

# **HYPHEN**

A journal of Melitensia and the Humanities

Vol. V

No. 2

1986



172555  
PHOTOCOPIES

**Residential Inversion: The Changing Use of  
Space in Malta** – *Jeremy Boissevain*

**The Field of Maltese Folklore** – *Joseph  
Cassar Pullicino*

**Interpretation of Balance Sheets and Other  
Financial Statements** – *Emmanuel Fava*

**L'Umanesimo di Calvino** – *Gerard Bugeja*



U  
N  
I  
V  
E  
R  
S  
I  
T  
Y

O  
F  
M  
A  
L  
T  
A

LIBRARY

# Main Library

Class Mark MZ6

No. of Volumes           

Remarks



\*432896\*



Malta. (Tel. 224271/6, Ext. 51).

*Subscription:* Malta: single copy, 55 cents; volume (six numbers), Lm.3.25.0, postage included. Back numbers, 55c. Other countries: please write for details.

Volume V

1986

Number 2

## CONTENTS

Residential Inversion: The Changing Use of Space in Malta	
<i>Jeremy Boissevain</i> .....	53
The Field of Maltese Folklore	
<i>Joseph Cassar Pullicino</i> .....	73
Interpretation of Balance Sheets and Other Financial Statements	
<i>Emmanuel Fava</i> .....	85
L'Umanesimo di Calvino	
<i>Gerard Bugeja</i> .....	95

© Hyphen

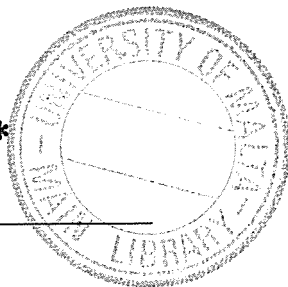
Cover picture: Naxxar, with Parish Square in the centre.

---

# RESIDENTIAL INVERSION: THE CHANGING USE OF SOCIAL SPACE IN MALTA\*

*Jeremy Boissevain*

---



**T**HE use of space for residential purposes is dynamically related to the physical and social environment. Changes in that environment affect the utilization of space. Changes in the man-built environment resulting from shifts in the pattern of utilization of space affect social behaviour. I would like to illustrate the symbiotic relation between the social and the man-built environment by looking at the changing use of residential space in Malta, especially since 1960.

## **Malta in space and time**

The Maltese islands lie mid-way between Gibraltar and Lebanon. The southeast tip of Sicily lies just 60 miles to the north, Tripoli 220 miles to the south and Tunis a little over 200 miles to the west. Malta has thus always formed a natural port of call between Europe and North Africa. Both the Christian and Muslim worlds have contributed cultural traits which the Maltese have adapted to their own use. The language is basically Semitic and related to North African Arabic. The flat-roofed houses with interior courtyards are more reminiscent of North Africa and the Middle East than of Southern Europe. In spite of this, the main features of the cultural and social organization of the Maltese are more European than North African.

Malta, the largest and southernmost of the three islands which form the Maltese archipelago, is 20 miles long and nine miles wide.

---

\*This paper was first presented to the Euromed Conference on "Perception and the use of space and non-verbal communication in European and Mediterranean societies", Maastricht, 11 – 12 January 1985. I am extremely grateful to Jojada Verrips and Joe Friggieri for helpful comments. Denis de Lucca, Conrad Thake and Jan Ter Haar helped with the Naxxar Maps.

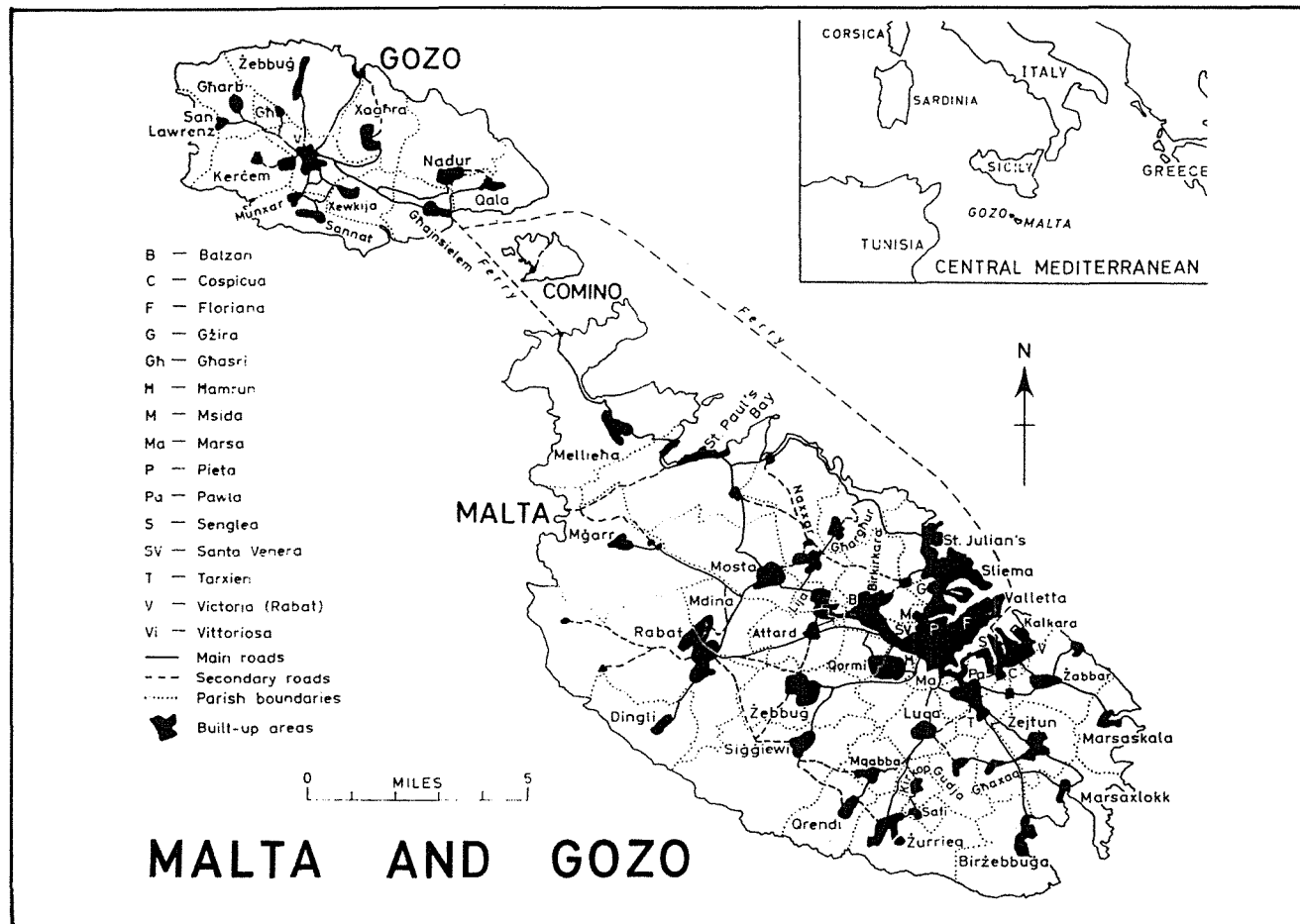


Figure 1. — Malta and Gozo 1960.

Gozo, the main sister island, is only nine miles by five (see Figure 1). The little island of Comino lies in the channel which separates the two main islands. Altogether the archipelago has a land area of only 122 square miles (316 km<sup>2</sup>). Since the islands have a total population of about 330,000 Malta has a population density of 2,700 per square mile (1,045 per km<sup>2</sup>). In spite of the intense crowding there is considerable open land away from the industrial conurbation which has grown around the harbour. There are more than 50 villages and towns which range from just under 1,000 to just over 15,000 inhabitants.

Malta's strategic location and its large sheltered deep-water harbours have influenced its history in no small measure. Until it became independent from Britain in 1964 it belonged to a succession of major Mediterranean powers. The Maltese themselves regard the visit of St. Paul following his shipwreck in A.D. 60 as their most important historical happening. They are intensely proud of the apostolic origin of their religion. The legacy of its colourful history is still very much evident: relative prosperity, a high degree of centralization, the power of the Roman Catholic church and the dynamic way in which its inhabitants adapt to new economic, political, and cultural influences. Malta's relative prosperity is very much a result of its traditional fortress economy. First the Knights of St. John and then Britain provided funds to construct and then man the island's massive fortifications and its many public buildings. Maltese were employed as masons, soldiers and sailors, bookkeepers and servants and, later, as skilled engineers and technicians to service the fortress. Times of international armed crises, such as the first and second World Wars, were boom periods. Thus independence in 1964 came to a country with a developed infrastructure and a modestly prosperous population which had acquired technical, social and cultural skills, including a knowledge of English, by servicing its military overloads. These were resources used to develop light manufacturing and tourism. Tourism in particular has become a major industry. Since independence the annual influx of tourist arrivals increased from 38,000 to a peak, in 1981, of 728,000. Since then it has declined to 480,000 in 1984.

### **Social space**

Nature and culture of the past and present have combined to form a dynamic continuity in Malta. This is no more evident than in the location and form of villages. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century Maltese villages and towns were located well away from the coast on inland hills or around the fortified Grand Harbour. Houses were tightly clustered around enormous cathedral-like churches. This

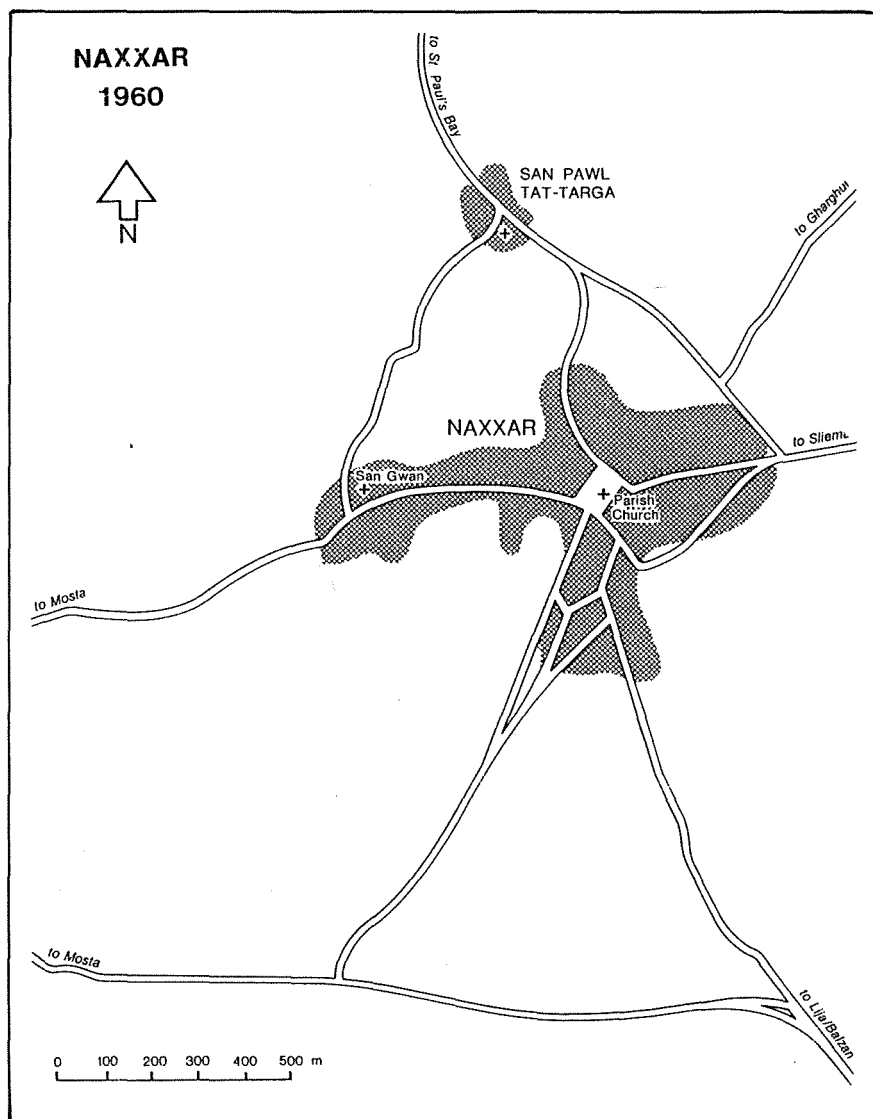


Figure 2. – Naxxar 1960 showing built-up area.

settlement pattern was common in much of the European Mediterranean. It dates from a period when inhabitants sought shelter from marauding pirates and Muslim corsairs and from the malaria that flourished in the coastal marshes.<sup>1</sup> Since the early nineteenth century the central Mediterranean has been pacified and seaborne dangers have ceased to threaten villagers. Consequently the coastal parishes were established during the past 150 years (Mellieħa 1841, Ġhajnsielem 1855, Sliema 1878, Marsaxlokk 1897, St. Paul's Bay 1905, Birżebbuġa 1913, Marsascalea 1949).

