COMPARATIVE MALTESE AND ARABIC PROVERBS

By J. Aquilina

The oldest published collection of Maltese proverbs is M.A. Vassalli's book Motti, Aforismi e Proverbi Maltesi which the author published in 1828 with the financial assistance of his benefactor John Hookham Frere. The collection contains 864 proverbs translated into Italian. But there are hundreds of other proverbs and sayings in De Soldanis's larger work Damma tal-Kliem Kartaginis mscerred fel fom tal Maltin u Ghaucin (1750) which is a four volume manuscript work preserved at the Royal Malta Library. De Soldanis is also the author of an earlier unpublished book entitled Apostegmi e Proverbi Maltesi given in alphabetical order but with the letters A and C missing. This collection was published by Dr. G. Curmi in Malta Letteraria No. 5 May 1928. Unlike Vassalli, De Soldanis translates the proverbs and sayings into Italian literally, but hardly ever explains the figurative meaning of their social context. Unfortunately, one sometimes has to reproduce some of the obscure proverbs given by De Soldanis and then attempt an explanation which, coming so late after the compilation of his work, is very often of a tentative nature. A few more recent collections like P.P. Castagna's Malta bil-gżejjjer taghha (3 vols. 1885), Fr. C. Fenech's Il-Qawl Malti Jew Kliem Ix-Xiib (1955), Captain E.D. Busuttil's Ġabra ta' Quwel Maltin, u Quwel Ingliżi li jaqblu magħbom (1942) add very little to the original list of De Soldanis and Vassalli.

I have in the press what is going to be the largest dictionary of Maltese proverbs which are given under separate headings with their literal translation and sometimes also their field of figurative application. The proverbs are translated into English literally and as idiomatically as possible. But the translation of some of the proverbs is very disappointing because the essence of their wit, like the fragrance of a flower cut off from its stem, completely evaporates and one has the uneasy feeling that the proverb in translation reads more like a parody of the original than a
faithful reproduction. In separate sections and in smaller print, these proverbs are compared with as many proverbs in other languages as I could find. In some cases, I have given additional etymological notes on words of Romance or Semitic origin of philological interest. Of the whole collection of proverbs, comparatively very few are of Arabic origin, but the total list of correspondences in all the work is fairly impressive. Some of these proverbs are mixed in the sense that they may be Arabic and European at the same time, sometimes literally and sometimes approximately. Here arises the question as to the criteria that must be adopted to establish which is the original version. Comparatively only a small number of Maltese proverbs corresponds to Arabic ones because since 1090, when the Normans conquered Malta, the social context of our country moved in the direction of Sicily. Internal Arabic linguistic influence may have lasted for another 200 years after the Arab domination when Frederick II turned the Arabs out of the island to put an end to further conspiracies.

A proverb is the product of a form of communication which reproduces the social atmosphere of the times and the experiences of the people living in those times. Most proverbs, like old folk songs, contain a larger percentage of words of Semitic origin. A country's proverbs therefore can be described as the sum-total of the people's practical wisdom.

The longer post-Arabic period of European cultural and historical influences (1090-1967) accounts for the larger number of Maltese proverbs either of a general European origin in a very broad sense or of Romance origin in a narrower sense or completely local.

History helps us to understand what happened in the Maltese language. After the Arabs left the country, the Arab vocabulary which they left behind them began to serve social interests and ideas which reached our island from the European continent and especially through Sicily and later through Italy. The social impact of the European civilisation on the one-time Arabic-speaking island has been much profounder than the Arab domination.

