation prevailed in early modern Malta much on the same pattern as the rest of Europe. Spells and prayers were used side by side for healing as well as love magic, good luck, divination and so on. Unfortunately, only details and transcripts of spells adoperated for love magic are available in the period under study. This was probably because love magic was widely practised by 'prostitutes', who were given harsh punishments which included public whipping, imprisonment and even exile if found guilty (AIM Misc. 2: 40–41). The formulas used, give an insight of the mingling of magic and religion as perceived by Skorupski (see above).

Among the magic cases of the Pignatelli inquisitonship, one encounters three women denounced for having adoperated such incantations, with the help of wise women, in order that their carnal friends may return to them. Spells can be divided into three categories, namely: those involving implorations to the planets or the dead, which are of obvious pagan origin; prayers to saints and the recitation of the Pater Noster and the Ave Maria; while others included invocations to the devil.

The first type of spell is usually included in the belief that the spell is nearly always essential to the act of magic. Among tribal societies, 'It is a saying rather than a formula, it is familiar, it is handed over without strict reference to genealogical ties, the knowledge of it is not confined to the practitioner' (Evans-Pritchard 1967: 5).

This was the way spells were transferred from one person to another in Malta. When Gratia Greg quarrelled with her 'carnal friend', Margarita *di Pelamita* advised her to implore the North Star.

Ti sconguiro, Stella della Crispa,	I implore you winkle star,
di quello che ti dico non ti	do not regret what I tell
rincresca	you.
Io vi prego li scatinati,	I pray you to break loose,
quattro ungi di granati ci dati,	four hails of thunder (and),
dove è N. li mandati,	send them where there is N.,
lo bastonati, lo flagellati,	beat him, flog him,
non lo lasciar riposare,	do not let him rest,
e quando a me venga a trovare.	and that he may come for me.
(AIM 61B, 165: f. 875).	

While women generally used spells in order to reconcile with a lover, men had a tendency to profer incantations in order to make women fall in love with them. On one such occasion Gioseppe Boccia of Messina learnt the saying: *Ara dei sacra cana*, probably a corrupt form of a Latin phrase, which Boccio could not explain what it meant (AIM 61A, 60: f. 285). The spell is therefore not a set formula learnt by heart and repeated without variation by all who use the same magic. It is an assertion adopted to the purpose of the magic which

will vary in word formation. Hence the practitioner will change words on different occasions and different individuals might insert different details.

The image of the witch current in this period involved the belief that witches can make a pact with the devil. R. Kieckhefer argues that although judicial manuals give the impression that actual devil-worshipping was the most common form of witchcraft, in reality, devil-worship played little or no part in popular belief (1976: 31).

In Malta devil-worship played a very minor role at a popular level. In the Pignatelli period only one person confessed to have had carnal relations with the devil (The case of Geltrude Navarra aged 17, is discussed at length in A. Bonnici 1977: 103–105). The very allegation of diabolism was often vague and peripheral. The accused was first charged with magic and then asked whether he had ever indulged in such practices. When inflicting a punishment, the Inquisitor had to distinguish between one who deliberately indulged in diabolism and another who might not be conscious of invoking the help of the devil (AIM Misc. 2: 34). Gioseppi Guevara of Valletta invoked the devil four times but stated that he did so, 'casually without reflecting on anything' (AIM 61A, 13: f. 59). In such occasions, that is, where no tangible harm resulted, or where the Inquisitor was faced with a lack of evidence, the accused were mildly punished (AIM Misc. 2: 30).

Furthermore, the seventeenth century was greatly influenced by the publication of a tract by Inquisitor Salazar de Frias on a so called outbreak of witchcraft in Navarre in 1612. Written in 1620 and published in 1655, the tract, *Instructio pro formando processibus in causis strigum maleficiorum et sortilegiorum*, contained a series of instructions on how to proceed against witches. The *Instructio* insisted on the need for medical examinations to prove the reality of crimes supposed to have been committed by witches (Burman 1984: 186). Its wide influence in the seventeenth century helps to explain the relatively light treatment of witches and the sharp decline in witch trials during the second half of the century.