The parish church is very much the symbol of a village, for it is the hub around which community life has revolved for centuries. Every village is a parish; some towns are divided into two or more parishes. The *village (raħal)* as a place of residence has no official leader, owns no property, conducts no activities, and does not even have a clearly defined territory. But as part of a *parish (paroċċa)* it has a leader in its parish priest, a clearly demarcated territory, clear membership rules, and a busy programme of ritual activities which bind its members together. The territory of the parish is more extensive than the village and may include several hamlets. (There is no Maltese word for hamlet.) The parish owns valuable property, the most important of which is the parish church. This building is more than a central place of worship. It is usually located near the geographical centre of the village, which has grown up around it. Its gilded ceilings and silver altar fronts, its embroidered vestments, its damask tapestries, its ornate statues and precious votive offerings represent the parish's collective history and wealth amassed over centuries via the savings, work and bequest of generations. The saint to whom the church is dedicated is the patron of the parish and the symbol of the village. It is not surprising therefore that most of the important associations, shops and residences traditionally clustered in and around the square in front of the church or in the streets leading to it. The pattern of residence was thus concentric. It reflected the distribution of economic and political power. Those with the highest status tended to live nearest the church and those with the lowest status farthest away, in little alleys that backed on to open fields, or in rural hamlets. Residence in the village centre conferred prestige for, like elsewhere in the Mediterranean, the built-up village has been associated with the

1. Anton Blok, "South Italian agro-towns", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, XI (1969), 121 – 35.

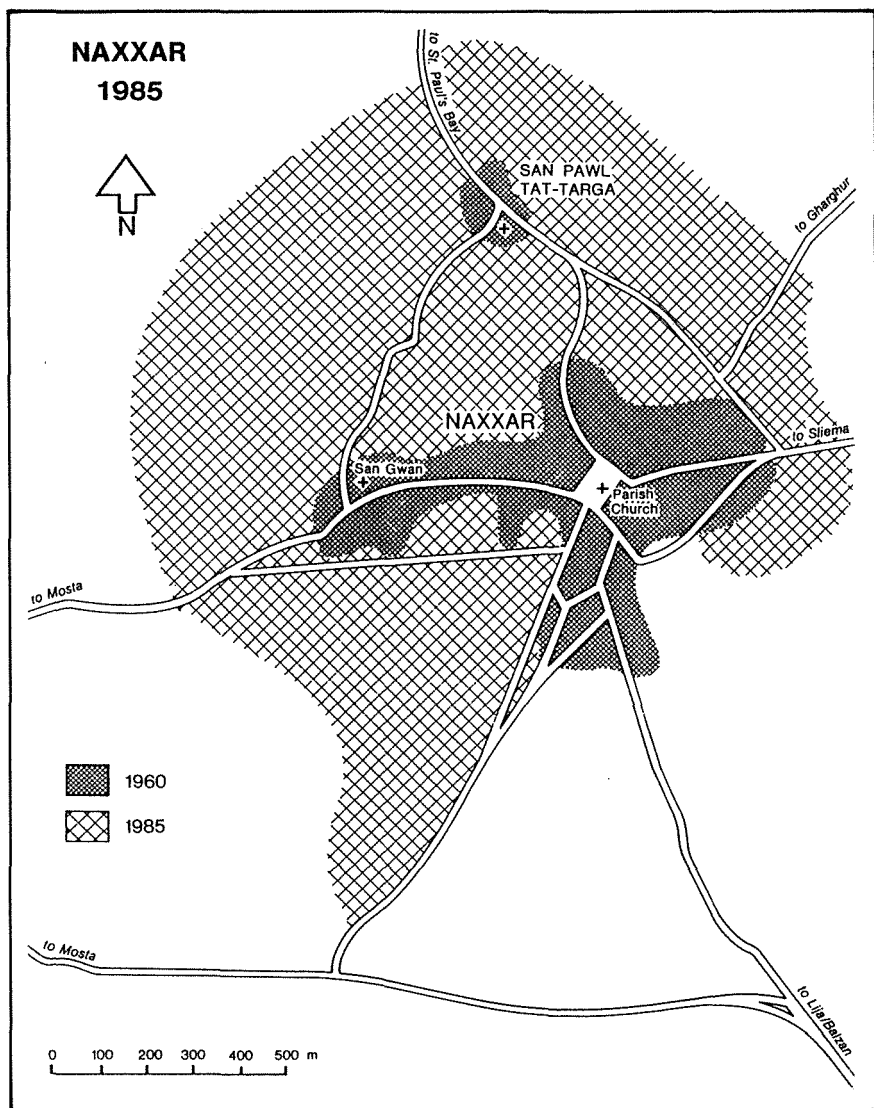


Figure 3. — Naxxar 1985 showing area built up since 1960.



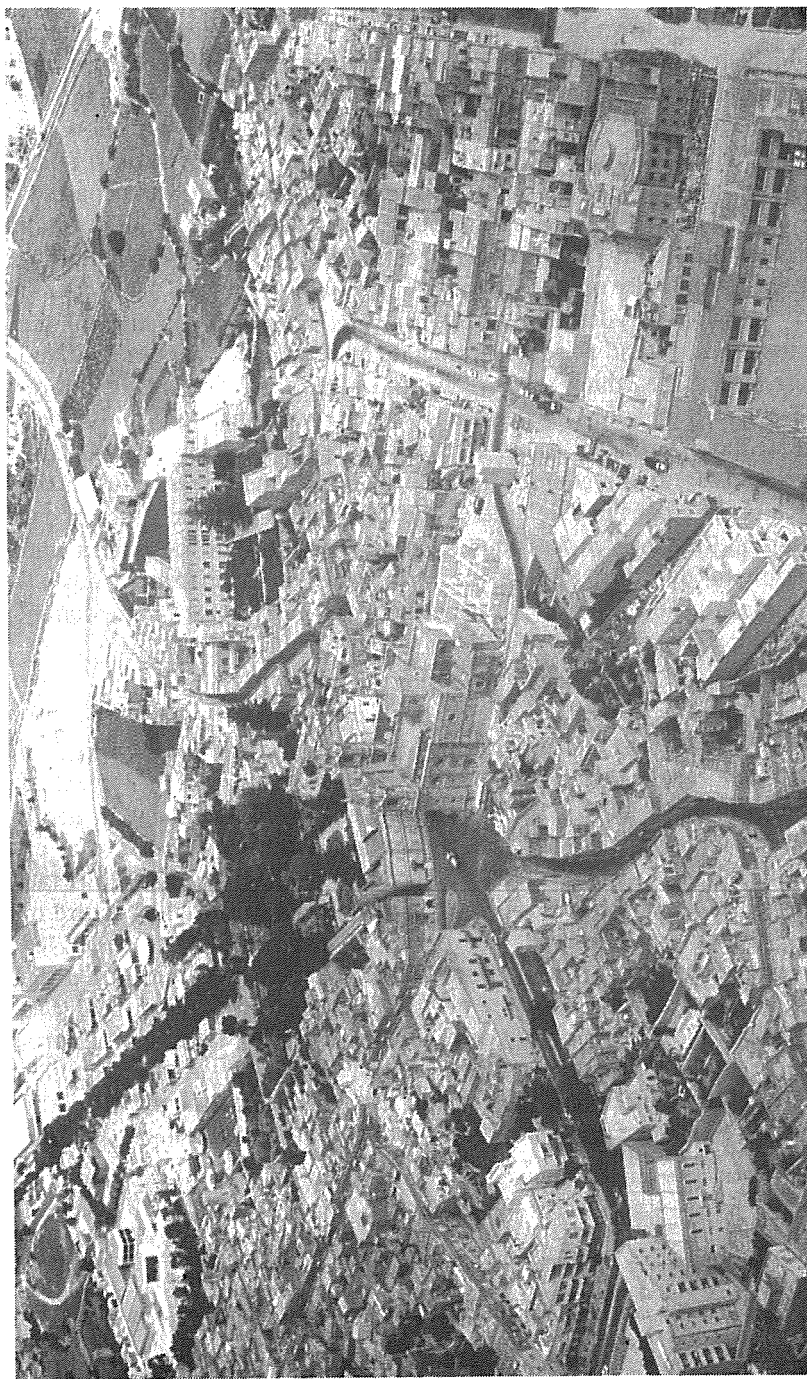
culture of the town, with 'civilization'.<sup>2</sup> The periphery of the village, which shaded off into the fields, was associated with the country and agricultural work, which in Malta, as in many other Mediterranean countries, had very low status, for it was associated with poverty, physically punishing work and cultural and social deprivation. Some of those who lived at the edge of the village or in the adjacent countryside were persons whose reputation had been destroyed by immoral or violent behaviour. Figuratively and physically they were outside the moral community of the village.<sup>3</sup>

A Maltese village was thus inward looking, focussing on the parish church and the intense social, political, economic, ritual and ceremonial life which takes place in and around the central square. The many religious processions which pass through the streets immediately adjacent to the central square helped to weave this core area closely to the church. These processions, as it were, linked the secular space of the elite area of the village to the sacred space of the church. Religious processions did not pass through the poorer and peripheral quarters, though the parish priest made efforts to link all families to the church by blessing them and their houses immediately following Easter.

### Naxxar

Naxxar, the ancient hilltop village (the parish was founded in 1436) on which this study focuses, was in many respects typical of Maltese villages. In 1961, when I first set foot in the village, it had a population of 5,000.<sup>4</sup> The village of Naxxar formed the centre of an extensive parish which in 1961 included three hamlets, San Pawl tat-Targa, Maghtab and Bidnija. The social and residential structure of the village was concentric. The village's five most important streets led into the spacious square in front of the church which constituted the social and cultural if not the geographical centre of the village (See Figure 2 and Plate 1). On the square, or no more than two minutes walk from it, were situated the house of the parish priest, the police station, the houses and premises of the notary and the chemist, the houses of four of the village's dozen or so priests. the palace of the

2. Sydel Silverman, *Three Bells of Civilization: The Life of an Italian Hilltown*, (New York, 1975).
3. Jeremy Boissevain, "The Maltese Islands" in *Face Values*, ed. Ann Sutherland (London 1978), 128.
4. Boissevain, *Saints and Fireworks: Religion and Politics in Rural Malta*, London, 1965.



*Plate 1: Naxos 1977. At centre is Parish Square with Labour Avenue leading into it from the left.*

Marquis Scicluna and, adjacent to that, Scicluna's bank. Four of the town's butchers, three of its five wineshops, four of the six grocery shops, the village tailor, the two barbers, a silver smith and several household bazaars were located there. Moreover, all the important voluntary associations were housed in this circle. These included the Peace Band Club, the Victory Social Club, several parish lay associations, the football club and, last but not least, the Malta Labour Party and the Nationalist Party clubs.

The small chapel of St. John, one of the village's five chapels, located at the westward edge of the village, formed the focal point of the 'poorest neighbourhood'. In 1961 two wineshops and a grocery were located there. Most residents in the San Ġwann neighbourhood were semi- or unskilled industrial or government labourers. Many farmers also lived there, and several commuted to their farm houses in Magħtab in the plain three miles northwest of the village, returning to their 'town houses' for weekends and feast days.

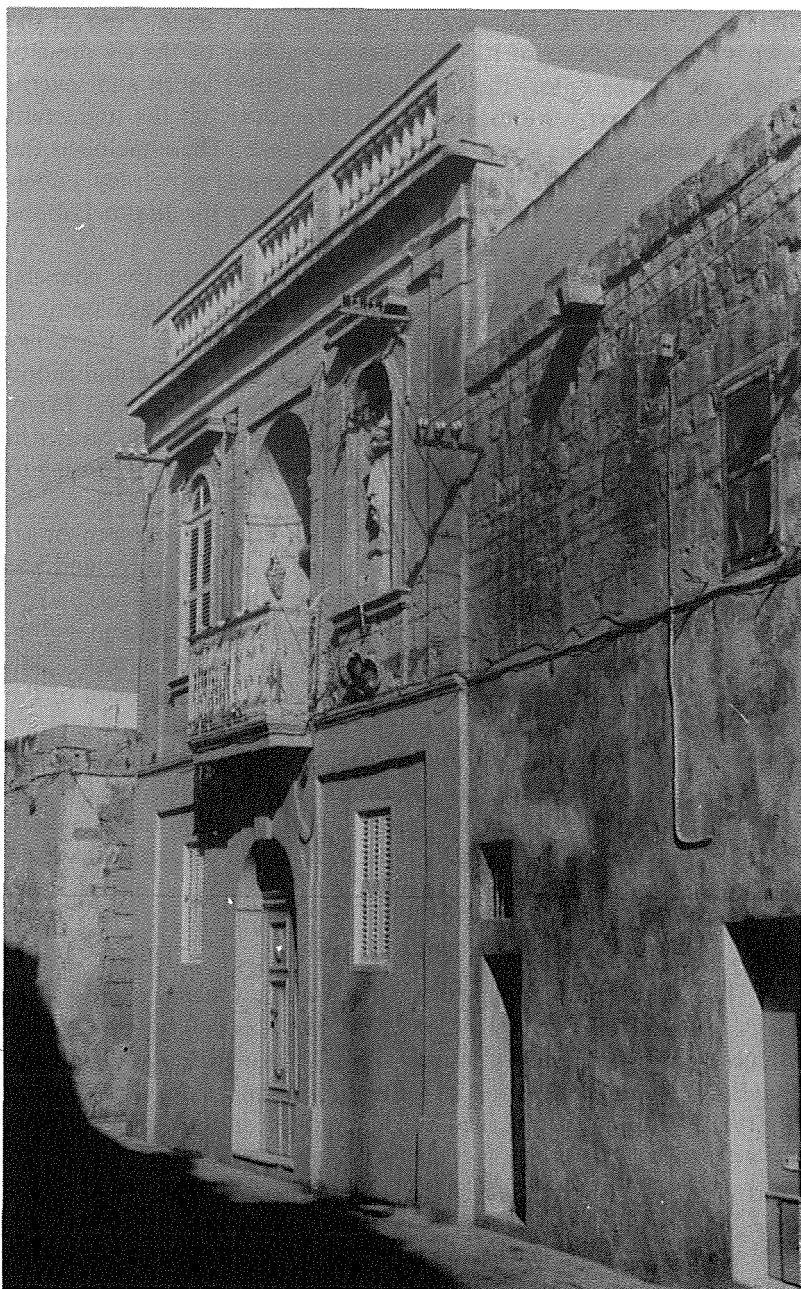
About half a mile north of the parish church, a dozen or so houses and villas clustered around an ancient watch tower and the chapel of San Pawl tat-Targa 'Saint Paul of the (geological) Fault'. St. Paul reputedly rested there after climbing the escarpment on his way to Mdina, the Island's capital, following his shipwreck.) San Pawl tat-Targa, located on the ridge overlooking the northwest of the island, is an elegant residential hamlet. Several members of Malta's nobility own houses there, as does the British High Commission.