The present Maltese linguistic heritage is a matter of single words, phrases and idioms which no longer form part of the Arabic civilisation
which began in Malta and Gozo in the 9th century. Many Maltese proverbs, though couched in a completely Arabic vocabulary, are the translation of Italian, and generally Sicilian proverbs, many of which can be compared with those collected by the famous Sicilian parameologist Giuseppe Pitrè (1841-1916). Very interesting are those Maltese proverbs which correspond to Arabic ones but have also their literal correspondences in one or more European languages. I give two such examples. One is the Maltese proverb: *Min ma jibkix ma jerdax*, 'The baby that (lit. he who) does not cry will not be suckled', advice to those who want something but do not bother to ask for it either because they are careless or because they are shy. Feghali in his book of proverbs *Proverbes et Dictons Syro-Libanais* (No. 907) gives the corresponding Arabic Proverb: *kti:r en-naqq kti:r er-rāːqaː 'Plus un enfant pleure, plus il tette'* [كتير النّق كتير الرضاعة] This proverb does not occur in Sicilian and Italian from which we borrowed most of the Maltese non-Arabic proverbs, but it occurs in Spanish 'El que no allora no mama' and also in Turkish 'They do not give the bread to the infant that does not cry' recorded by Rev. E.J. Davis, M.A. on page 25 of his book *Osmanli Proverbs and Quaint Sayings* and by Rev. H. Jensen in his *A Classical Collection of Tamil Proverbs* – No. 1947 (1897) 'A crying child will get milk'. Another interesting Maltese proverb is *Omm il-gija qatt ma taglili immā lanqas tifrah* 'The mother of the coward neither grieves nor rejoices' to which corresponds the Arabic proverb (said of a timid person who avoids all risks of all kind even those worthwhile) ṭūmm al džabaːni laː tafrahû u laː tahzanu  [أمُُّ الجبان لا تفرح ولا تحزن] corresponding to the Latin proverb *Mater timidi neque laeta est neque tristis* (MEIDANI Vol. I p. 101 No. 300). *In vituperanda timiditate adhibetur*. Scharaf-Aldin *In meo codice proverbium non legitur*. The Arabic proverb in its turn, at least part of it, corresponds to Latin *Mater timidi flaere non solet*, a literal, corresponding Turkish proverb being 'The mother of a timid son never weeps'.

I am now going to give a few more examples of Maltese-Arabic proverbs with the respective headings under which they will appear in my book *A Comparative Dictionary of Maltese Proverbs.*
Strangely enough of the 85 proverbs under the section 'God and Religion' there is only the Maltese proverb given by M.A. Vassalli (No. 819) which has its literal Arabic correspondent. This is it-tigiega hija u tixrob tizzihajr’l Alla – ŋeddëdza: día btiʃrab wiMallalliq saub rabba [الدّ جاجة بتشرب وبتطلع صوب رّها] ' (Even) a hen after drinking raises its head upwards to its God' (FRAY No. 1601; FEGH No. 2904).

This is no more strange than the fact that, apart from the language which is certainly an Arabic heritage, there is no evidence of Arabic survivals in Malta. But in the proverbs dealing with Craft and Evil we find 4 Maltese proverbs which have Arabic approximate correspondences but none of which is exclusively Arabic. One of these four proverbs which seems of direct Arabic origin is: Ibża’ mill-fqir li jsir sinjur, u mill-qabba li tigbor l-unur, 'Beware of the poor man that becomes rich, and of the whore that becomes respectable'. – allaːh ul mdziːr min el-faqiːr u l-mitkabbir wilganiː ul mit-dzabbir [أَلْلَّهُ امْجِرَّ مِنْ الفَقِيرِ الشَّكَّرِ والْمِلْمِلِّ الْمِتْجَبَّ ] 'God (guard us against) keep us from a proud, destitute man, and a pompous, rich man' (FRAY No. 346); but there are several other European proverbs of approximately the same meaning and similar wording such as It. 'Dio ti guardi da villan rifatto e da cittadin disfatto'; 'Il villan nobilitato non conosce il parentado'; Rum. 'Beware of a new boyar (= nobleman) and an old beggar' (CHAMPION); Eng. 'No pride like that of an enriched beggar'.

Under the heading entitled Hypocrisy and False Appearances I included Stabbba (Inheba) wara sebgħu (subghajb), imbaghad jidber kollu, 'He hides behind his finger, then comes out into full view'. – byetxabba bexyaːl ešbqeu [بيتخيب بخيل اصبحو] 'D’une personne qui sait toujours se tirer d’affaire, qui a toujours une raison ou une excuse à donner (FEGH No. 106 and FRAY No. 1061). I know of no other European correspondences. I recorded the very common Maltese proverb L-ewwel tidrobni (tferini) u mbagħad iddewwini, 'You first wound me, then you cure me' to which corresponds literally the Arabic proverb byedʒraːn webyərbot [بيجرح وبيربط] 'Il blesse et panse' i.e. 'C’est une personne qui se brouille avec un ami et immédiatement se réconciliée avec lui, ou bien
devient tout de suite l'amie d'une autre personne, abandonnant la première amitié (FEGH No. 2284); 'Il blesse et cure' (RASS No. 789). There are similar proverbs in several other European languages.