In our social-setting invocation of the devil was one of the methods used by lonely women so that their 'carnal friends' might return to them. On one occasion, Maddalena de Stephani was told by Antonia *La Siciliana* to thrust a black handled knife in the floor, invoke the devil and repeat a Sicilian spell:

Questo coltello trema la terra.	This knife shakes the earth,
la terra trema lu cielu,	the earth shakes the sky,
lu cielu trema Mongibellu,	the sky shakes Mongibello,
Mongibellu resviglia Satanassu,	Mongebello awakens Satan,
che piglia questo coltello.	who picks this knife,
e lo ficchi nel cuore di N.,	and thrusts it in N's heart,
che non possa dormire,	so that he would not sleep.
ne riposare,	nor rest,
ma a mia possa portare.	but that he brings him to me.
(AIM 61A, 4: ff. 15–16).	

These invocations of the devil clearly reveal that Maddalena, like many other women of her times, needed male protection—a widespread phenomenon when the men are away at sea. Due to incessant victimization by the Church authorities, these women may have come to believe that they were witches in pact with Satan. At most times, however, they

were unaware that they were confounding the difference between religion and witchcraft.

Delumeau argues that the peasantry of Europe were effectively christianised for the first time during the Reformation and Catholic Reformation period, as both movements emphasized the importance of lay personal religion which was unknown in earlier times. In pre-reformation Europe 'lay religion was optional', and it was only the idea that individuals were responsible for their own salvation that transformed the belief structure (1977: 170–172). But it took generations before the old habits gave way to the new teachings of the Church, and mid-seventeenth century Malta was no exception to the rule. Furthermore, such ideas lingered on even among the clergy, and especially the clerics, who only received the minor orders and were thus free to marry. The cleric Gioseppi Scarso behaved in a manner similar to that of the lonely women, in order to make a female fall in love with him (AIM 61B, 125: ff. 648–649).

Why is it therefore that women were more harassed than men in these trials? Confessions including the invocation of devils by the accused were at most times nothing more than the fruits of delusion, hysteria and melancholy. A depressed state characterized such an odd behaviour particularly in women. Midelfort suggests, that south western Germany in early modern times contained,

> many women (who) in their confessions emphasized that they were seduced into witchcraft at a time when they were sad, dejected or even desperate . . . the dangerous attribute . . . was isolation. Women belonged under the protection and legal power of their father until they married. When they married, husbands took over this power intact . . . The structure of society was so completely geared to the family, that persons without families were automatically peculiar, unprotected and suspect (1982: 181–182).

The fact that other women identified them as witches further confirms a general hostility to women when they failed to fulfil the functions thought appropriate to them. Female security therefore lay in conforming to the positive standard and thus women 'reinforced their own individual positions by joining in attacks on defiant women' (Larner 1984: 62).[5]

In seventeenth century modes of thought, women's function was within the domestic sphere, and they were not expected to be aggressive. Their characteristics in the domestic role were based on the needs of a woman to be a mother and a wife, the latter defining her as a subordinate to her husband. In this way such beliefs act as a conservative force. As such the growing number of women without a male protector would have appeared to be a seditious element in early modern society. Until society learned to adjust to the new social patterns, these women were especially susceptible to attack. By being accused for witchcraft, women were continually reminded of their subordinate position vis-a-vis men and were treated harshly if they did not comply with accepted standards. Witchcraft accusations were therefore culturally constructed, primarily meant to control women's activities.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have tried to demonstrate how early modern folk beliefs permeated all sectors of society. This state of affairs was made possible by the infusion of the new ideas that accompanied the inflow of migrants from all parts of Mediterranean Europe, and the ever growing presence of Muslim slaves (Cassar 1993: 432–436).

At a time when Europe was still suffering from the general upheaval of the

Reformation and its Catholic response, the role of religion was still dominant in both the Catholic and the Protestant camps (Febvre 1982: 335–353). We have seen how in the Catholic south, the religious rigour expressed itself in the establishment of the Inquisition Tribunal, which was able to impose itself on all sectors of public and private life. The Inquisition managed to manipulate the minds of people, by adapting testimonies to its own 'notions and theological preoccupations' (Ginzburg 1983: 11–12).