To summarize then, Naxxar in 1961 was a large, relatively isolated village residentially and socially focussed inward on its soaring parish church. This concentric pattern, replicated in all Maltese villages in 1961, has changed markedly since then.

### Change

Three developments have taken place within the past twenty years which have radically affected the utilization of social space in Maltese villages: government programmes to build new roads and housing estates; rising prosperity; and an influx of foreign residents.<sup>5</sup> From the late 1950s until the present the government has continuously expanded the network of roads. New roads were laid across open country to

5. Boissevain, "A Causeway with a Gate: The Progress of Development in Malta", in *Perceptions of Development*, ed. Sandra Wallman, Cambridge, 1977; *id.*, "Tourism and Development in Malta", VIII (1977), 523 – 38.



*Plate 2: Traditional sheer-fronted inward looking town house, St. Lucy Street, Naxxar.  
House on left has 18 doors and windows opening on to the interior courtyard.*

connect regions, ring roads were built around villages and access roads thrust into village centres. Following the victory of the Labour Party in 1971, the government began systematically to build housing estates. Usually these are located in areas at the edge of existing villages. The late 1960s and early 1970s were characterized by an unprecedented building boom made possible by the rising prosperity due to the growth of tourism, modest industrialization and, especially, increased spending on public works, wages, jobs and other social benefits introduced by the socialist government. This enabled Maltese to build their own houses in the areas made accessible by the new roads.

The houses built during the 1960s and 1970s differed from the traditional town houses. The new houses were influenced by the houses foreign residents had built for themselves. Attracted to Malta by sun and tax benefits, many foreigners settled in Malta during the 1960s, reaching a peak of 4,500 'settlers' in 1971. Their numbers began to decline after that.<sup>6</sup> These foreign settlers, for the most part retired with substantial capital, acquired two types of houses. First, the traditional, sheer-fronted, dark 'houses of character', with high ceilings, arches, wooden beams and a rambling assortment of rooms located around a central courtyard (See Plate 2). Some were located in the older sections of the towns and villages, many were also on quiet outlying farms, where there was sufficient space to construct swimming pools. Second, other foreign residents built houses out in the country, set well back from the road, surrounded by large gardens and often including a swimming pool. These houses, in contrast to the dark, inward-facing, traditional Maltese house, looked outward, towards the country. A series of terraces, balconies and large windows admitted the country views and, especially, sunlight (See Plate 3). Thus these wealthy foreign settlers introduced a new style of housing and established new norms. They constructed immensely-expensive outward-facing houses and located them in the low status countryside instead of in the high-status area adjacent to the parish churches.

With rising prosperity the Maltese sought improved housing. A new house became an important status symbol. These new village houses copied aspects of the sumptuous country villas. Though on a smaller scale, they also began to construct larger balconies and terraces. They set the houses back from the road by means of a garden or, at least, an alcove or a railed terrace (See Plate 4). These new

6. Loek Esmeijer, *Marginal Mediterraneans. Foreign Settlers in Malta* (Amsterdam, 1984), 26–7.



*Plate 3: A modern country villa with sun balcony and open surrounding gardens built near San Pawl tat-Targa circa 1970.*

houses were also located along the new avenues and roads well away from the traditional high-status residential zone adjacent to the parish church.

The utilization of space in Maltese villages and the social rhythm associated with it thus have changed dramatically in the past twenty years. These changes can be illustrated by developments in Naxxar.

### **Developments in Naxxar**

The developments in Naxxar were not only typical of events that took place in other Maltese villages. In many respects they also formed an example. Naxxar's hilltop location meant cooler summer breezes and panoramic views. These, together with its chic residential hamlet, San Pawl tat-Targa, attracted some of the first foreign residents to live in and build outside a village. Since Naxxar was only accessible via steep winding roads, it was also one of the first villages to receive a new access road. For prestige reasons, other villages demanded similar roads. Let us look at the steps in the building of post-war Naxxar.

The first post-war development took place around 1950, when new streets were laid out in the area immediately behind and to the west of the parish church. This was followed by the new access road, Labour Avenue, built by the Labour government in 1958, which connected the island's main traffic artery directly to the heart of the village, for it opened out onto the village square. Construction of Labour Avenue was in many respects a political act, for its access to the church square involved the destruction of a small chapel and the house of the father of the notary, a former Nationalist cabinet minister. When we came to the village in 1961 the only new residential area was immediately behind the church (to which the notary's father had moved). There were no houses along Labour Avenue (See Figure 2).

When we returned on holiday in 1966 Naxxarin were busy constructing smart new houses on the western side of Labour Avenue, building out from the village square. We visited friends who had just moved there. They had been our neighbours in the alley where we lived in 1961. They had sold their little alley house, which they shared with the husband's mother, to an English property company, which had then resold it at enormous profit to a retired English couple.

In 1974, when I again returned to the village briefly for research, considerable further changes had taken place. The most impressive was a new road from just below the parish square to the neighbouring village of Mosta. This new road, XXI September Avenue, had been built by the Nationalist government (1962–1971), and formally





*Plate 4: Town houses and apartments built along 21st of September Avenue, Naxxar, during the 1970s had larger balconies and were set back from the road by means of a sidewalk and small gardens or railed terraces.*



opened by the notary, who had again become a cabinet minister. It was named to commemorate Malta's Independence, achieved under the Nationalist government. I lived in one of the new flats built along the north side. More houses were under construction. Both sides of Labour Avenue had been built up and construction was still taking place farther down hill. Much of the building along the XXI September Avenue and in the newly-developing areas behind the church were being undertaken by a local contractor, in partnership with the notary. Many luxury villas had been built between the village and San Pawl tat-Targa, along the escarpment overlooking the northwest of the island. Many of these were built by foreigners, but wealthy Maltese increasingly constructed villas in the same area.

When we again lived in the village, in 1978, the countryside around San Pawl tat-Targa was filled with villas. XXI September Avenue was built up on both sides and government and private housing estates were under construction to the south of XXI September Avenue.

By 1985 the old village of Naxxar was connected to San Pawl tat-Targa by a continuous series of town houses and villas. The old core of the village had been surrounded by a periphery of expensive new houses. XXI September Avenue had become the commercial centre of the village. New hardware shops, chemists, boutiques, furniture shops provided shoppers, and their automobiles, with comfortable access to a range of modern consumer goods. Naxxar in 1985 was a very different place from the isolated hilltop village we first knew in 1961 (See Figure 3).

## Discussion

Like all Maltese villages during the past twenty years, Naxxar had become more heterogeneous, much of its centre had shifted to the periphery and the rhythm of life had altered perceptibly. These developments were partly influenced by the changes in the man-made environment which have been described.

First of all, and perhaps most obviously, Naxxar had lost much of the closed character it had twenty-five years before. Labour Avenue then had already eviscerated the village. What had once been a closed, intimate square had been opened to the outside, almost as though the living-room of a house had had one of its walls sliced off to expose the intimate events taking place there to the stares and winds of the outside world. Older villagers lamented this change to us in 1961. But the square then was still crowded.

By 1985 the village had become crowded with strangers. When we first lived in Naxxar, all non-Naxxar born were married to locals, though a few local entrepreneurs rented flats to several British military families. By 1985 some 2,500 newcomers with no roots in the village had moved in to occupy the modern new housing in the government estate and the commercial developments. The sense of community which had existed in 1961 between neighbours and fellow villagers (all of whom were at least distant relatives or friends of friends, bore village nicknames and lived in households of which at least one member was local) had altered perceptibly. Many neighbours were now strangers whose kinship and friendship links were with persons in other parishes.

The parish priest was concerned about the influx of foreigners which had swollen his parish. He took conscious steps to integrate the newcomers and the new residential areas, where many Naxxarin now also lived. In the late 1970s he re-routed some of the band marches preceding the annual *fešta* of the village's patron saint, the Birth of Our Lady (celebrated on 8 September), to pass through some of the new streets behind the church and, especially, the new residential estates south of XXI September Avenue. He also tried to tie this area more closely to the parish by holding an open air mass there before the *fešta*. He and his assistants of course bless the families and their houses annually following Easter.

In 1985 the parish church drew the new peripheral residents to hear mass on Saturday evening and Sunday morning. The parish square was then crowded with their parked cars and, after the mass, with people to-ing and fro-ing. The village square has continued to function as the central stage for the solemn pageantry of the Good Friday procession and the exuberance of the celebration of the parish's patron. These rituals also drew people in from the periphery, for Naxxar puts on a good show. The clergy have consciously developed this pageantry and the scale of these celebrations has been increasing. It is also through taking part in the weekly and seasonal cycle of religious rituals that newcomers can become participating members of the parish and hence of the village as a community. These rituals have helped them established new roots.<sup>7</sup>

7. Boissevain, "De groei van volksrituelen op Malta", in *Feest en ritueel in Europa. Antropologische essays*, ed. A. Koster, Y. Kuiper, J. Verrips, Amsterdam, 1983; *id.* "Ritual Escalation in Malta", in *Religion, Power and Protest in Local Communities The Northern Shore of the Mediterranean*, ed. E. R. Wolf, Berlin, New York, Amsterdam, 1984.

If in 1961 the residential and commercial focus was inward, on the main square, this was no longer so in 1985. Upwardly mobile villagers no longer lived or aspired to live on or near the square. They had moved to the periphery. Though the leading butcher shops, cafés and clubs were still located on the main square, as was the weekly market and the bank, a new commercial centre had grown up along XXI September Avenue. The shops that had sprouted up along XXI September Avenue were new to the village. They provided a range of goods previously available only from the large towns or the city of Valletta. Televisions, fridges, pets, wedding presents, jewellery, dresses, and the latest European newspapers could now be obtained in the village. This generated a new and very important source of wealth for many locals. This source is located outside the village's centre.

The rhythm of village life in 1985 had also changed. Apart from mass and *festa* traffic, the square was no longer crowded as it had been in 1961. Then, on summer evenings, it used to be filled with men sitting on the parvis and steps of the parish church. From there they could watch much of the social traffic that flowed across the square in and out of the cafés, clubs and parish associations. In 1985, many villagers lived too remote from the centre to be able to stroll to the square to meet friends.

Not just the activities in the square had changed. The streets at the centre of the town were also less populated. There were no longer as many people passing through them or sitting in front of their houses on summer evenings to catch the cool air. This change can partly be explained by the move out of the centre to the periphery. There were fewer people living in the village centre than twenty years ago. Moreover, many of the traditional "houses of character" in the centre were occupied by foreigners or wealthy young urban Maltese who were not accustomed to spending time on their doorsteps chatting to passersby or to each other. There were also other reasons why the centre of Naxxar seemed more deserted in 1985 than when we first lived there.

By 1985 every home had television. Located, as Malta is, in the windshadow of Sicily, the average Maltese had access not only to Maltese T.V. programmes, but also to a range of Italian channels. Television, in short, also kept men off the streets and out of the clubs and cafés, which twenty years ago were where they went to watch television.

A final factor that contributed to the change in the rhythm of the village was the tremendous increase in private transport. Virtually every village family in 1985 owned a car. People were thus able to

leave the village when they wished. They were no longer tied to the bus from the main square. This enabled people not only to leave when they wished, but, more important, to return later, for the last bus returned from Valletta just before half past ten. Those with cars could stay away longer. Many, especially in the summer, remained until after midnight by the seaside to escape the stifling heat that builds up in the village. Many Naxxarin had also bought seaside houses in or near St. Paul's Bay. This also drew them away from the village on summer evenings and weekends.

To summarize then, the changing settlement pattern in Maltese villages, epitomized by the developments in Naxxar, reflected increasing outside involvement. As more people worked and married outside the parish, as more strangers moved into the village retaining linkages elsewhere, as public and private transportation became more readily available, as the grip of television on leisure time grew, people were less dependent upon neighbours for work and leisure. They looked increasingly outward, beyond the parish limits. The shift from a village-centred to a village-outward orientation was reflected in the way people had re-oriented their social space. The community of interest and activity was no longer primarily the village. The structure and location of the houses that had been built in the last twenty years mirrored this. They no longer were exclusively inward looking, and no longer faced the parish church.

## Conclusion

The orientation of residential space in Malta has changed quite radically. The village periphery, once socially marginal, and beyond that, the open country, once stigmatized, have become sought-after residential areas. A ring of villas and housing estates have encapsulated the old periphery, which elite couples seeking traditional houses have in part gentrified. The outer walls of houses, once sheer and fortress-like, have been pierced by numerous apertures. The traditional periphery has lost its ambivalent, liminal character. Since the open country has been populated by wealthy Maltese and foreigners, and is no longer associated with poverty and deprivation, since the few remaining full time farmers are regarded benignly as living folklore, it no longer threatens. Consequently, the village's new periphery is no longer an area of sharp transition between the dangerous, uncouth countryside and the high status, urbane centre of the village. These changes have affected both the style and location of residence and the rhythm of village life.

These developments bear a strong structural resemblance to the

way in which the Maltese coast lost its ambivalent, liminal status during the nineteenth century, following the pacification of the hitherto dangerous sea by the Royal Navy.