The Maltese proverb ll-giddieb (gideb) ghomru qasir, 'Liars (lies) are short-lived' corresponds to Ar. qumr al kaṣāːb qaṣīːr [عمر الكذاب قصير] 'The liar is short-lived' (BURCK No. 423). This proverb occurs in several European proverbs; but while Maltese and Arabic describe liars as short-lived, the European languages describe a lie as short-legged, though the English, not only say that 'A lie has no legs', but also that 'A lie never lives to be old'.

From now onwards to shorten the communication as much as possible, I give only Maltese proverbs which one can definitely consider as of exclusively Arabic origin because there are no literal, or approximate, correspondences in Sicilian and other European languages.

RETRIBUTION

Min jobjoqlik f'wiċċek tisbiха tobżoqlu f'wiċċu 'Do not hesitate to spit in the face of him who spits in your face' – illi byibzuq bkaffak ?ubzuq bdaqnu [الي بيبق بكفكف ابزق بدقته] 'He who spits on your palm, spit on his beard' (FRAY No. 448).

Min jithallat man-nubhala, it-tigieg tferk xu (tgerfxu), 'He who gets himself mixed up with bran will be scratched by hens' – dyetsxalla t mghan-noxxaːl yakluh l-klaːb [ذيتخلط مع النحل يأكلوه الكلا ب] 'What is mixed with the bran will be eaten by the dogs' (Andjra WEST. No. 387).

TROUBLES

Min jidḥol bejn il-basla u qoxritha jibqa' b'riḥitha, 'He who gets in between the onion and its skin carries its smell' – yaːdaːxel bain el-qeʃre wettuːme yaːʃaːmem riːḥa maiʃma [يا داخل بين القشرة والتومة يا شام ريححة ميشومة] 'Celui qui s'introduit entre l'écorce et l'ail, sentira une odeur désagréable' (FEGH No. 294; BURCK No. 93; MEID Vol. II, No. 369, p. 519; FRAY No. 550).
Il-borma fuq tlieta toqghod, 'The pot rests on three (a tripod)' - ṭessi: ba ma btu:qaf ẓilla ẓa tla:ti(t) 'A tripod stands only on three legs' (FRAY No. 1938).

Social Position

Li jien kont amir, u int amir, kieku min isuq il-hmir? 'Were I an Emir, and you an Emir, which one of us would drive the asses?' - ṭen ta mi:r wana mi:r ḥku:n isuːg el hmiːr? 'Aunt Emir and Anna Emir' - ṭen ta miːr wan a miːr ḥkuːn isuːg el hmiːr? 'Toi Emir et moi Emir (prince) lequel de nous conduirà les ânes?' (As No. 23) given also by FRAY No. 704; FEGH No. 1221 and MBCH No. 37.

Man and Woman

L-ghaːq uza ahžen mix-xitan, 'The old woman is shrewder (or worse) than the devil' - ladʒuː za ktsar men j-ʃit ahn [al-ḥukūţa ʾakhar] ‘An old woman is worse than the devil’ (WEST No. 20).

Kull andar ghandu l-kaɾfa tieghu, 'Every threshing floor has its chaff' - s-saba ma tskun bla gerfa [la ʿarfa] 'The heap of threshed corn is not without unthreshed ears' Andjra (WEST No. 248).

Qabel ma tara (or) tikri d-dar, ghandek titaqṣi ẓhall-ɡar, 'Before you rent a house inquire about the neighbour' - sʔaːl ʕan edʒ-dɡaːɾ qabl ed-dar [ʔasal ʿan al-jaɾī qul el-dar] 'Inform-toi du voisin avant (d’acheter) ta maison' (FEGH No. 1645). There are other Arabic variants.