It often turned out that the accused practitioner of witchcraft, or any other heretical accusations, became the victim both of the Tribunal and the supposedly 'bewitched' person. In the majority of cases, the accused served as a scapegoat for the sake of safeguarding accepted moral standards. While in England and northern Europe the witch stereotype was usually the old or poor woman (Macfarlane 1970: 205–206), in Malta, the lonely woman and Muslim slave were most liable to prosecution.

The general trend of the witch hunt in early modern Malta, as in the rest of Europe, was essentially an attack on defenceless members of society, who at most times were considered a threat to the established system, simply because they did not conform. This explains why in two main witch trials held by the Malta Inquisition in 1617 and 1625, women suspected of witchcraft practices were brought to trial *en masse*. In the 1617 case, 32 such women were accused of the 'crime' (AIM 40A, 13: ff. 144–412), while the number rose to 40 in 1625 (AIM 44B: ff. 620–1067).

The two cases suggest that the Maltese islands passed through a witch craze similar to its continental counterpart. Lonely women, in a male dominated society, unable to sustain themselves and with no one to turn to, were often looked upon as 'prostitutes'. In such circumstances they were always on the look out for a permanent friendship with a male protector without having to fork out a dowry—an essential in seventeenth century marriage contracts (Cassar 1993: 465–468). When such a relationship was terminated, these women often resorted to witchcraft, more often than not, with the help of Muslim slaves or wise women.

At the same time during an age of religious intolerance, Maltese society could not afford to ignore the suspicious behaviour of slaves adherent to a rival religion, and who furthermore comprised a sizeable minority. Slaves might be regarded as part of a family household, and were probably well cared for, but they could easily be blamed for all sorts of evil and uncertainty that might crop up. Thus for example, to forestall rebellion, all slaves, whether belonging to the Order of St. John or in private employ, were from time to time required to sleep in a special prison *bagno* in the evening (Blouet 1967: 140).

A non-conforming attitude in a highly conformist atmosphere led to harassment from all sides, and all such individuals became prone to accusations.[6] Thus 'prostitutes' and Muslim slaves were the two sections of society who were most liable to charges. A. R. Cardozo remarks that in a witch hunt, 'it is primarily social, political and religious intolerance that provides the initial impetus of a craze' (1982: 469).

What do the Inquisitorial records contribute to the study of popular culture in the seventeenth century? The existence of parallel and competing remedies to fundamental problems of everyday life is one indication of the tensions between cultural levels in early modern society. The identity of purpose and the structural similarities shared by 'orthodox' and folk remedies indicate that these alternatives existed within the same universe rather than deriving from fundamentally antagonistic views.[7]

The efforts of the Tridentine Church to erect secure boundaries between 'orthodoxy' and folk religious beliefs, aimed primarily to define and control an often resistant social reality. This was an ongoing historical process which persisted from one generation to

the next, yet ultimately, the jurisdictional efforts of the Inquisition Tribunal helped to extensively restrain popular religious practices and beliefs as the records of these trials bear witness.

Appendix I: Ingredients and the adoperation of healing cures

Healing Cures:	*Slaves*	*Others*	*Total*
1. Spells and/or prayers	1	2	3
2. Use of ointment; scribbled paper; powder or herbs on aching parts of the body or in the mouth	3	2	5
3. Use of candles; vestments of sick persons	4	2	6
4. Potions consisting of powder; written paper or herbs to drink	4	1	5
5. Washing of face or hands with a special water	3	1	4
6. 'Fumigation' of the body with olive branches, palm branches or other	3	2	5
7. The use of a water jug or plate, at times with writings scribbled, put on a sick person's head and later thrown away	3	1	4
8. 'Healing' touch	2	–	2
9. Written paper or parchment thrown in fire	3	–	3
10. Palmistry	1	–	1
11. Cutting of prickly pears to size of foot	–	1	1
12. Unknown method	1	–	1
	28	12	40

Appendix II: Ingredients and the adoperation of magic in love charms

Adoperated Charms:	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
1. Invocation of devils	4	6	10
2. Prayers and Spells	5	11	16
3. Salt or other ingredients thrown in fire	2	14	16
4. Writings on leaves, paper or hands	3	3	6
5. Candles, cord, finger nail pairings, hair	6	13	19
6. Potions incluing bread and cheese, oil, water, and other on doorstep or window-ledge	1	9	10
7. Potions mixed in food or drink	2	5	7
8. Thrusting of a black handled dagger or nail in window-ledge, door, flower-pot or floor	–	7	7
9. Making of wax images	1	2	3
10. Divination with the aid of beans	–	10	10
11. Other	–	2	2
12. Unknown	1	–	1
Total:	25	82	107