During the past 150 years an inversion has taken place that has affected the traditional inward orientation of residential space in Malta. The direction of change has largely been from outside to inside. First the sea was pacified, then, related to that, the countryside. Shoreline, countryside and village periphery, social thresholds between unknown – thus dangerous – areas, and known protected and familiar areas, have lost their role as zones of transition.<sup>8</sup> Thus they became less ambivalent, more permeable. Just as villages spread along the coast, new settlements were built in peripheral areas and the walls of houses were pierced by larger windows and balconies.

Our conclusion is then that the concentric pattern or inward orientation of residential space in Malta was a function of the interplay between physical and political forces. As danger from without decreased as a result of political developments, various thresholds lost their significance as transitional zones. The inward orientation of residential space became divorced from practical utility. The inversion of social space in Malta reflects this.

8. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffé, Chicago, 1960.

# The good sense of a Mid-Med Cheque Book

Mary and John have their own current account and their own Mid-Med Bank Cheque Book.

☺ They see a lot of sense in having their salaries transferred

directly into their account.

☺ They pay their bills by cheque and have instalments and some other fixed periodic payments paid regularly through the Bank.

☺ They also feel much safer carrying a Mid-Med Cheque Book than carrying cash.



**Have the good sense  
of a Mid-Med Cheque Book.**

Open a Current Account with one of the Mid-Med branches spread throughout Malta and Gozo.



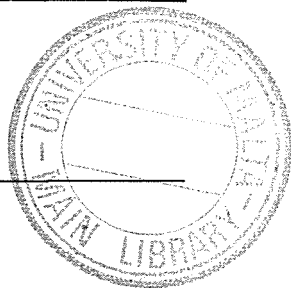
**Mid-Med Bank Limited**  
Reliability and Efficiency

---

# THE FIELD OF MALTESE FOLKLORE

*J. Cassar Pullicino*

---



**B**EFORE a proper study of Maltese folklore can be made one has to acquaint oneself with the ground already covered by others and with the material collected or published on the various aspects of the subject. It is most important that one should have a conspectus of the subject in its broad outline so as to identify the areas so far unexplored and at the same time relate comparable type of material with one's own findings as items of tradition arranged within an accepted scheme of classification.

Such an arrangement is necessitated by the intricate fabric of Maltese folklore, which is today beset by many difficulties. More and more the culture "imported" into the islands in the wake of improved contacts with the outside world, a better standard of education, the presence of a sizeable non-Maltese community, and the cumulative effect of social pressures calculated to discard "local" folk-speech and manners — all these are pushing back the frontiers of Maltese folk-culture and transforming out of recognition the traditional ways of thought and behaviour. Admittedly, social and economic progress is welcome and inevitable; but as one probes deeper into the matter from the point of view of folklore studies the conviction grows that though much has been saved which otherwise would have been lost, a considerable portion of tradition is fast disappearing out of sight and mind, and much more remains to be done before sufficient documentation is assembled from which the student can attempt to reconstruct the picture of ancient Maltese folk-life.

The collecting of folklore in Malta so far has been haphazard and intermittent, due more to personal initiative or foreign interest in the language than to any organized scheme primarily motivated by an ardent desire to rescue the vanishing folk-culture of these islands.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Worthy of note is the pioneering work of G.P.F. Agius De Soldanis (1712–1770) whose MS collection "Apoftegmi e proverbi maltesi" was published by Dr. Giovanni Curmi in *Malta Letteraria*, Nuova Serie, Vol. III (1928), and M.A. Vassalli's *Motti*,

Nevertheless, considerable progress has been recorded in the present century. Side by side with the impressive work of Italian and German scholars, such as Luigi Bonelli, Hans Stumme and Bertha Ilg, in the collection of folktales and folksongs,<sup>2</sup> there has been the invaluable material rescued from oblivion by Fr. E. Magri, consisting mainly of weather proverbs and folktale texts,<sup>3</sup> the monumental *Comparative Dictionary of Maltese Proverbs* issued by Professor J. Aquilina in 1972, and the present writer's collection of texts, with variants, comparative notes and commentary, of traditional lullabies and children's rhymes, of popular riddles (M. *ħaġa moħħaġa*), of exorcisms and popular religious poetry, of legends and folktales, *blason populaire* or collective nicknames, and of traditional ballads, the

*aforismi e proverbi maltesi* (1828). Some interesting material was included by 19th C. historians in their work because they considered it cognate with their field of study. Such were the legends and accounts of local customs appearing in G. F. Abela's *Della Descrizione di Malta* (1647) and Count G. A. Ciantar's edition of Abela's work *Malta Illustrata* (Vol. 1, 1772), as well as P. P. Castagna's *Lis Storia ta Malta bil gzejer tahha*, 3 vols. (1880–1890), A. Ferris's *Descrizione storica delle chiese di Malta e Gozo* (1866) and *Memorie dell'inclito Ordine Gerosolimitano esistenti nelle isole di Malta* (1881). Vincenzo Busuttill's *Holiday Customs in Malta* (1894) and his two articles "Demopsicologia Maltese: I – Canti", *Archivio per lo studio delle tradizioni popolari* (A.S.T.P.), Palermo–Torino, Clausen, Vol. XVI (1897), pp. 432–435; and "II – Giuochi fanciulleschi maltesi", *ibid.*, Vol. XVII (1898), pp. 400–405, also fall within this category.

- 2 L. BONELLI, *Saggi del folklore dell'Isola di Malta, con prefazione di G. Pitre*, Palermo, 1895, "Il Dialecto Maltese", *Supplementi periodici all'Archivio Glottologico Italiano*, Torino, Loescher, 4a Dispensa 1897, pp. 53–98; 6a Dispensa, 1898, pp. 37–70; "Contrasto popolare maltese", A.S.T.P., Vol. XVII, 1898, pp. 7–10.

H. STUMME, *Maltesische Studien*, Leipzig, 1904; *Maltesische Märchen, gedichte und Rätsel in Deutscher Übersetzung*, Leipzig, 1904.

B. ILG, *Maltesische Märchen und Schwänke*. 2 vols., Leipzig, 1906; "Maltesische Legenden von der Sibylla", *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde in Berlin*, Heft I, 1914, pp. 63–71; English translation by Vera Venour published in *Maltese Folklore Review*, Vol. I, No. 4, 1973, pp. 339–347.

B. ILG und H. STUMME, *Maltesische Volkslieder*. Leipzig, 1909.

B. KOESSLER-ILG and J. CASSAR-PULLICINO, "200 Maltese Folksongs collected in 1909–1912", *Maltese Folklore Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1962, pp. 8–39.

- 3 E. MAGRI, *X'Ighid il Malti jeu l-Għerf bla miċtub tal Maltin*, 1905 – originally published serially in *Kotba tal-Mogħdija taż-Żmien* (K.M.Z.) Nos. 1–62 (1899–1907); *Ħrejjef Misserijietna* – K.M.Z. Nos. 15, 18, 29, 38–39 (1912–4); *X'Ighid il Malti fuq id Dinja ta' Taħt u fuq ir-Rjeh* – K.M.Z. No. 44 (1905); "Precis de Mythologie Maltaise", *Actes du XIV Congrès International des Orientalistes, Alger, 1905*, Deuxieme Section, Paris, 1907, pp. 23–35 – reprinted in *Maltese Folklore Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1963, pp. 102–109.



latter being still unpublished.<sup>4</sup>

Over the past 40 years or so there has been a growing public awareness of the national heritage, including folklore, as a result of radio and T.V. programmes, of generous press coverage of local folkloristic events, and of *ad hoc* exhibitions organized and sponsored by the Maltese Folklore Society, by some Parish Councils and others. Besides, during the same period some pertinent audio-visual material has accumulated in the archives of *Xandir Malta* (formerly Rediffusion Co. Ltd.) – valuable material such as traditional guitar tunes, bell-ringing from different parishes and other characteristic local sounds, lullabies now all but forgotten, improvised folk-singing, interviews with old people and practitioners of dying crafts. It is also known that various traditional artefacts, household pottery and old prints representing typical Maltese scenes and characters are housed both at the National Museum and in private collections.

Between 1964 and 1971 much useful material of direct interest to the folklorist was collected in the course of a Survey of Contemporary Dialectal Maltese undertaken jointly by Professor J. Aquilina, Head of the then Department of Maltese at the University of Malta, and Professor B. S. J. Isserlin, Head of the Department of Semitic Studies in the University of Leeds. The two Professors considered that, as a result of the transformation affecting the Maltese style of life in general, “many traditional arts and crafts are disappearing: old methods in occupations like agriculture or fishing, and with them old-fashioned implements, are passing out of use: and with their disappearance the relevant vocabularies likewise pass out of the language. It seemed important to us to register such vocabularies in particular

4 G. CASSAR PULLICINO, “Bejn Rahal u Laqam” (Village rivalries and nicknames), *Lehen il-Malti*, 1944, pp. 21 – 26; “Pauline Traditions in Malta”, *Scientia*, Vol. X, 1944, pp. 19 – 31; “Norman Legends in Malta”, *ibid.*, Vol. XI, 1945, pp. 152 – 165; “Pirates and Turks in Maltese Tradition”, *ibid.*, Vol. XIV, 1948, pp. 164 – 189; “The Order of St. John in Maltese Folk-Memory”, *ibid.*, Vol. XV, 1949, pp. 147 – 175; “The French Occupation in Maltese Tradition”, *The Sundial*, Vol. IV, 1947, pp. 27 – 32; “Ghana u Taqbil it-Tfal”, *Lehen il-Malti*, April – Ġunju, 1948, pp. 33 – 66; “Tahnin u Ghana tan-Nieqa”, *ibid.*, Sett. – Diċ. 1949, pp. 107 – 127; “La Maddalena in una leggenda maltese”, *Lares* (Firenze), Anno XVI, Fasc. 1, 1950, pp. 177 – 182; “Canti sulla Passione nelle isole maltesi”, *ibid.*, Anno XX, Fasc. III – IV, 1954, pp. 138 – 158; “Nursery Vocabulary of the Maltese Archipelago”, *Orbis* (Louvain), Tome VI, No. 1, 1957, pp. 192 – 198; *Haga Mohgaga u Tahbil il-Mohh Iehor*, Parts I – IV, 1957 – 1959; *Skungrar u Orazzjoni fil-Poeżija Popolari Reliġjuża f’Malta*, 1981.

while they were still available for investigation".<sup>5</sup> Fortunately for us, the tapes produced were duplicated so as to provide one set each for Leeds and Malta, and the full data acquired were thus preserved in the shape of tapes, notes, etc. as archives for future reference. A number of sketch drawings were also made in the field concerning old-fashioned crafts, arts, techniques etc., together with black and white photographs as well as some colour shots and one or two film sequences were taken. Apart from this survey, very few, if any, schemes of questionnaires with village notabilities, school teachers and students, parish priests and other correspondents have been worked out with an academic purpose and with copies of tapes and photographs available for reference in Malta.

Since 1960 there has been an active interest in amateur filming of Maltese documentaries with a decided folklore content or bias. Members of the Malta Amateur Cine Circle blazed the trail with a series of 16 mm. films covering (i) the traditional bread-making process "From Corn to Bread", (ii) Tunny Fishing and (iii) *Il-Maltija* – Malta's National Dance. Between 1962 and 1970 the Department of Information's Film Unit produced some excellent documentaries in which the spirit and content of Maltese seasonal customs were re-captured and presented with great gusto. Among these one may mention the blessing of animals on the Feast of St. Antony the Abbot, Carnival, the Good Friday procession, the Easter Sunday procession (*l-Irxoxi*) at Cospicua and Vittoriosa, *l-Imnarja* festival and the 8 September festivities. Two other valuable productions were (i) *Maltese Festa* and (ii) *Crafts of an Island*. These documentaries, together with others selected from among those included in various T.V. programmes produced by Charles Coleiro since 1970, could well form the nucleus of a Folklore Archives for which there is a crying need now if we are to keep a proper record of traditional folk-life in these islands.<sup>6</sup>

One positive development in this direction has been the opening of a Folklore Museum at Vittoriosa in 1970, followed by another one, relating mostly to rural culture, at Victoria, in Gozo, in 1983. Besides the arrangement and display of artefacts and other exhibits for educational purposes and as a tourist attraction, these museums will be in a position to fulfil their full role when scientific archiving of material

5 J. AQUILINA and B.S.J. ISSERLIN, eds, *A Survey of Contemporary Dialectal Maltese: Vol. 1 – Gozo*, Leeds, 1981, Preface, p. iii.

6 For further details see the present writer's note on "Maltese Folklore in Film Documentaries" in *Maltese Folklore Review*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1973, pp. 353 – 354.

will be taken in hand, with proper cataloguing of objects, and details of provenance and locality, size, approximate date, use, technical terminology, etc.

Various kinds of materials are therefore available, and well-meant initiatives have been started. However, what is sadly lacking is a sense of direction, a unifying purpose to inspire, guide and coordinate these various interests and establish the essential link between academic institutions, museums, private collectors and local independent scholars.

The situation outlined above underlines the urgent need to provide a broad outline of the field of Maltese Folklore to serve as a guide for would-be collectors, whether amateurs or not. Far too many people in Malta seem to think of folklore exclusively in terms of folk-singing, which they inaptly term "folklore singing", or of village festas. At the other extreme there are those who fallaciously believe that anything that is old should automatically be considered as being part and parcel of local folklore.