Children and Parents

Il-borma tagli♭ba ghal fonnma, il-bint (or it-tifsə) tixbəh l’ommha, 'Turn the pot upside down over its mouth, the daughter takes after her mother' - qlab el qdiːra qala fmimatha teʃbeh ʔel-bent ummimetha [qalb al-qader al-ʿalâ fummita tashib al-bint a-jimitha] 'En mettant la marmite sens dessus dessous, elle ne cesse pas d’être marmite; ainsi la fille ressemble à sa mère (As No. 253). There are other Arabic variants.
L-o mm basla, il-missier tewma, it-tif la kif tkun tfuh? 'If the mother is
an onion, and the father a garlic, how can the daughter smell good?' -
? ab u : h bas al w a ? um mu tu m w m n a i n b a d d a h a t i d i ri : h t
etti : bti لأبو بصل وأمّة توم، ومنين بدّها تجي ريحّة [الدلّية؟]
'His father is an onion; his mother is a garlic; (so) where
does good fragrance come from?' (FRAY No. 58).

LOVE, SEX AND MARRIAGE

Ghidli bin (bint) min int u nghidlek x'int, 'Tell me whose son (daughter)
you are and I'll tell you what you are' - s? a : l ? an ? e l - ? e m m q abl
an tlemm [اأسال عن الأمّ قبل ان تلقّم] 'Renseigne-toi sur la
mère avant de prendre la fille' (FEGH No. 1384).

Fejn thobb il-galb jinxu r-riglejn, 'Where the heart loves, there the
legs walk' - ? e l - ? e d g r ma betdebb ella m tra h ma bethebb
[الأجر ما بتدّب الاّ مطرح ما يتحب] 'Le pied ne va que là où
l'amour le guide' (FEGH No. 1279).

Apparently the Maltese have not inheri
ted any of the feeling of jealousy
with which the Arab male regards his woman. Of the 10 Maltese proverbs,
referring to this lack of emotional balance there is not one which is of
Arabic origin.

NEIGHBOURS

Bongornu, bonasira, la badili u lanqas badl lek, 'Good morning, good
evening; I have taken nothing from you and you have taken nothing from
me'. - s a b a : h ? e l - xe : r ya d g a : m e n t i b i h a : l a k w a ? a n a
b i h a : li [صباح الخير يا جاري انت بحالك وانا بحالي]
'Bonjour, voisin! reste chez toi, je resterai chez moi' (LAND No. LII).

Hares tajjeb 'il darek u la thallilx 'il garek, 'Guard your house carefully
and don't tempt your neighbour to steal' - fu d d ed - da : r u the
eddzga : r qandek ya q tek en n a : r [شد الدار واطح الجار
عندك يعطيك النار] 'Close the house and send away the neighbour,
lest he give you fire' (WEST No. 1106); sakkir ba : bak ula tithim
d3a: rak ['Lock your door rather than accuse your neighbour' (FRAY No. 1908; FEGH No. 1646; MBCH No. 965).

HABITS

Il-ghada li titrabba fih, il-kefen biss ineibiha, 'Only the shroud will take away the habits in which you have been brought up' - xasel el-baden ma bigaiyra gair el-kefen [ خصلة البدن ما بغيّرا غير الكن ] 'Nos habitudes ne nous quittent qu'au cercueil' (FEGH No. 544).

CHARACTER

Minn bassa joghxa u min fiswa jmut, 'A fart makes him faint and break of wind kills him' - mn el-faswa byeg'a mn-edarata bimut [ من الغسوة بيفشي من الضربة بموت ] 'Une vesse le fait s'évanouir, un pet le fait mourir!' Cette expression triviale est passée en proverbe; elle est employée vulgairement pour désigner quelqu'un qui est sans énergie, faible de caractère, sans courage et sans force de caractère (FEGH No. 485).

SELF-INTEREST

Ahjar fwiedi minn uliedi, 'Better my liver than my children' Ahjar fwiedi minn uliedu, È meglio il fegato che i figli suoi. - fwa:di wa la ?awla:di [ فوادي ولا أولادي ] 'Mes entrailles plutôt que mes enfants'. Se dit de l'amour que la mère a pour ses enfants; elle préfère mourir à leur place' (MBCH No. 1336).

