

MALTESE FOLKLORE NOW

By J. CASSAR PULLICINO

THE study of Maltese Folklore, up to now, has not been treated as seriously as it should. Its importance as a science was so greatly underestimated in the past that invaluable material that could have been preserved has now been lost irretrievably. Up to comparatively recent times there was, among the educated classes, an unfortunate aversion to the Maltese language in which many folk-beliefs, stories and sayings are preserved. This explains why, with a few notable exceptions, we owe the few existing collections of Maltese folklore mainly to foreign scholars.

Maltese folklore preserves the soul of the past, embodying the ways of thought, the mode of life and the moral code of preceding centuries. This national heritage of lore and tradition is the product of simple, psychological reactions to the historical environments and to the various culture-contacts which our people have experienced in the past. At different times and by various routes, many peoples have come to our island and dominated it for varying periods. Each ruling group brought its own lore, language and way of life in its wake. All these left their imprint on local tradition and, in their turn, underwent changes in the process of adaptation to the conditions of the country and adjustment to the usages of the inhabitants. The result has been an extremely variegated pattern of culture, traces of which may be identified, or analysed, and studied on a comparative basis by reference to similar material and motifs recorded in the neighbouring countries of the Mediterranean littoral.

It is surprising how few are really interested in the large mass of strange, unrecorded facts, beliefs and customs which make Malta in many ways an Undiscovered Country and therefore a fertile field for folklore research. In this context, one may even say that the Maltese do not know Malta well, and the old Maltese adage *Jekk ma tafx ħrafet pajżek, ħrafet min taf, ħrafet qaddisek?*, 'If you don't know your country's story, what other story on earth can you know?', gains special significance in as much as folklore is part of our heritage and therefore part of the knowledge which we cannot afford to ignore.

The field of Maltese Folklore is so extensive as to be almost limitless. It is as vast as life itself. The subject allows enough room for a division of labour, if only enough workers were to come forward, aimed

with the necessary qualities and training, in order to turn up the virgin soil of which only the surface has yet been scratched. No one student can be expected to acquire single-handed a full and detailed knowledge of tales and superstitions, songs and dances, nicknames and place-names, agricultural practices and social customs. There is no reason, however, why the scientific study of the subject should continue to be almost exclusively pursued by foreign scholars and a small number of local scholars. We Maltese should not be deterred by the magnitude of the task for many of us are well equipped already for the investigation of the subject. In the first place, we speak the language fluently and therefore there is no need for an interpreter. I need not emphasize that only those with an adequate knowledge of the Maltese tongue can expect to undertake folklore studies in Malta in all its shades. We are conscious of the local cast of mind, and know a good deal about what goes on inside or outside our homes on given occasions or at different seasons of the year. Above all, we are familiar with the ever-changing Maltese background which is made up not only of concrete and tangible objects, but also of the panorama of the sights and sounds of daily life, of things so small and apparently insignificant that they are not recorded in history or poetry, biography or other serious literature.

This brings us to the question, What is Folklore?. Various interpretations have been given to the term 'folklore' since it was first coined by W.J. Thoms in 1846, and its scope as a science has gradually evolved and expanded into 'a proper study of Mankind'. As Sean O'Suilleabhain wrote in 1942: 'It was the general opinion until recent years that fairy tales and superstitions formed the main, if not the only, material to be collected from oral sources. Developments in these latter years, especially in the Scandinavian and Baltic countries, have, however, opened up wider vistas, with the result that Folklore is now accepted as being concerned with the lore of Man and of all his numerous activities: accounts of the houses people lived in, the dress they wore, the food they ate, their social dealings with one another, their education and religious life, their festivals and amusements, births, marriages and death, together with beliefs in the afterworld, as well as innumerable other facets of human life, have been brought within the sphere of Folklore'.¹

Some of the definitions enunciated by the pioneering scholars are worth recalling, though they fall short of the present-day concept of the

¹ S. O'SUILLEABHAIN, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*. Folklore of Ireland Society, 1942. Introduction, p. xi.