It is important to let people know that folklore is about. The present writer's initial concept of folklore was directly influenced during the last war by the two definitions of the famous Sicilian folklorist Giuseppe Pitrè. The first one dates back to 1894, when Pitrè wrote the preface to *Bibliografia delle tradizioni popolari d'Italia*. The following is the relevant extract:

Il folklore abbraccia la vita fisica a morale dell'uomo in tutte le sue manifestazioni, cominciando dalle vesti, dagli alimenti, dalle pratiche domestiche e religiose, e finendo alle credenze, alle ubbie, alle tradizioni orali, che rivelano i pensieri, gli affetti e lo spirito multiforme di esso nella novella, nel canto, nella sentenza, nell'arguzia; partendo dagli espedienti primitivi per procurarsi da vivere (caccia, pesca, agricoltura) e scendendo giù giù fino ai mestieri tutti, alle occupazioni onde si campa la vita sulla terra e sul mare, in città e in campagna, sui monti e nelle miniere.<sup>7</sup>

More carefully worded is the later definition which Pitrè gave of the domain of folklore in his inaugural address at the opening of a 'Corso di Demopsicologia' at the University of Palermo on 12 January 12, 1911. The operative part reads as follows:

Per noi la demopsicologia studia la vita morale e materiale dei popoli civili, dei non civili e dei selvaggi . . . Questa vita è documentata dai diversi generi di tradizioni orali

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Giuseppe Bonomo in his comments on G. Pitrè's *Che cos'è il folklore*, (reprinted) Palermo, 1965, p. 60.

ed oggettive. Fiabe e favole, racconti e leggende, proverbi e motti, canti e melodie, enigmi e indovinelli, giuochi e passatempi, giocattoli e balocchi, spettacoli e feste, usi e costumi, riti e cerimonie, pratiche, credenze, superstizioni, ubbie, tutto un mondo palese ed occulto, di realtà e di immaginazione, si muove, si agita, sorride, geme a chi sa accostarvisi e comprenderlo . . .<sup>8</sup>

Opinions about what folklore means have varied considerably during the last half century or so, both in Europe and in the United States. Although Pitрэ's concept of folklore is still substantially valid today, there have been various modifications and extensions to its scope. To illustrate this I quote the definition given by two eminent American scholars of international repute, Stith Thompson and Archer Taylor, whom I had the good fortune to meet and discuss local folklore problems with at an International Congress in Kiel in 1957. Stith Thompson says:

Although the word folklore is more than a century old, no exact agreement has ever been reached as to its meaning. The common idea present in all folklore is that of tradition, something handed down from one person to another and preserved either by memory or practice rather than written record. It involves the dances, songs, tales, legends, and traditions, the beliefs and superstitions, and the proverbial sayings of peoples everywhere. It also includes studies of customs, of traditions, agricultural and domestic practices, types of buildings and utensils, and traditional aspects of social organization, but for these latter aspects there seems to be a general agreement to consider them, when found in a primitive or preliterate society, as a part of ethnology rather than folklore. This latter division of labour is largely a matter of convenience and is not universally accepted. At least among literate people all the subjects mentioned above are considered as folklore, since all of them are truly traditional.

Archer Taylor writes at greater length:

Folklore consists of materials that are handed on traditionally from generation to generation without a reliable ascription to an inventor or author. Although proverbs, ballads, and other items of folklore are often credited to a particular person, this is itself a stylistic peculiarity of the genre and the individual's claims are ordinarily dubious in the extreme. If they are capable of proof, we find that the material has suffered alteration or adaptation in the process of transmission. The "communal recreation" proceeds characteristically according to associative rather than logical ways of thinking. The materials handed on traditionally may be physical objects, ideas or words. The folklore of physical objects includes the shapes and uses of tools, costumes, and the forms of villages and houses. The folklore of gestures and games occupies a position intermediate between the folklore of physical objects and the folklore of ideas. Typical ideas transmitted as folklore are manifested in the customs associated with birth, marriage, and death, with the lesser events of life, with remedies for illnesses and wounds, with agriculture,

8 G. PITRÉ, *Che cos'è il folklore*, Palermo, 1965, p. 20.

the trades, and the professions, and with religious life notably with Christmas, Easter, and other holy days or saints' days. Verbal folklore includes words considered for their own sake and words occurring as connected discourse. Typical words that the folklorist studies without special regard for their use in connected discourse are place names, personal names (both family and Christian names) and nicknames. Folklore in the form of connected discourse includes tales of various kinds (*märchen*, jests, legends, cumulative tales, exempla, fables, etiological tales), ballads, lyric folk song, children's songs, charms, proverbs and riddles. The study of folklore consists in the collection, classification, and interpretation of these traditional materials. Classification involves interpretation to some extent. Interpretation seeks to discover the origin, meaning, use, and history of these materials, to state and explain their dissemination, and to describe their stylistic peculiarities.<sup>9</sup>

To arrange the material of Maltese Folklore which we have been speaking about we could perhaps benefit from the experience of other, much bigger countries and utilize, with necessary amendments and adaptations, one or other of the working systems of classification devised for the purpose. An adaptation and simplification of A. Van Gennep's sub-division of French folk-material in his *Manuel de Folklore Français Contemporain*<sup>10</sup> would produce the following scheme for the arrangement of local folklore material:

FROM THE CRADLE TO THE GRAVE: Pregnancy and childbirth – Baptism – Infancy and Adolescence – Engagement and Marriage – Death and Funeral Customs.

PERIODICAL CEREMONIES: 1. *Seasonal Cycles & Movable Feasts* – Carnival and Lent – Easter – May-Midsummer (SS. John, Peter and Paul) – All Saints – The Twelve Days – 11. *Fixed Popular Ceremonies* – Candlemas – 1 April – First of May – Ascension Day – The Assumption – 8th September.

CALENDAR CEREMONIES: Cult of the Virgin and Saints – Patron Saints and their feasts – Rural Chapels and Ceremonies – Popular iconography (*if not preferred under "Folk Arts"*).

FOLKLORE OF NATURE: The Sky – The Earth – Rain and Drought Ceremonies – Stones and Prehistoric Folklore – Water: sources and miraculous springs, sea – Popular Fauna and Flora.

MAGIC AND WITCHCRAFT: Witches – Folk-prayers, Exorcisms and Magic Formulas – Divination – Evil Eye – Amulets and Talismans.

FOLK-MEDICINE: Popular Remedies – Saint Healers.

IMAGINARY CREATURES: Changelings – Giants (ogres) – The Devil – Ghosts and Apparitions – Creatures half-man and half-beast.

FOLK LITERATURE WITH CHANGING TEXT: Tales and legends – Coarse and obscene speech – Play on words and Anecdotes.

FOLK LITERATURE WITH FIXED TEXT: Proverbs and Sayings – Wellerisms –

9 *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, edited by Maria Leach. London, 1975, pp. 402 – 403.

10 Tome III, 1937, pp. 11 – 56.

– Fables – Riddles – Hawkers' and Other Street Cries – *Blason Populaire* (collective nicknames).

FOLK-MUSIC AND FOLK-SONGS (including Noël's).

GAMES, TOYS AND PASTIMES (including counting rhymes, musical instruments and Folk-Dance).

SOCIAL AND JURIDICAL FOLKLORE: Bells and Weather-Cocks – Special groups and types (e.g. hanged persons) – Trades and Occupations – Fishing & Agriculture – Property Marks.

DOMESTIC FOLKLORE: The Dwelling – Construction, Contents and Annexa – Regional Cookery and Sweets.

FOLK ARTS: Popular Iconography – Symbols and Emblems – Tattooing – Stone Carving – Pottery and other crafts – Popular Pictures – Dress and Costume – Ex-Votos – Folk-Drama – Puppets.

A more elaborate classification, with detailed questionnaires under each topic, has been worked out in the Scandinavian countries, where research in the fields of ethnology and folklore has reached a higher level than elsewhere. A detailed scheme for the classification of folklore material was prepared in Sweden in 1934 by Prof. Herman Geijer, Dr. Aake Campbell and Dr. Sven Liljeblad and a modified version of it was used in the *Landsmaalsarkiv* (Dialect and Folklore Archives) at Uppsala. The Swedish system, which embraces both the spiritual or oral lore, and the material, was successfully adapted, with minor changes, for use in the Irish Folklore Commission's office in Dublin. This is what Sean O'Suilleabhán, late Archivist to the Commission, said about the Swedish classification at the Third Symposium on Folklore held at Indiana University in 1950:

It begins with the lore, both spiritual and material, of the people settling down on the land. This embraces legends about the house, the field, the land and all that goes with it, and also oral traditions. Then next we have the question of how people support themselves after they have once settled on the land. There is the study of hunting and fishing and implements and oral lore about them and the like. Then we come to the study of the household, the cultivation of land, the planting of crops, work within the house, the light and heat in the home, food, utensils, cleanliness, and so forth. From there we go on to the study of commerce, communications and trades, shopping, buying, selling, markets, and the like. From these things we go on to the study of the community, the people of the parish or whatever unit they are working in, the relation of master and servant, the relations between the rich and poor, the family as a unit, names, personal names, surnames, and the like. Then the administration of the law, land tenure, education, religion, the growth of towns and villages. Next they take the human being from before birth until after his death . . . Then you have nature lore in all its aspects, and folk medicine. You have the calendar, time, place, and the year. Next comes a very important branch – custom and belief, which runs through all cultures. Next we come to mythological tradition starting with devils, witches, hags, and the like . . . Next we have historical traditions consisting of what people remember or think they remember about the living and the dead. In Ireland we have another sub-division which we call religious tradition, very important in our Irish folklore. We finally get round to popular

folk literature. First of all the international folk tales . . . Then we have folk songs, proverbs, riddles, psalms, prayers and so on, sayings and anecdotes . . . Finally one comes to amusements and pastimes of various kinds . . .<sup>11</sup>

The following is a summary of the classification appearing in *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* published for the Folklore of Ireland Society in 1942 to serve as a guide for collectors of Irish oral traditions.<sup>12</sup>

SETTLEMENT AND DWELLING – The District – Local land division and tenure – The Dwelling-House (house furniture, building) – Temporary Dwellings – Relics of the past (old buildings, castles, towers, etc.).

LIVELIHOOD & HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT – Care and management of livestock – Folklore of Domestic Animals and Birds – Agriculture – Trades and Occupations – The Fire – Food and Drink – Meals – Luxuries – Household Vessels and Utensils – Personal and Domestic Hygiene.

COMMUNICATIONS & TRADE – Travel by land (paths, roads, carts and carriages) – Travel by water – Spreading News and Information – Business and Commerce – Fairs and Markets.

THE COMMUNITY – Work and Labour – Dress – Rich and Poor – Social Intercourse – Social & Family Relationship (including surnames, Christian names and nicknames) – The Practice of Religion (including fast and abstinence, baptism, confirmation, blessing of houses or boats, processions, pilgrimages) – Education – Legal Administration (including the making of wills) – Possession of Land or Property – Villages, Towns and Cities – Military Service.

HUMAN LIFE – The Sexes – Youth and Age – Individual Characteristics – The Human Body – Bodily Functions & Activities – Challenges – Contests and Feats – Sickness – Death – The Wake – The Funeral – The Return of the Dead.

NATURE – The Sky and Solar System – The Atmosphere (including wind-lore, rain-lore, thunder, and lightning) – The Weather – The Points of the Compass – The Four Elements – Natural Features (including stones, the sea, caves, hills, wells) – Trees & Plants (including medicinal use of plants) – Other Growths – Birds – Mammals – Fishes – Insects and Spiders – Crustaceans – Reptiles – Molluscs – Worms.

FOLK-MEDICINE – Health and Illness – Avoidance of disease and illness – Diagnosis of Disease – Medical materials (e.g. herbs) – Medical practitioners in olden times – Care of the Sick – Common Diseases and Ailments.

TIME – Measurement of Time – Important Dates & Periods – Patterns and Local Festivals – Pilgrimages – Feasts and Festivals of the Year – The Days of the Weeks – The Months of the Year.

PRINCIPLES & RULES OF POPULAR BELIEF & PRACTICE – Boundaries – Fate – Divination – Individuals credited with Supernatural Powers (including the Evil

11 S. THOMPSON, ed., *Four Symposia on Folklore held at the Midcentury International Folklore Conference, Indiana University, July 21 – August 4, 1950* . . . Bloomington, Indiana, 1953, pp. 260–261.

12. Sean Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, 1942, pp. xix–xxxi.

Eye) – Talismans – Sorcery and Witchcraft – Emblems, Numbers and Colours – Speech and Silence (including exclamations and ejaculations, curses, swearing and affirmations, charms) – Traditional Code of Right and Wrong – Fictions (child bogeys, etc.)

MYTHOLOGICAL TRADITION – Origins – Supernatural Beings – Devils – Demons – Witches – Giants – Mythical Champions and Warriors – Wizards – Changelings – Spirits – The Nightmare – Ghosts and Apparitions – Sub-human Persons – Water Beings – Supernatural Places (including haunted houses, submerged villages, churches, houses) – Hidden Treasure – Supernatural Phenomena – The Afterworld.

HISTORICAL TRADITION – Individual Persons – Important Historic Events – Local Happenings – The Island in Tradition – Traditions about foreign countries.

RELIGIOUS TRADITION – God – The Angels – Christ and the Blessed Virgin – The Saints.

POPULAR ORAL LITERATURE – Storytellers and their Art – International Folktales told locally – Hero-tales – Male characters in folktales – Female characters in folktales – Animals and Birds in Folktales – Tales of Magic – Romantic Tales – Religious Tales – Humorous Tales – Animal Tales – Speech attributed to animals, plants and objects – Didactic Anecdotes – Tales of Origin (of certain animals, etc.) – Place-Names – Prayers and Charms – Songs and Airs – Proverbs, Bywords and local Expressions – Riddles.