Notes

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1. Excludes Vol. 153 to 156 of the criminal proceedings each of which consist of one item. These case studies belong to the Pignatelli phase but were kept separately by the Inquisition Tribunal.
2. The terms witchcraft and sorcery are usually considered as roughly synonymous in most English dictionaries. Nonetheless in anthropological usage they have acquired distinct meanings thanks to the study of tribal societies notably Evans-Pritchard's analyses of Azande magic. Here the main difference between a sorcerer and a witch is that the former achieves his evil ends by magic (1937: 409). But there is certainly no general agreement among anthropologists on this narrower definition. There existed a certain amount of overlap between 'white' magic and 'black' magic. Therefore some of the magical powers and the purposes for which they were used were clearly ambiguous. It must be pointed out, that the term witchcraft has been used throughout this article in order to avoid ambiguity.
3. A Sinhalese healing ritual exposed by Tambiah exploits three main kinds of verbal forms which accompany ritual acts. The *mantra*, *kannalavva*, and *kavija* arranged in a progression of four sequences beginning and ending with the word *mantra* is muttered by the healer and is not meant to be heard for it constitutes secret knowledge (1968: 176).
4. On analyzing a song used by the Cuna Indian Shamans to facilitate childbirth, Levi-Strauss suggests that its effectiveness lay in its power to 'psychologically manipulate the patient's generative organs'; by attaining this psychological release, the shaman also effects a psychological cure (1963: ch. X).
5. It was a common feature of early modern society to label women of low social standing, who lived alone, as 'courtesans' or 'prostitutes'. The great majority of these unfortunate women fell into the following categories: they were either wives of sailors who were away at sea; widows—a common phenomenon of the era; unhappily married women: and finally unmarried women. It was not unusual for these women to take lovers hence the identification with prostitutes.
6. Similar attitudes are evident in tribal society. Among the Nupe, witch hunting is related to a period when women take over the roles of the men as traders in the economy. In this way men often end up in debt to these women and are therefore dependent on them. The result is that women violate the norm of the caring, submissive female as they take lovers, lead an independent life, travel widely and rarely produce heirs thus being susceptible to witchcraft accusations (Nadel 1954: 163–181).

   The Gonja of Ghana, accuse their women of witchcraft practices more often than men, on the grounds that women are more evil. Unlike the men, they have no legitimate outlets for aggression, and since actual violence is forbidden they resort to witchcraft (E. Goody: 1970: 240). This view is shared by I. M. Lewis who argues that women seem to feel the heavy burden of life struggle more than men and are therefore more prone to seek help in cults and witchcraft practices (1986: ch. 2).
7. Early modern Maltese society could be divided into two strata. On the one hand there existed 'normal society' which included all 'free' subjects of the State. On the other hand slaves comprised what can be termed 'abnormal society'. 'Prostitutes' were at a disadvantage due to their being female, but worse still, they lacked sexual modesty. Hence they were classified

at the bottom of the social scale. At the same time male slaves were at the top of 'abnormal society'. It was therefore most natural for the two sections to interact.

8. Such circumstances seem to have led K. Thomas to remark that, 'If contemporary doctors had been cheaper and more successful, people would not have gone to charmers ... If the church had been able to cater for all practical needs there would have been no wizards. Counter witchcraft, magical healing, exorcism, were not just expressive or symbolic rites; they were meant to work. The cunning folk discharged a limited number of functions; people went to them at times of need, for highly practical purposes and in a distinctly utilitarian frame of mind. Their prestige depended upon their supposed efficacy ...' (Thomas 1975: 101).

References

v. = verso
f. = folio

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AIM = Cathedral Museum, Mdina – Archivum Inquisitionis Melitensis

a) Criminal Proceedings:
Ms. 1A, 2A, 3B, 40A, 44B, 61A, 61B.

b) Miscellaneous:
Ms. 2

NLM = National Library of Malta, Valletta
Libr. = Library Ms. 23

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