science of folklore. For instance, that by the famous scholar J.G. Frazer: 'In the broadest sense of the word, folklore may be said to embrace the whole body of a people's traditions, beliefs and customs in so far as these things appear to be due to the collective action of the multitude and cannot be traced to the individual action of great men'. Equally striking, in respect of the content of Folklore, was the definition put forward by the great Sicilian scholar Giuseppe Pitré: *Fiabe e favole, racconti e leggende, proverbi e motti, canti e melodie, enigmi e indovinelli, giochi e passatempi, giocattoli e balocchi, spettacoli e feste, usi e costumi, riti e cerimonie, pratiche, credenze, superstizioni e ubbie, tutto un mondo palese e occulto, di realtà e d'immaginazione, si muove, si agita, sorride, geme a chi sa accostarvisi e comprenderlo.*

It is to Pitré's credit that he was the first to extend the realm of folklore to all the manifestations of popular life. Commenting on Pitré's inaugural lecture on the subject in the University of Palermo on January 12, 1911, Giuseppe Bonomo very aptly quotes the following definition which appeared in 1894 in the preface to the 'Bibliografia delle tradizioni popolari d'Italia': *Il folklore abbraccia la vita fisica e 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 campava la vita sulla terra e sul mare, in città e in campagna, sui monti e nelle miniere.*²

Like other disciplines, history in particular, the term Folklore has a twofold acceptation, designating both the material and the science which attempts to study the material. Its scope, as defined by Krappe,³ is 'to reconstruct a spiritual history of Man, not as exemplified by the outstanding works of poets and thinkers, but as represented by the more or less inarticulate voices of the "folk"'.

Especially revealing and cogent are the following extracts from K.M. Briggs' *A Tentative Essay*⁴ which appeared in 1962: 'What constitutes Folklore as a study? What are the objects towards which it is directed?

² G. PITRÉ, *Che cos'è il folklore*. Introduzione e commento di Giuseppe Bonomo. Palermo, S.F. Flaccovio Editore, 1965, p.60.

³ A.H. KRAPPE, *The Science of Folklore*. London, Methuen, 1930. Introduction. p. xv.

⁴ Vide 'Folklore', Vol. 73, Autumn 1962, pp.145-148.

What human activities are legitimately to be included in its scope? How is it to be differentiated from Ethnology? Anthropology? Folk-Life Study? What place has literature and the written word in it? Does the term 'Folk' imply or insist on, a class distinction? All these questions have been very much debated lately, in America and on the Continent as well as in England, where the inception of the new Folk-Life Society has perhaps given special impetus to the question. The conclusions reached by different types and nationalities of folklorists are very various, but on the whole 'tradition' is felt to be the operative word... The meaning of 'Folk' is a good deal debated. One school of thought limits the term to people at a certain state of culture, and more specifically to small groups in a modern society cut off by some limitation from the civilisation that surrounds them... It does not follow, however, that folklore is absent from even the most complex civilisations. It is to be found wherever men pass rumours, tales, jokes and scurrilous rhymes from mouth to mouth and shape them into a form which is recognisable as traditional. It is to be found wherever there are superstitions about good and bad luck, and beliefs, often more implicit than explicit, about Fate and Fortune. The difficulty about checking tradition in these communities is that it is always being sophisticated by the written word, and in modern times by the gramophone, broadcasting and television, so that it is, not easy to be sure of it... For this reason the stuff collected and observed in the more complex civilizations needs to be continually checked by comparison with smaller and more restricted groups, the 'Folk' in the technical sense...' The same writer sums up the whole problem in these words: 'My contention is that any class of people, lettered or unlettered, may be a carrier of folklore; literature, theology, history may contribute materials and cannot be neglected by the folklorist, but the matter of folklore itself deals with oral tradition, stuff that has been shaped to anonymity by many after unconscious omissions and embroideries. We are collecting not a cut stone, but a water-rounded pebble'.