SPORTS AND PASTIMES – Occasional Pastimes and Celebrations – Festival Amusements and Games – Other Games (including Games-Rhymes & Card Playing) – The Playing of Music – Dancing – Singing – Dramatic Entertainments – Active Pastimes and Tests – Pastimes with Animals or Birds (e.g. dog-fights, bird trapping & shooting) – Toys.

Another alternative would be to turn to one of the book classification systems used for the arrangement of libraries. Here, too, one should heed the conclusion reached by Bonser and Garside that “an examination of the various published classifications, such as the Dewey decimal classification used in most public libraries and the more scholarly classification of the Library of Congress, showed that none of these ready-made schemes offered a really satisfactory classification of folklore”. In view of this, in 1955 these two librarians produced for the Folklore Society, London a new and comprehensive classification which, in itself, was intended to be “an important contribution to the study of folklore, in the broad and scholarly sense of the word as accepted by the Society”. In the words of Bonser and Garside,<sup>13</sup> “an examination of the schedules themselves will show that the classification of the various aspects or elements of folklore

13 W. BONSER and K. GARSIDE, “The Classification of the Library of the Folklore Society”, *Folklore: Transactions of the Folk-Lore Society*, Vol. LXVI, June 1955, pp. 267–281.



proceeds in a logical sequence from man himself, through his various activities and the physical world which governs or interests him, to his religion, and ends with narrative folklore and the incidence of folklore themes in literature, music and the arts.’’

The subjoined summary of the schedules of this classification includes a few amendments to make it adaptable for local use;

#### MANKIND

- (i) Men – Women (fertility and barrenness) – Children (twins, etc.)
- (ii) Birth (couvade, changelings), – Baptism – Infancy – Baby Language
- (iii) Love, Courtship and Marriage
- (iv) Death and Burial – Mourning
- (v) Domestic folklore (threshold etc.)

#### HUMAN ACTIVITIES

- (i) Occupations and Industries (agriculture, fishing, building, etc.)
- (ii) Folk Arts and Crafts (stone work, lace, weaving, filigree, basketry, etc.)
- (iii) Medicine
- (iv) Law
- (v) Food and Drink
- (vi) Games and Pastimes (including Folk-Dance and Song)
- (viii) Feasts and Fairs
- (viii) Other Social Customs
- (ix) Dress and Costume

#### ANIMAL, VEGETABLE AND MINERAL WORLDS

- (i) Animals, birds, fishes, insects, reptiles, fictitious beasts (A – Z under each)
- (ii) Trees, fruits, flowers, vegetables (A – Z under each)
- (iii) Rocks and stones, gems, etc. (A – Z under each)

#### NATURAL PHENOMENA

- (i) Sky (sun, moon, stars)
- (ii) Earth (hills, caves, etc.)
- (iii) Water (sea, wells and springs)
- (iv) Fire
- (v) Weather (thunder and lightning, rain, wind)

#### CALENDAR CUSTOMS

- (i) Movable Feasts (Carnival, Easter, etc.)
- (ii) Seasons
- (iii) Fixed Feasts (Candlemas, Midsummer (St. John’s Day and *L-Imnarja*), Christmas, etc.)
- (iv) Patron Saints and their feasts.

#### MAGIC AND SUPERNATURAL

- (i) Superstition in general (including changelings)
- (ii) Devil lore
- (iii) Giant (ogres), monsters, dragons
- (iv) Ghosts and Apparitions

- (v) Magic (Charms, exorcisms and incantations, talismans, spitting, crossroads)
- (vi) Divination (omens, dreams)
- (vii) Evil Eye – Luck – Taboos – Astrology
- (viii) Witchcraft and Sorcery
- (ix) Occult, Fortune-telling – Sects

#### RELIGIOUS FOLKLORE

- (i) Christ and the Virgin Mary
- (ii) Apostles, Saints and Hagiology
- (iii) Miracles, Ex-Votos
- (iv) Cult of the Dead, etc.

#### NARRATIVE FOLKLORE

- (i) Myths and Legends
- (ii) Folk-Tales – Fables
- (iii) Nursery Rhymes – Folk Rhymes
- (iv) Proverbs, Riddles
- (v) Ballads and Folk Songs, Street Cries
- (vi) Folk Prayers (including, if so preferred, exorcisms and incantations)

#### MISCELLANEOUS ASPECTS

- (i) Numbers
- (ii) Colours
- (iii) Names (nicknames, place names, etc.)
- (iv) Symbolism (cross, emblems, etc.)
- (v) Folklore in literature, art, music
- (vi) Other topics (shop signs, etc.)

Although classification systems are inevitably arbitrary, it is hoped that any one of the above schemes will be enough to give a broad outline providing proper orientation in approaching the field of Maltese Folklore. Material collected and arranged under the main headings may then need to be further sub-divided; detailed classifications in respect of various topics have been worked out, as in the case of folk-narrative, where Aarne-Thompson's *The Types of the Folktale*,<sup>14</sup> accepted by scholars in various countries as a basis for their work, has been successfully used, with some additions, by G. Mifsud-Chircop for the classification of the Maltese material.<sup>15</sup> These specialized systems, however, fall outside the scope of the present study.

14 A. ARNE – S. THOMPSON, *The Types of the Folktale: a classification and bibliography*, 2nd ed., Helsinki, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961.

15 G. MIFSUD CHIRCOP, *Type-Index of the Maltese Folktale within the Mediterranean Tradition Area* – Unpublished thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Maltese, University of Malta, 1978.

---

GUŻÈ CASSAR PULLICINO, is the author of several scholarly papers and works on Maltese folklore, among them *Studies in Maltese Folklore*. At present he is the librarian at The Bishop's Seminary at Tal-Virtù.

---

# INTERPRETATION OF BALANCE SHEETS AND OTHER FINANCIAL STATEMENTS: PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS

*Emmanuel Fava*

---

**E**SSENTIALLY, a balance sheet is a historic statement showing the financial position of a business at a given point in time; consequently, its use is somewhat restricted. Whoever studies a balance sheet does so to get an *indication* of future, rather than past, performance and security. As a general rule a prospective investor, or lender, is primarily interested in the financial strength of the firm as it is likely to be in the months or years ahead. Therefore, he attaches greater importance to the security of his investment, and lesser to its yield.

In order to understand a balance sheet properly and adequately an individual must first study it as an entity with its own merits and peculiarities. It becomes imperative to perceive the importance of the relationship which the balance sheet figures bear each other and to judge the various items in the light of what is known of the business generally. For example, a figure of Lm6,500 for debtors does not carry the same implications if trade creditors amount to Lm1,800 as it would carry if they amount to Lm15,200. Again, there seems to be little point in comparing the two figures at all without first ascertaining whether the business concerned normally sells its goods on a cash or credit basis.

It has to be remembered, however, that a balance sheet in itself has little significance. To base an interpretation exclusively upon an examination of its constituent items without having a knowledge of the real, living and changing enterprise, which a balance sheet only imperfectly depicts, would indeed turn out to be a futile and misleading exercise. As a matter of fact, very little will be gained by pondering over a figure of, say, stock-in-trade; much more has to be known in order to arrive at a sensible and worthwhile conclusion. A balance sheet is as varied as the human activities which it reflects and cannot be usefully interpreted by studying it in isolation or by simply breaking it up into its constituent items.

This leads to another logical point. Although it is essential to study a balance sheet in conjunction with sufficient knowledge of the firm as a whole, yet, to do so only would result in an incomplete assessment. Therefore, to obtain maximum information and reliable data about the business, a series of consecutive balance sheets will have to be consulted and analyzed. Only then does it become possible to ascertain what is known as the “trend”; that is, how the period under review performed. Once the trend has been established, the forecasting and planning of the future tends to be easier than if such a trend had not been identified.

#### **POINTS TO BE CONSIDERED**

The proprietors’ stake in an ordinary business should at all times be sufficient to cover, in the first instance, the amount invested in fixed assets and intangibles, including any loans to directors or investments in other businesses. Then, there should be a further sum available to finance trading, i.e. adequate working capital. Naturally, the working capital fluctuates from day to day as the constituent items forming it continually change in the course of the day’s trading. The amount of working capital needed by a firm depends on a number of factors, and it is not easy to ascertain the exact amount. Too large a working capital is not at all conducive to efficient management; on the other hand, too little of it puts the business under constant strain and endangers the firm’s existence. Thus, the experienced and skilful financial manager will be the one who is able to strike the ideal balance between the two – neither too much, nor too little.

The day-to-day running of an enterprise requires finance over and above that which is needed for the purchase of fixed assets, and the volume of trading which can safely be undertaken depends not only upon the equipment and labour which the business controls but also upon the finance which is available. Debtors, stock and work-in-progress have to be carried all the time, and whilst the amount of each of these and the aggregate total of all of them may fluctuate very considerably, there must always be a matching global amount of finance upon which they can float without undue worry. The firm’s finance is provided either from the proprietor’s stake in the business (capital, reserves and undistributed profits) or by borrowing (loan creditors, bank overdrafts, mortgages, etc.) or by obtaining credit for goods and services employed. In addition, money earmarked to meet future liabilities (for example, taxation) may be used to finance current trading. And since none of these sources provides unlimited money or credit it follows that there is an upper limit upon the total of current assets which may be carried. All this would become apparent by analyzing a series of balance sheets.

Also, a careful study of a balance sheet will show whether the firm is “overtrading” or not. This can be ascertained from the distortion of the trading structure, the relationship between current assets and current liabilities, amounts owed vastly in excess of the stake of the proprietors. Primarily, overtrading is a matter affecting the trading figures of a business – the current assets and the current liabilities, and as such caution should be exercised at all times so as not to reduce the working capital to an unacceptably low figure. Also, it has to be borne in mind that any programme of expansion necessitates additional capital, partly to buy new fixed assets and partly to finance the increased volume of trading. Regrettably, this latter aspect is often overlooked, with the result that the enterprise is subjected to unwarranted pressures.

Another point which should be considered is the relationship between overtrading and liquidity; liquidity is here taken in its stricter sense, denoting the availability of cash to meet cash calls. When a balance sheet is said to be “liquid” it means that it shows an excess of current assets over current liabilities, but it does not follow that such a business is not vulnerable. Although, globally, a business may appear to be safe, it may be short of cash to pay its wages or an impending payment. A business should at all times have available sufficient cash or overdraft facilities to meet any contingency. The fact that an enterprise is profitable will be of little comfort if cash is not available in time and in the required amount. Overtrading imposes a strain on all the finances of a business and where too great a part of the resources is tied up in stock and debts there will be constant pressure on the overdraft limit and persistent difficulty in finding ready cash to pay the workers’ wages or accounts as they fall due.

Again therefore, in a financially healthy business the current assets should exceed the current liabilities. However, a clear and substantial excess is not always a guarantee of stability and invulnerability. A great deal depends upon how current the current assets really are; in other words, how frequently they are turning over and turning into cash. It is no comfort at all to have large amounts of money tied up in stocks which are obsolete, damaged or out of fashion. Moreover, what is the use of having considerable amounts owed by debtors, when many of these are bad or doubtful? Therefore, a business becomes vulnerable if it is not turning over its stock-in-trade quickly enough, even though the balance sheet shows a liquid surplus.

The balance sheet, like any other financial statement, serves as an aid in efficient managerial control. Every activity of an expanding business must be carefully watched to ensure that it develops in proper relation to other activities. Stocks must be kept low enough to

maintain rapid turnover, yet large enough to give adequate selection and thus prevent lost sales. Expenses must be checked for unwarranted increases. Book debts must be collected promptly partly to minimize as much as possible losses through bad debts and partly to provide cash for further operations. All these efforts are helped by the figures shown in financial statements, particularly the balance sheet. The most important goal of the balance sheet, then, could be to facilitate intelligent executive control by supplying exact information about the condition of the enterprise. In addition it must be borne in mind that the executives of a firm are not the sole persons who have an interest in its financial position or progress. There are others as well. The shareholders, for security of their investment and the lenders cash and creditors, for the stability of their employment.

#### **MANAGEMENT (ACCOUNTING) RATIOS**

The annual financial statements prepared by a business are most carefully and rigorously produced. They are the ones which carry the highest credibility and are accepted as embodying unimpeachable truth. These statements often serve as the bases on which the firm's stability performance and forecasting are computed and compared by means of ratios.

Ratios are arithmetical relationships or comparisons between two different totals as shown in the financial statements. They always relate one figure to another. Thus, whilst being concise, they have significance. Ratios should always be identified with that aspect of the business which they are designed to bring to our attention. Generally speaking, these fall under two headings:

- a) financial, that is pertaining to stability and security, both short and long term.
- b) performance, that is pertaining to efficiency, profitability and return on capital.

Accounting ratios are indeed an important aspect of management accounting because they enable business executives, or other interested persons, to form an opinion as to the financial soundness of the enterprise and as to how well its commercial objectives have been attained. Once computed, present ratios may be compared with those of past years, resulting in a fuller and more meaningful picture. Such comparisons help to establish the business trend and the progress achieved. Furthermore, ratios can be compared with those of similar firms (inter-company comparisons), thus indicating how the enterprise is doing in the context of the industry as a whole.

**FINANCIAL RATIOS**

Financial ratios are of great help and value because they measure the financial strength and stability of a business. Survival is the main priority of any enterprise and this can only be ensured if the business, at any time, is able to pay its debts as they fall due. The more commonly-used financial ratios are:

1. Working Capital Ratio (Current Assets Ratio).  
Current Assets/Current Liabilities.

This ratio shows the solvency of the business and the ease with which it can carry on its trading activities without undue strain. It is assumed, rather arbitrarily, that the current assets should be approximately double the current liabilities. However an excess of net current assets well beyond that which is needed for survival represents idle capital – capital tied up in a constituent part, or parts, of the current assets.