Merhba bih meta gie, meta ma giex Alla hennieh, 'When he came he was welcomed, and when he did not come, God cheered him' - marha be lli dga u dga:b wu lli dga u ma dga:b mawalih u dga:b, [ مرحبا بالي جا وجاب والي جا وما جاب ما عليه جواب ] 'Welcome to him who comes and brings (something), and he who comes and does not bring (anything) gets no answer (WEST No. 1121).
GRATITUDE AND INGRATITUDE

Abjar habib mal-kelb inkella ma' sidu, 'Better (be) the friend of a dog than of his master' - 'uqmal maqruf maq kalb wela taqmlu ma 'ibnad dam [عمل معروف مع كلب ولا تعمله مع ابن ] 'Do good to a dog rather than to a man' (FRAY No. 254).


VANITY AND SELF-CONCEIT

Kulhadd jerhan (jisrah) bl-gharusa tieghu, 'Every one feels pleased (happy) with his own bride' - kellemen biganni qa dzama:1 hebba:btu (a laila) [كلمن يغبني عا جمال حبيبته لايله ] 'Chacun chante les beautes de sa belle (de sa Laila)'. Ce proverbe veut dire que chacun se laisse conduire par une passion ou un plaisir qui l'absorbe tout entier. Cf. 'A chaque fou sa marotte' (FEGH No.1334).

GLUTTONY AND GREED

Min jibza' ghall-ikel tal-qattusa jeklob il-grieden, 'He who grudges the cat's food will be eaten by rats' - allaadi yatha:rafa ala alafa el-qitt taskalu el-far da:nih [الذي يحارب على عشا القط تأكل الفار نانويه ] 'Celui qui veut faire des esparages sur le souper de son chat, aura ses deux oreilles mangées par les rats' (MEIB p.30).

Iz-jejjed bhun-nieges (or bu n-nieges), 'Too much is like (or, is the brother of) too little' - 'ez-zay ed xai en-neqes [الزايد خي الناقص ] 'Le trop est le frere du moindre' (FEGH No.271).

WORK, DILIGENCE AND IDLENESS

Dak li ma jkobbx jahdem ma' l-Insara jkollu jaga' jahdem ma' l-Ilsera, 'He who does not like to work with Christians will have to work with
slaves' - *el-xadma mqa n-nsa:ra wa la l-gla:s xsa:ra* [الخادم مع النصارى ولا الخسارة] 'To work with Christians is better than to lose (time) by sitting idle' (WEST No. 587).

Abdem ghal habba u ghodd mal-battal, 'Work even for a grain (one twelfth of a penny), then count (your earnings) with the idle' - *?iftigil bdgedil (bba:ra, bmi riya', 'bfils', 'bqatqa) waxasib al batta:l* [اشتغل بجد وحساب البطل] 'Travaille pour un liard et donne-toi de garde du désœuvré' (LAND No. XII).

**Sloth and Laziness**

*Bi nhar jigli (or jiggerrew) fuq il-bjut u bil-lejl jahraq (jaharqu) iz-ziut,* 'During the day he runs (or they run) about on the roofs; and during the night he burns (they burn) the oil' - *zei ?ula:d z-zfu:ts bel-li:l iharqu zi-ziut u n-nha:r iqabtu l-qnu:ts* [زي أولاد الزفوت بالليل يحرقو الزيوت والنهار يقضوا القنوت] 'It is the manner of scamps (lit. 'sons of pitch') to burn oil-lamps at night and to seize comers at day, (to sleep in)' (WEST No. 642).

**Money and Wealth**

*Il-bahar tqassmu jsir ghadajjar,* 'If you divide the sea, it will become pools' - *qassam el-bahr sawa:qi: tatallah ma tala:qi:* [قسم البحر سواقت تطلب ما تلاقى] 'Divisez la mer en rigoles, cherchez-les, il n'y a plus rien'. (MEIB p. 102).

*Bla flus la tghannaq u lanqas tus,* 'Without money one can neither embrace nor kiss' - *li ma ?andu flus ma iderraq ma ibu:s* [الي ما عنده فلوس ما يدرع ما يبوس] 'He who has no money can neither embrace nor kiss' (WEST No. 880); *illi ma ?andu flus ma yacannaq mayabu:s* [الي ما عنده فلوس ما يمتق ما يبوس] 'Celui qui n'a pas d'argent n'êtreint ni embrasse' (MBCH No. 281).