I stated earlier that many of us have the basic knowledge necessary for beginning the work of investigating Maltese Folklore. In modern times much of the collecting of oral material is done by mechanical means. But there is still room for much non-mechanical recording and perhaps the few simple rules enunciated by M.A. Murray⁵ in her Presidential Address delivered before the Folklore Society on March 10th, 1954,

⁵ M.A. MURRAY, *England as a Field for Folklore Research*. In 'Folk-Lore', Vol. LXV, April, 1954, p.8.

may be usefully reproduced here:

(i) In copying from a book, check every word and even the spelling. Always add the full name of the author, full title of the book, number of volume, page number, place and date of publication, and, (where necessary) number of the edition.

(ii) If the information is given to you by word of mouth, take notes if possible during the recital. In any case write down what you have heard within twenty-four hours; and either read to your informant what you have written or send him a copy for verification. *Do not trust your memory.*

(iii) If you are recording your own experiences, take notes if you can. In any case write the record within a week, preferably within twenty-four hours.

(iv) Let your record state only the facts; comments or suggestions are not needed. If you find your memory confused, e.g. as to the sequence of events in a ceremony, do not hide the fact in your record, say so plainly.

(v) In short the two qualifications required in a collector are accuracy and honesty. A desirable quality is brevity in the record; picturesque writing is unnecessary.

In addition, the following guide-rules selected from the 'Instructions to Collectors' recommended by the Irish Folklore Commission⁶ should be followed as closely as possible:

7. Record the information in the exact words of the speaker, if possible. Make no 'corrections' or changes...

11. The collector should state clearly... the name, age and full address of the person from whom he recorded the information. It is most important that the source of each piece of information be given correctly...

13. In describing an unusual implement, vessel, house, etc. a well-drawn sketch, with measurements, or a photograph would add greatly to the value of the account. Similarly, a map showing the position of a particular house, holy well, field-monument or other object mentioned in the course of an account should, if possible, be given.

14. If a custom or belief mentioned in a collection is no longer ob-

⁶ S.O'SULILEABHAIN, *op. cit.*, pp. xii-xiii.

served, that fact should be stated. The approximate date of the decay of a custom or belief should, if possible, be given.

The would-be investigator must always bear in mind that his informants are individual men and women and not mere repositories of ancient lore. Nor must he forget that, in essence, we want to study what is in the minds and hearts of men and when the right type of person has been chosen for interview, it is well to remember that indirect approach to the subject often yields more information than a direct question apt to arouse the suspicion of a reticent and diffident informant. In many cases, friends residing in the town or village where information is sought may help in directing one to the right person and in persuading him to reveal the secrets of his mind. There are very few people living in Malta who are not tradition-bearers to some extent; even city and town-born individuals possess traditional information concerning the ways and doings of those about them. As R.U. Sayce says in his paper *Folk-Lore, Folk-Life, Ethnology*⁷ 'there need be no distinction of class, occupation or locality. We can find matters to interest us in the remotest valley or island, and the crowded streets and work places of our cities, among craftsmen, boxers, cricket players, business people and race-goers'.

The collector should stand on his guard against unsuspected learned or foreign influences, such as vernacular publications of foreign stories, printed religious books, early newspapers, or the emigrant returning from abroad. With all this in mind, we must go amongst the people we want to study, hoping to be accepted as friends, for it is only then that we can hope to do good work. The greatest difficulty, of course, lies in persuading the would-be narrator to impart to his questioner the national heritage of lore and tradition. In this connection I quote from G.W. Dasent's *Popular Tales from the Norse* (1859) as reproduced by Max Muller in *Chips from a German Workshop* (1898): 'It is hard to make old and feeble women, who generally are the depositories of the national treasures, believe that the inquiries can have any real interest. They fear that the question is only put to them to turn them into ridicule, for the popular mind is a sensitive plant, and, when once shut, it is hard to make those aged lips reveal the secrets of the memory. There they remain, however, forming part of an undercurrent of tradition, of which the educated classes, through whose mind flows the bright upper current of faith, are apt to forget the very existence. Things out of sight, and therefore out of mind'.