2. Liquidity Ratio (Quick Assets Ratio or “Acid Test” Ratio) Liquid Assets/Current Liabilities.

Liquidity is the ease with which assets can be turned into cash. Liquid assets normally include cash and bank balances, bills receivable, short-term investments and debtors. This ratio indicates what is immediately available to meet current commitments. In a sense it is a measure of safety in the short term. Generally speaking, liquid assets should be slightly above the current liabilities if the firm is to be regarded as safe.

3. Working Capital to Turnover Ratio.  
Net Current Assets/Turnover.

This ratio may be expressed as a decimal, but normally it is multiplied by 365 to indicate the number of days’ sales as represented by the net current assets. Although this ratio serves the purpose of comparison with that of previous years, yet it provides no proof that it is optional nor does it remove any distortion caused by the inability to keep expenditure on fixed assets in line with accumulations of depreciation provided.

4. Capital Employed to Fixed Assets Ratio:  
Capital Employed/Fixed Assets.

As a general rule capital employed comprises share capital (both ordinary and preference), all reserves, debentures and loans (both medium and long-term). It is expected that the proprietors’ funds (including preference shares) should be such that they cover the fixed assets of the business and leave a reasonable amount as working

capital. If this is not the case, then the enterprise is overtrading, that is, it is relying too much on outside sources. This is a financial weakness which could be remedied by an increase in a long-term debt.

#### 5. Proprietor's Ratio

Share holders' Funds/Total Liabilities

The Shareholders' Funds include preference shares. This ratio denotes the long-term financial stability of the business with regard to an adequate security for the payment of all liabilities. This shows whether the shareholders' funds are large enough to provide a cushion for unsecured creditors. The proprietors' funds should be large enough to cover also the book values of goodwill and other intangible assets, if the financial position of the firm is to be regarded as satisfactory.

#### 6. Net Worth to Fixed Assets Ratio:

Net Worth/Fixed Assets

Net worth means what the business as a whole is worth. This is taken as all the assets (fixed and current) less all outside liabilities. Alternatively, the net worth may be computed by adding the share capital to all the reserves. This computation assumes that the real value of the assets is that stated in the balance sheet. This ratio shows the structure of the business. If it is high then it implies a low working capital ratio with correspondingly inadequate liquid resources. On the other hand, a low ratio indicates a "top heavy" structure with insufficient earning power. However, this ratio is influenced by the type of business under investigation; an estate business will have a high ratio, while a retail one will have a low ratio.

#### 7. Fixed Assets to Current Assets Ratio:

Fixed Assets/Current Assets.

This ratio is frequently used to determine the pattern of the resources employed by the business under review. Then, when compared with that of other firms in the same industry it will have a useful indication as to whether or not the fixed assets are being utilized optimally.

#### 8. Capital Gearing Ratio:

Equity Capital/Fixed Rate Capital (Preference shares + Loan Capital)

This ratio shows the capital structure of the business, that is, the relationship between ordinary share (equity) capital and fixed rate



capital, that is, preference shares, debentures and loans. It has to be remembered that the greater the proportion of fixed rate capital to equity capital, the greater the fixed annual commitment and the smaller the amount available for distribution. This ratio is useful for comparative purposes because it gives an indication as to whether the enterprise's policy, as compared with other similar business, has been prudent or not. It is commonly assumed that the optimal ratio for British industrial and commercial firms should be .5.

9. Debentures + Long-Term Loans to Total Assets (or Fixed Assets) Ratio.  $\text{Debentures} + \text{Mortgages} + \text{Loans} / \text{Fixed} + \text{Current} + \text{Assets}$ .

This ratio shows the long-term borrowing power of the firm. It indicates to debenture holders and to lenders of cash the security on their loans. This ratio is based on the book-value of the assets.

### PERFORMANCE RATIOS

Performance ratios show how well the business has performed during a current year. It can safely be said that the greatest value and benefit of these ratios is their comparison with ratios of past years and with those of similar businesses. Some of the more common ratios in use are:

10. Net Profit to Capital Employed Ratio (Efficiency Ratio)  $(\text{Net Profit} / \text{Share Capital} + \text{Reserves} + \text{Loan Capital}) \times 100$

This ratio shows the earning power of the long term capital employed in the business; that is, how much the capital has earned as an investment.

It has to be pointed out that the return expected on capital depends on a) the cost of the present capital, and b) the cost of raising future capital. The cost of capital depends on the capital "mixture" or "structure". The return on capital should compare favourably with the return of similar business in the same industry. Usually, the higher the risk, the greater should be the expected return.

Return on capital is a top-management ratio. Once it has been fixed, other more detailed ratios can be evolved in order to assist middle- and lower-management.

11. Profit to Sales (Turnover) Ratio:  
 $(\text{Net Trading Profit} / \text{Sales}) \times 100$

This ratio measures the success of executive managers in maximizing the profit from the firm's business activities. Items having no connec-

tion with the enterprise's normal trading operations, such as investment income, rent received, taxation, etc, should be excluded, otherwise the ratio will be distorted. If the ratio is decreasing then costs are normally rising quicker than sales, or disproportionately. However, a poor ratio may not necessarily mean inefficient management. Other factors, such as tighter economic conditions, difficulty in obtaining credit, increased competition, difficulty in reaching marginal customers etc, may be at play.

12. Net Sales to Debtors Ratio:  
Net Sales/Debtors.

This ratio shows the average credit given to debtors. Usually, the figure for net credit sales, with bad debts subtracted, is used. A declining ratio indicates that customers are taking longer to pay. The average collection period should be related closely to the credit policy of the firm. If monthly credit is given, then the average collection period should not exceed 40 days; if it does, then the debt-collecting system is not as efficient as it should be. If this ratio is allowed to deteriorate then it may jeopardize the cash flow, with the added risk of bad debts.

13. Sales to Stock Ratio (Stock Turnover):  
Cost of Sales/Average Stock

This ratio shows the number of times that the stock has been turned over during the year. This is a simple yet very important ratio. The quicker the stock is sold the higher will be the profit. It must be kept in mind that slow-moving stock ties up capital and is rather costly. Besides lost profits provision will have to be made for warehouse overheads, pilfering, deterioration, etc.

14. Net Purchases to Ratio:

This ratio shows the period of time allowed by creditors for the payment of purchases. It is advantageous for a business to have a considerable amount of creditors because in this way the business would be employing the suppliers' funds to generate part of its profit. It would be working with other people's money.

Although it is beneficial to have a large amount, yet this policy is rather risky and great caution has to be exercised.

15. Gross Profit Ratio:  
 $(\text{Gross Profit}/\text{Net Sales}) \times 100$

This ratio shows the profit margin earned on the sale of goods. It is the mark-up over and above the cost of goods sold. Only expenses which have a direct influence on the goods sold are included in the cost

of good, such as carriage inwards and it is important ratio because once it remains constant the profit earned on any sales can easily be revealed without having to prepare a trading account.

16. Earnings per Share Ratio:

Equity earnings after tax/Number of ordinary shares.

This ratio shows the profitability of a firm. It measures the earnings available for distribution divided by the number of ordinary shares. In computing it complications may arise (a) if the number of equity shares changes during the year, and (b) according to whether a "full" or "nil" distribution of dividends occurs.

17. Price Earnings Ratio: (P/E ratio)

Market value of one share/Distributable earnings per share.

This ratio shows what an ordinary share has earned from an investment point of view. It reveals the number of years that have the elapse so that the investor recovers his capital, assuming that future earnings remain unchanged. The importance of this ratio is, perhaps, the ease which it affords investors to assess the share value of their investment. Since it takes into account all the distributable profit, both that which is retained and that which is given out as dividend, investors attach great weight to it.

18. Earnings Yield Ratio:

$(\text{Earnings per share} / \text{Market Price per share}) \times 100$

The ratio relates the amount available to the equity shareholders, after settlement of all prior charges, with the purchase price of the ordinary share capital. Undoubtedly, in calculating the yield the market price of the share plays an important part in the computation because the ratio indicates what the investment is yielding in the present conditions.

## CONCLUSION

Reference has been made to turnover and to assets, both fixed and current. It is essential to note that turnover (sales) is more directly and immediately influenced by inflation, therefore ratios having turnover either as a numerator or as a denominator will tend to rise (improve) year by year, even if there is no real gain in efficiency. Moreover, in the case of assets, their value is taken as it appears in the balance sheet, without knowing for certain what the actual value really is, Wasting assets depreciate because of a number of factors, and although provision is usually made for this loss in value, yet it may either be

inadequate to cover the real loss, or else in excess. Consequently this will distort the ratio in question.

Notwithstanding the flaws that are inherent in the calculation of ratios, yet their computation is of considerable help to persons who need some guidance which could serve as a basis for the forming of an opinion as to the financial soundness of the business. Therefore, accounting ratios are regarded as useful management tools, and they have to be employed diligently, prudently and above all objectively, otherwise they could lead to wrong decisions.

---

EMMANUEL FAVA is Head of the Department of Accounts, The New Lyceum (Arts), Msida.



## **Student and Youth Travel**

220, ST. PAUL STREET, VALLETTA, MALTA. TEL: 624983, 626628. TLX1626MW

**your natural travel link  
to/from Malta**

Air, rail, ship, coach tickets, Inclusive holiday tours, educational and social travel for individuals and groups, Range of accommodation services, Language Course, sightseeing and Sports holiday programmes.

Special services and prices for students and youths, holders of the International Student Identity Card (ISIC) or the Youth International Educational Exchange (YIEE) Card.

### **TRAVEL WITH NSTS**

Over 400 student and youth travel offices throughout the world for your comfort and easier contact.

---

# L'UMANESIMO DI CALVINO

Gerard Bugeja

---

**I**N TUTTE le sue opere Calvino, mediante la sua vena umoristica, pone l'accento su alcuni ostacoli che impediscono all'uomo di realizzarsi. Spesso l'uomo appare "dimezzato" <sup>1</sup>, tagliato in due, con una delle metà che cerca affanosamente l'altra; a volte si configura come un essere che rifiuta di comportarsi in modo normale, si arrampica su un albero e vi stabilisce la sua dimora permanente; <sup>2</sup>, in alcuni casi è tormentato da dubbi e angosce tali che non è più distinguibile da un'automa ipocrita e pietoso insieme. <sup>3</sup>, Sembra infatti che l'attenzione dello scrittore ligure si rivolga esclusivamente a denunciare la miserie dell'uomo moderno. In *Marcovaldo*, pubblicato nel 1956 <sup>4</sup>, questo grigiore e questa miseria raggiungono livelli davvero inquietanti.

Motivo della sua alienazione è il distacco dall'ambiente naturale. Marcovaldo abita in una città dove manca il verde. Gli unici spazi sono le strisce d'aiola dei corsi cittadini; proprio in una simile striscia Marcovaldo, sbalordito, vede spuntare dei funghi. In "Funghi in città" <sup>5</sup>, viene posta in rilievo la noia di coloro cui è precluso il piacere di notare "i mutamenti della stagione" <sup>6</sup>: le foglie che ingialliscono e le piume che penetrano nelle tegole. Marcovaldo, che ha passato l'infanzia a contatto con la natura, prova una grande e struggente nostalgia; e abitare in città costituisce per lui un vero e proprio martirio psicologico oltre che fisico. <sup>7</sup> In città, insomma, predomina il cemento, e le piazze alberate con gli ippocastani, malgrado che diano la possibilità di "ascoltare il chiasso dei passeri stonati ed invisibili sui rami" <sup>8</sup> sono

1. *Il visconte dimezzato*, 1952.

2. *Il barone rampante*, 1957.

3. Come cordà ne *La nuvola di smog*.

4. I. Calvino, *Marcovaldo*, Einaudi, Torino, 1966.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

7. In questo sguardo nostalgico di Marcovaldo si ravvisa probabilmente quello stesso dello scrittore cresciuto in una Liguria ancora intatta e vergine e non ancora "rapallizzata".

8. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

troppo poche. Inoltre, come si può notare ne ‘La villaggiatura in panchina’<sup>9</sup> l’eccessivo inquinamento uditivo (saldatori autogeni con il loro raschio interminabile), visivo (il continuo accendersi del semaforo) e olfattivo (il puzzo che viene dai tombini dei rifiuti) rovina il tanto sospirato riposo del nostro personaggio. Per gli abitanti delle metropoli la bellezza della natura si configura come un’immagine o del passato (in forma di ricordo nostalgico) o del futuro (in forma di utopica proiezione dei desideri inconsci), così che Marcovaldo insegue “inverno con la fantasia la fragranza d’un roseto”.<sup>10</sup> A volte questi desideri possono configurarsi non solo su un piano individuale ma anche collettivo; la fontana nella piazza alberata con “ninfe, fauni, dei fluviali che intrecciavano zampilli, cascate e giochi d’acqua”<sup>11</sup> è opera della collettività che si sostituisce alla natura attraverso l’imitazione. Perciò Marcovaldo si accontenta di suoni e colori sostitutivi delle “conchiglie . . . barbe . . . froge dei cavalli”<sup>12</sup> e che “si velarono di manti scintillanti”.<sup>13</sup> Quando per mancanza di verde i figli di Marcovaldo si ammalano il medico suggerisce “un pò d’aria buona . . . per permettere loro di correre sui prati”<sup>14</sup> specialmente a Teresa che ha “le scapole fragili come le ali d’un uccelletto implume”.<sup>15</sup> Allora Marcovaldo decide di portarli sulla collina e lì riescono sì a trovare un pò di aria buona, ma anche un sanatorio in cui sono ricoverati tanti affetti dalla tubercolosi. Sembra che gli unici spazi ancora intatti servano per guarire color che si sono ammalati, ma che devono guarire in fretta per ritornare al lavoro, alla produzione il più presto possibile, in città magari per riammalarsi ed essere ricoverati di nuovo. Quindi certe malattie sono la conseguenza diretta del modo di produrre. In ‘Dov è più azzurro il fiume’<sup>16</sup> si scopre che si può tranquillamente morire perchè si è mangiato una tinca avvelenata. A Marcovaldo non tocca tale terribile morte solo perchè c’è uno ad avvisarlo del pericolo.