**Poverty and Thrift**

*Kulhadd jidfen *l ommu kif jista*, 'Every one buries his mother as best
he can' – kull wañed jedfen yimma:n kifihebb [كل واحد ] 'Everyone buries his mother as he likes (West No. 1388).

Ahjini illum u oqtolni ghada, 'Help me (lit. give me life) today, kill me tomorrow' – ?ahjini el-yaum we uqtulni gadda[ أ حيني اليوم ] 'Fais-moi vivre aujourd'hui et tu pourras me tuer demain' (MBCH No. 21).

SQUANDERING, WASTE AND BANKRUPTCY

Min ghandu l-b'jar (zęjje d) iroxu fuq il-kromb, 'He who has got manure (to spare) let him spread it on the turnips'. – elli quwa zaqafaranu ya¿amlu fagla: [الي قوي زعفرانو يعمطا فاغلا ل ] 'Celui qui dispose de beaucoup de safran, n'a qu'à en assaisonner même les escargots' (As. No. 46); hal sendu ba:rr birejzal-qerrayis [هالعندو بهار بيرش علقالريق ] 'Qui a du safran, en saupoudre les orties'; 'Il faut être riche et prodigue pour jeter du poivre aux orties; elli sendu ba:rr birejzal hebbaize [الي عندو بهار ] 'Qui a du poivre, en saupoudre la mauve' (FEGH No. 1120); li andu zaqfran ya¿amlu fagla: [الي عندو الزعفران ] 'He who has saffron (which is expensive) spices snails with it' (West No. 857, MBCH No. 235).

TRADE AND BUSINESS

Rbis u m'erhsu dan il-laham: iżda la meraq u la xaham, 'This meat is so cheap it could not be cheaper, but it contains neither gravy nor fat' – men estarxes el-lahm send el-maraq yendem [من استرخ ] 'Quoi choisit viande à bon marché, aura mauvais bouillon' (FEGH No. 2442).

Il-furnar bobža islišbielu, għax jekk ma jaghtiblekz, tebodielu, 'Lend a loaf to a baker, because if he does not give it back to you, you can take it back from him' – ?aqti xubzak lil xabba:z ulau ?akal nusqa [أعط خبزك للخبّاز ولو أكل نشة ] 'Give your dough (lit. bread) to a baker though he may eat half or it'. Let experts or profes-
sionals do things for you, however expensive they may be. In the long run, it is more advantageous. (FRAY No. 243; MBCH No. 151).

PRACTICAL WISDOM AND FORESIGHT

*Iftah biebek u *ftahar jew agfilqu u nsatar,* 'Open the door and show off or shut it and hide yourself'— *?iftah ba:bak wiftixir yamma sakkir ba:bak winsitir* [افتح بابك وافتخ يا سكر بابك وانستر] 'Either open your door and live gloriously, or else shut it and live gloriously, or else shut it and hide yourself inside' (FRAY No. 266).

*Saqsi l-imgarrab mbux lit-tabib* (or *lill-gharef), 'Ask the man of experience and not the doctor'— *sa:1 l-mdgarrab la tsa: t-tabib*[ سل المجرب لا تسال الطبيب] 'Ask the experienced one, don't ask the doctor (meaning that she knows what she is talking about' (WEST No. 14, MBCH No. 967).

ABBREVIATIONS

**AS**

**BURCK**
John Lewis Burckhardt, *Arabic Proverbs or the Manners and Customs of the modern Egyptians.* Second edit., London, MDCCCLXXV.

**CHAMPION**

**FEGH**

**FRAY**

**LAND**
Carlo Landberg, *Proverbes et Dictons de la Province de Syrie Section de Saydâ* (Leide/Paris, 1883).

MEIB  Anatole de Meibohm, *Proverbes Arabes* (Les editions universitaires d'Egypte, Cairo, 1948).

MEID  *Meidani Proverbia*, edited by G.W. Freytag (Bonne, 1839).

RASS  Ahmed Rassim, *Chez le Marchand de Musc* (*Proverbes populaires arabes*) (Egypt (?), n.d.).


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