⁷ Vide 'Folk-Lore', Vol. LXVII, June 1956, p. 75.

It is still and will always be essential for the collector to establish friendly relations with his informants. Maud Karpeles and Arnold Baké have this to say by way of general advice in their *Manual for Folk-Music Collectors*, prepared at the request of the International Folk Music Council in 1951: 'It is, of course, essential that the collector should not show, or indeed, feel any superiority over his informant. Ilmari Krohn, the Nestor among Finnish folklorists, has written: 'To make people sing, one must not act from above as a representative of erudition, but as one who himself enjoys singing simple songs and is delighted to chat about things belonging to the interest of the country people.'

'One of the first lessons the collector has to learn is patience. The peasant or countryman is more leisurely than the townsman, and the collector must adjust his own pace to that of his informant. Suspicion, embarrassment and fear of ridicule have usually to be overcome before the countryman will be ready to display his art, and on a first visit it is generally advisable not to speak of one's mission straight away, but to talk of general matters and generally lead the conversation round to the songs or dances. It is, of course, important to convince your informant that you have a real love of the subject and if at the same time you can show that you have a knowledge of it he will be far more ready to impart information. For instance, a good way of obtaining songs is to sing yourself and to offer to exchange songs... It is, of course, almost essential that one should be able to speak to the informant in the language of his country, as otherwise it will be difficult to establish intimate relations with him.'

Earlier on we mentioned the importance of a comparative approach in the study of Maltese folklore. Comparative study, however, calls for a good deal of preparation in a cultural sense, and for critical acumen. R. Pettazzoni touched on this point in his inaugural speech at the First Congress of Popular Traditions held in Florence in May, 1929, and said: *Tutti possono dare opera a raccogliere documenti, registrare notizie, mettere insieme collezioni, ordinare musei. Più difficile è penetrare il senso di un'antica usanza, di una leggenda, di una superstizione, rintracciarne la provenienza, ricostruirne lo svolgimento. Tutto ciò si può fare soltanto col metodo comparativo veramente applicato.*⁸ However, comparison with customs and traditions found among distant peoples or

⁸ *Atti del I Congresso Nazionale delle Tradizioni Popolari* (1929), Firenze, 1930, p. 8. Quoted by P. TOSCHI in *Guida allo studio delle tradizioni popolari*, 2 edizione riveduta. Roma, Edizioni Italiane, 1945, p. 91.

in countries with which no historical or cultural connection can be traced may do more harm than good. Hence the need of repeating here the word of caution included by Professor P. Toschi in his *Guida allo Studio delle Tradizioni Popolari* (2a ediz. 1945, p. 91): '*... la comparazione, se fatta a casaccio, incompleta e non metodica, è più dannosa che utile... Pertanto nelle opere di raccolta e di descrizione, astenersi dal tentativo o meglio dalla tentazione dei confronti è criterio saggissimo e non mai abbastanza raccomandato. Preoccuparsi, dunque, di esporre ordinatamente e compiutamente: a comparare si provvederà in altra sede*'.

Much remains to be done before a satisfactory climate can be created for the scientific study of Maltese Folklore. No organised efforts were made in the past to collect the traditions of the people of Malta. Sporadic collections by foreign scholars or by Maltese individual enthusiasts left the main body of local lore still ungarnered. Some signs of an awakening in recent years have not made any significant contribution to the study of the subject. Neither the Malta Folklore Society established in 1964 nor the *Moviment Folkloristiku Malti* founded in 1968 have undertaken any real folklore collection so far. No suitable collectors have been found, and as these societies are not endowed they are not in a position to issue regularly a journal as a vehicle for the publication of papers on folklore, with book reviews, and so on. The only venture of this kind, the *Maltese Folklore Review*, is a private one undertaken by the present writer but, owing to lack of financial support, the journal cannot be published regularly and only three numbers have appeared since 1962. Library facilities, though improving, are still inadequate. No *ad hoc* library, constantly kept up to date, exists in Malta, though some useful material is scattered about in the three main libraries, i.e. the Royal Malta Library, the National Museum Library and the Royal University Library. The holdings of the University Library may well form the nucleus of any future special collection in this field. The opening of a Folk-Museum, at Imdina, which was announced in the Government's Second Five-Year Plan (1964-1969) has failed to materialise and seems to be a long way off yet. The importance of establishing a folk-museum on the lines developed in other countries cannot be over-emphasized, especially if it is associated in some way or other with the Royal University of Malta on a basis of cooperation. It would not only help to safeguard and to present to the public some aspects of the cultural history of our country but also to complete the pattern of research and study and at the same time constitute the end-product for much of the work of the Dialect Survey which is being carried out jointly by the Department of Semitic Studies of the