A Calvino preme porre in rilievo il problema dell’inquinamento, che colpisce sia chi produce sia chi consuma. I produttori si trovano coinvolti in una feroce concorrenza come è testimoniato in ‘Luna e

9. *Ibid.*,

10. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

Gnac<sup>17</sup>: qui due compagnie, che producono lo stesso prodotto, sono impegnate in un esercizio spietato di reciproca eliminazione; ed una di loro alla più riesce ad avere la meglio, perchè sfrutta il guasto dell'insegna luminosa dell'altra, il che provoca la sfiducia nei creditori. Il motivo apparentemente banale, il guasto dell'insegna da parte di alcuni ragazzi birichini (come sono appunto i figli di Marcovaldo), viene poi opportunamente sfruttato da una delle ditte concorrenti. Infatti si diffonde "l'idea d'un desso" <sup>18</sup> tra i creditori quando l'insegna luminosa "Cognac" si trasforma ora in COGNAC ora CONAC ora CONC". <sup>19</sup> Addirittura "l'agenzia pubblicitaria si rifiutò di fare altre riparazioni se non le venivano pagati gli arretrati; la scritta spenta fece crescere l'allarme tra i creditori: la Spaak fallì". <sup>20</sup> Il motivo dello spreco che si fa delle risorse naturali viene ancor più sottolineato in un altro racconto, 'I figli di Babbo Natale'. <sup>21</sup> Lo scrittore, con forte carica ironica, denuncia i modi cui ricorrono i Consigli d'amministrazione per "dare gioia al prossimo", <sup>22</sup> che è così costretto a "comprare, comprare, comprare" per "regalare, regalare, regalare, come imponevano i più sinceri sentimenti suoi e gli interessi generali dell'industria". <sup>23</sup> E quando si rendono conto che ai bambini possono piacere i "regali distruttivi" <sup>24</sup> sono pronti a fornirglieli a bizzeffe. Spesso la gente è ignora d'essere strumentalizzata su tre livelli: economico, spirituale e culturale. <sup>25</sup> Così i rapporti sociali diventano stereotipati e triti. Sono pure vittime i proprietari stessi delle ditte in concorrenza fra di loro che non si distinguono dai membri dell'orda arcaica, cui fa riferimento Freud <sup>26</sup> e che somigliano ai lupi hobbesiani che la critica sociologica marxista ravvisa appunto nella classe padronale. <sup>27</sup>

17. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

25. Che ai bambini si diano oggetti chiamati giocattoli, distruttivi potrebbe essere pericoloso perché ne influenza il loro sviluppo morale ed indirizza negativamente la loro aggressività. Nel contempo Calvino valuta positivamente i "regali distruttivi" come il martello, il tirasassi e i fiammiferi, perché mediante questi il bambino sviluppa la sue capacità creative.

26. S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trad. ing., Penguin, 1955, pp. 202–225.

27. K. Korsch, *Karl Marx*, trad., La Terza, 1972, pp. 41–45.

Eppure nell'uomo ci sarebbero segni di un sospirato risveglio, di un incessante anelito alla vita, di uno struggente desiderio di amore. In 'Luna e Gnac' sono sintomo di tale sforzo Isolina, Fiordaligi e la ragazza "color di luna"<sup>28</sup>: la prima che "si sentiva trasportata per il chiaro di luna"<sup>29</sup> ed anche "il più smorzato gracchiar di radio dai piani inferiori dello stabile le arrivava come i rintocchi d'una serenata";<sup>30</sup> il secondo, Fiordaligi, "Giovinetto melanconico"<sup>31</sup> che fa di tutto per mettersi in contatto con la ragazza che abita nel palazzo di fronte, una ragazza "color di luna, color di neon, color di luce nella notte",<sup>32</sup> e la cui bocca "pareva aprirsi in un sorriso".<sup>33</sup> Però i momenti di oscurità della luce intermittente del neon recuperante dal chiarore fisso e trasparente della luna consentono a Fiordaligi di ricreare un mondo fantastico surreale, ricco di suggestioni pittoriche quali si possono cogliere nella pittura di Munch (*Il Grido*) o di Villon (*Ritratto di Raymond Duchamp Villon*). Ai due innamorati che vorrebbero esprimere il loro amore è però vietato stabilire un rapporto durevole e genuino. Marcovaldo stesso diventa veramente patetico quando osserva gli astri che "andavano a confondersi coi commerci terrestri";<sup>34</sup> e la luce stessa della luna non può essere apprezzata a causa dell'illuminazione catodica del neon.

Comunque è difficile uscire da questo stato di degradazione sociale, economico e morale come appunto si riscontra in 'Un viaggio con le mucche'.<sup>35</sup> Marcovaldo, che è costretto a vivere in città, pensa che suo figlio passi delle giornate idilliache in campagna a contatto con la natura, seduto all'ombra degli alberi mentre ascolta il gorgoglio dei ruscelli. Ma s'inganna perchè suo figlio non solo non si diverte ma è addirittura costretto a sudare come un "mulo";<sup>36</sup> il che testimonia che non c'è differenza reale fra città e campagna se il lavoro e i rapporti umani non migliorano. Finchè nella società rimane il rapporto servopadrone, non si può parlare di società civile, emancipata e tanto meno di progresso. In altre parole, non è dunque la città sola responsabile

28. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 67.



dell'alienazione dell'uomo. Marcovaldo contemplando l'uomo di neve, osserva che "sotto la neve non si distingue cosa è di neve e cosa è ricoperto. Tranne in un caso: l'uomo perchè si sa che io sono io".<sup>37</sup> La frase "io sono io" è carica di significato positivo; infatti riprende l'"Ich bin ich" della filosofia hegeliana:<sup>38</sup> tramite il continuo movimento dialettico la persona "dimezzata"<sup>39</sup> può, forse, finalmente restaurare quella agognata unità che si raggiunge solo quando si armonizzano più autocoscienze.<sup>40</sup>

Che gli uomini debbono cominciare a prendere sul serio il richiamo alla "coscienza di se" — che è anche un imperativo categorico kantiano si nota nell'ultimo racconto, specie nella metafora del lupo e del leprotto: il lupo rappresenta la società ingorda ed avida di denaro e spietata nei mezzi che usa pur di raggiungere i suoi diabolici fini; il leprotto, anche se vittima di tali atroci assurdità, rappresenta invece l'aspirazione permanente ad un modello alternativo umanizzante dove "Solo le zampette lasciavano un'impronta leggera sulla neve, come foglioline di trifoglio."<sup>41</sup>

37. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

38. J. Hyppolite, *Genesi e Strutture della Fenomenologia dello Spirito*, Firenze, 1972, p. 197. Bisogna aggiungere che la fiducia nell'uomo come viene espressa in Calvino è di chiara matrice cartesiana ("cogito ergo sum").

39. Come, appunto, *Il Visconte Dimezzato*, op. cit.

40. Il sottoscritto è convinto che alcuni valori etici sono attinti dal Vangelo (Matt. cap. 5).

41. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

**KOTBA BIL-MALTI****IN MALTESE**

PAUL P. BORG	<i>dal-lejl għe alla</i>
KILIN: M Spiteri	<i>Tmint l-jem fi Dragunara</i>
E. A. FENECH	<i>Dawra Durella</i>
ED. ZARB	<i>F'Xifer L-Irdum (baqa' ftit illegati)</i>
C. ATTARD	<i>Karlu Visconti</i>
C. MICALLEF	<i>Fula Maqsuma (it-tieni edizzjoni)</i>
ED. ZARB	<i>F'Salib it-Toroq (baqa' ftit)</i>
J. CALLEJA	<i>Edukazzjoni Sesswali Nisranija</i>
J. CALLEJA	<i>Letturi (Tagħrif siewi)</i>
G. MIFSUD – J.M. GHIGO	<i>Guzè Delia Giżwita</i>
G. MIFSUD	<i>Is-Surmast Gużepi Caruana</i>
D. DEGIORGIO	<i>Il-Blat Jibki</i>
KILIN	<i>Fuq il-Għajn ta' San Bastjan (Il-hames edizzjoni)</i>
W. GULIA	<i>Marjana (poeziji)</i>
G. PISANI	<i>Żerniq fuq Għoljiet</i>
C. CARRETTO	<i>Hienja Li Emmnet (trad. A. Seychell)</i>
A. SACCO	<i>Girien</i>
L. MIZZI	<i>Għall-Holama Ta' Hajtu (it-tieni edizzjoni)</i>
H. GANADO	<i>Jien Inhobb Nitkellem Magħkom Vol. 1</i>
H. GANADO	<i>Jien Inhobb Nitkellem Magħkom Vol. 2</i>
L. MIZZI	<i>Dhaħen tal-Gwerra (ir-raba' edizzjoni)</i>
L. MIZZI	<i>Inkwiet u Qaddisin (it-tielet edizzjoni)</i>
O. FRIGGIERI	<i>L-idea tal-Letteratura</i>
J.M. GHIGO	<i>Ejjeu u Taraw</i>
PAUL P. BORG	<i>Beżghat</i>

**PUBBLIKAZZJONI BUGELLI PUBLICATIONS****50 Triq Sta. Luċija – Valletta – Malta****Tel: 224809****KOTBA BL-INGLIŻ****IN ENGLISH**

F. EBEJER	<i>A Wreath of Maltese Innocents</i>
J. MICALLEF	<i>When Malta Stood Alone</i>
J. BEZZINA	<i>Religion and Politics in a Crown Colony.</i>
	<i>The Gozo-Malta Story 1798-1864 (available in Paperbound, Harbound and De Luxe editions).</i>
GAULITANA:	No.1 <i>The Gozo Citadel</i>
	No.2 <i>Lourdes Home</i>
GALEA	<i>German Knights of Malta</i>

**KOTBA BIT-TALJAN****IN ITALIANO**

L. MIZZI	<i>Per il Sogno della Sua Vita</i>
A. MERCIECA	<i>Le Mie Vicende</i>

**KOTBA GHAT-TFAL****FOR CHILDREN**

D. DEGIORGIO	<i>Kif Dumby Jonah Ha Ismu</i>
D. DEGIORGIO	<i>Gwerra Fil-Kamp Tal-Qtates</i>
D. DEGIORGIO	<i>Xanteo</i>
D. DEGIORGIO	<i>Il-Milied Jigi Għal Kulhadd</i>
C. CAUCHI	<i>L-Għasfur Jitkellem</i>

# IL-MALTI

## Kopji tas-snin mghoddija ghall-bejgh

**Prezz:** Numru wiehed – 25c

Numru Speċjali – 50c

Żewġ/Tliet/Erba' numri flimkien – 50c

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1939: Marzu, Settembru   | 1965: Marzu; Gunju; Sett. Diċ. <i>(flimkien)</i>                          |
| 1944: Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru   | 1966: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru                                   |
| 1945: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru  | 1967: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru                                   |
| 1946: Marzu; Settembru; Diċembru   | 1968: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru                                   |
| 1947: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru  | 1969: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru                                   |
| 1948: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru  | 1970: Marzu; Gunju; Sett. Diċ. <i>(flimkien)</i>                          |
| 1949: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru  | 1971: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru                                   |
| 1950: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru  | 1972: Marzu; Gunju <i>(Numru Speċjali N. Cremona)</i> Settembru; Diċembru |
| 1951: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru  | 1973: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru                                   |
| 1952: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru  | 1974: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru                                   |
| 1953: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru  | 1975: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru                                   |
| 1954: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru  | 1976: Marzu; Gunju;   |
| 1955: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru  | 1977: Marzu; Gunju; Sett. Diċ. <i>(flimkien)</i>                          |
| 1956: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru  | 1978: Marzu; Gunju; Sett. Diċ. <i>(flimkien (numru wiehed biss))</i>      |
| 1957: Marzu; Gunju; Sett./Diċ. <i>(flimkien)</i>   | 1979: Marzu; Gunju <i>(flimkien)</i> ; Sett. Diċ. <i>(flimkien)</i>       |
| 1958: Marzu; Gunju; Sett./Diċ. <i>(flimkien)</i>   | 1980: Jannar/Diċembru <i>(numru wiehed biss)</i>                          |
| 1959: Marzu; Gunju; Sett./Diċ. <i>(flimkien)</i>   | 1981: Jannar/Diċembru <i>(Numru Speċjali G. Galea)</i>                    |
| 1960: Marzu; Gunju/Sett. <i>(flimkien)</i> ; Diċ. <i>(Briffa)</i> ; Sett./Diċ. <i>(flimkien)</i> | 1984: Jannar; Gunju <i>(Numru Speċjali Zieda mat Taghrif)</i>             |
| 1961: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru  |   |
| 1962: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru  |   |
| 1963: Marzu; Gunju <i>(Numru Speċjali R. Briffa)</i> ; Sett./Diċ. <i>(flimkien)</i>              |   |
| 1964: Marzu; Gunju; Settembru; Diċembru  |   |

Ighat għall-koppi melniga flimkien ma' eċċ għall-ammont ta' tliet li jgħid il-koppi lis-Sur Pawlu Milsud (Tel: 40733), 24, Triq il-Linja tal-Ferrovija l-Qadima, B'Kara.