University of Leeds and the Department of Maltese and Oriental Languages of the Royal University of Malta.

Let us now consider the importance of Maltese Folklore in its relations to other branches of knowledge, with special reference to local History, Language and Literature. The majority of historians have concerned themselves more with the chronological, politico-ecclesiastical account of events, the petty quarrels between Grand Masters, politicians, bishops and inquisitors, the erection of monasteries and public buildings, than they have with the inner life of the people with their domestic worries, their traditional callings, food and dress, their popular pastimes, beliefs, sayings and usages, or the manner in which they reacted to such national calamities as Moslem raids and drudgery at the Turkish oar. Small wonder, therefore, that this gap in the study of Maltese History, after the lapse of so many centuries, can only be partially filled by the traditional lore that has come down to us from generation to generation. In this sense, folklore fills in the blanks of history. Traditions, legends, and popular sayings reflect the influence of historical events on the popular mind. Basic facts are sometimes twisted out of recognition in the process of folk-transmission, but there always remains the kernel of the original historic fact. And even so, a saying or a simple folk-song sometimes tells us more of human suffering and endurance than the official books of history.

To the science of Linguistics, folklore may likewise prove an invaluable help. It provides a home to words and expressions which no longer form part of the everyday speech of the people – archaic or obsolescent words and sayings of interest to the grammarian in search of original features of Maltese grammar. This is especially so in the case of proverbs, which embody 'the wit of one and the wisdom of many'. From a purely literary point of view, the texts of oral or narrative folklore can be subjected to the same critical standards applied to other literary productions. As A.H. Krappe⁹ says: 'I conceive of folk-tales and folk-songs as purely literary manifestations of the popular genius, acting under the same impulses as the productive mind of literary men, scholars and artists. The two differ only in much the same things in which different literary schools are apt to be at variance, that is, in questions of taste and methods of technique. This being the case, I make bold to claim that productions of the popular mind demand and deserve the same standards of criticism'.

⁹ A.H. KRAPPE, *op. cit.*, Preface, p. x.

There is at present a growing appreciation and recognition of folklore as a subject for academic attention. Nearby Sicily was the first country in Europe to set up, in 1911, a Chair of *Demopsicologia* which was held by the distinguished scholar Pitré at the invitation of the University authorities of Palermo; folklore studies have since spread to the Universities of Catania, Rome, Bari and other places of learning in Italy. In Great Britain recognition came late and it is significant that the Anglo-American Conference held at Ditchley Park, Oxfordshire, in September, 1969, agreed that the following resolution¹⁰ should be sent to all Vice-Chancellors of Universities in Great Britain, and to certain newspapers and individuals:

'We, the members of the Conference on Anglo-American Folklore, held at Ditchley Park (September 9 to 12, 1969), wish to draw public attention to the unfortunate neglect in the British educational system of Folklore as a serious academic subject. Folklore is often regarded as a matter of fun and frivolity, because of the ambiguous use of the term 'folklore', a word coined by the English antiquary William John Thoms in 1846 to designate a new branch of learning. Properly, Folklore is one of the humanities and social sciences, related to anthropology, literature, history, psychology, and human geography, but with its own methods, goals and scholarship.

'Chairs of Folklore, research institutes, undergraduate courses, and doctoral programmes exist throughout Europe and have in recent years become established in the United States at the Universities of Indiana, Pennsylvania, California, Texas, Harvard and elsewhere. Except at Leeds, nothing comparable exists in England. Yet throughout the nineteenth century English antiquaries, men of letters and private scholars made the study and collection of folklore one of the highest achievements of the Victorian era.

'The function of the folklorist is to understand the ways of man. Folklore reflects not merely ideas of the past, but also the tensions, anxieties, laughter and preoccupations of the present. Anyone who wishes to understand the behaviour of ethnic and social groups must acquaint himself with their traditions. The materials of folklore should be collected, classified, studied, and made generally available. University students should be given the opportunity to learn about this portion of their intellectual inheritance. We earnestly request that University Faculties

¹⁰ V. NEWALL, *The Anglo-American Folklore Conference at Ditchley Park, Oxfordshire, 9-12 September, 1969*. In 'Folklore', Vol. 80, Winter 1969, pp. 270-271.

introduce Courses in Folklore into their curricula.'

A similar plea may be made for Maltese Folklore. Material for study and research is not lacking and the right climate for initiating such studies exists, for the necessary groundwork has already been done under the aegis of the Department of Maltese of the Royal University of Malta. Apart from the intimate relationship existing between Language and Folklore it is natural that, following the investigation of certain folk-crafts undertaken as part of the Dialect Survey we have mentioned, academic interest should spread to include as suitable subjects for a university curriculum, besides the dialect forms and technical nomenclature used by the folk, their ancient customs and usages inherited as part of their Mediterranean heritage, the songs they sang, the tales they told, the food they ate, the clothes they wore, and the beliefs they held.

The present tourist and development drive has generated a superficial, or rather commercial interest in the more showy aspects of Maltese folk-life. Such tendency, if allowed to go on unchecked, may lead to a partial presentation of the subject in the popular press and eventually produce a slanted image both in Malta and abroad. This is another reason why a scholarly attitude towards folklore should be encouraged. Other countries, much bigger and more highly developed than Malta, have passed through the same experience. As Professor Dorson says in his survey of *The American Folklore Scene, 1963*: 'At the same time that the academic support for teaching and research in folklore has grown, popular interest in the entertainment and performance aspects of folklore has steadily mounted... The teaching and study of folklore should adhere to the same high standards that regulate the established fields of learning among the humanities and the social sciences... One may marvel at the vigour and dedication that enabled the great founders of the Folklore Society, Lang and Gomme and Hartland and Clodd and Nutt, to achieve their prodigious output as private scholars while gaining their livelihoods in law, banking, publishing, journalism and civil service, but folklore scholars of this hardy breed could never persevere in contemporary America... The hope for scholarly attitudes towards folklore, and for general recognition of folklore as a field of scholarship, rests with the universities...'¹¹

I hope I have made it abundantly clear that the time is ripe for a more general appreciation of the value of folklore studies in Malta. It may not be out of place here to borrow the words of the late M.A. Murray, herself an enthusiastic advocate of the need of folklore research in Malta, which

¹¹ Vide 'Folklore', Vol. 74, Autumn 1963, pp. 433-434.

are admirable suited as a conclusion to this introductory survey. 'Folklore', she says, 'when scientifically studied, is found to be closely connected with all forms of human endeavour, and especially with the development of the mind of Man in its religious and spiritual aspects, and the changes which occur as the background of life changes. These changes in the background of daily life are preserved in Folklore. And if we are to 'look to the rock whence we are hewn and the hole of the pit whence we are digged' the importance of the study of Folklore is at once manifest. Folklore has hitherto been the Cinderella of all research subjects, but with the accurate methods of recording and the scientific use of the records, Folklore is no longer a dilettanti subject but is recognised as an important method of understanding the human mind and its variations. For, as we all know, 'the proper study of mankind is Man'.¹²

¹² M. A. MURRAY, *op. cit.*, p. 9.