

# REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE OLD MALTESE FOLK BELIEF IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF A PERSON INTO A GAWGAW GHOST ON CHRISTMAS EVE

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THE Maltese scholar Joseph Cassar-Pullicino mentioned in his recent 'Studies in Maltese Folklore' (1976, 225) a belief, that persons who were born on Christmas eve were doomed to be transformed once a year on this day, while they were asleep, into a ghost called 'Gawgaw'. In this form they wandered about frightening people with their groanings.

Similar beliefs were recorded in other islands like Sicily, and in particular Chios (Cassar-Pullicino 1976, 226). It should be interesting to investigate whether they are also known in the Italian and Greek mainlands. However during its history Malta had also close cultural ties with the Arab world. Although the political domination of the Arabs had already come to an end by the beginning of the eleventh century, Moslem domestic slaves have obviously played an important role for the survival of eastern concepts during the following centuries (Cassar 1976).\* When I was reading about this strange Maltese folk beliefs there came to my mind some noteworthy customs and imaginings from Arab and North European folklore which I should like to point out in the present paper.

## THE NAME 'GAWGAW'

In all North African countries one can find to this day dark-skinned minorities representing the descendants of slaves. In Tunisia they are called 'Sudanis'. This does not mean that their ancestors were brought from an area corresponding to the present Democratic Republic of the Sudan, but it only indicates their origin from any country of the 'Sudan-belt' including also Tchad, Hausa-countries, Niger, Mali etc.

In 1976 I met in Zarzis, in Southern Tunisia, a folklore group of these Sudanis, which is now performing almost every day for organized short-visits of tourists arriving from the island of Djerba. Most of the foreigners do not understand much about their interes-

\* Cassar-Pullicino 1976, 44-47.

ting cultural background which is a mixture of pagan and islamic elements. The black folk artists of Zarzis called themselves 'firqa al gougou (فرقة الجوجو) or Gougou-group. They were not able to explain the meaning of this name, but claimed that it should be a 'Sudani-word'.

I do not know whether the word 'Gawgaw' has got any meaning in the Maltese language. It is certainly not a common word, because it is not mentioned in the Maltese-English Dictionary by Busuttil (1971). A word resembling 'Gawgaw' is not found in Classic Arabic, but it exists in the vernacular Arabic of the Sudan:

جَوَّجُو = جبن و خام و أنظر

Gawgaw = coward or mean fellow – rude man – trouble-maker (Owen al Sharif Qasim 1972, 141). With this meaning the word should be an explanatory name for a ghost frightening other people.

In addition there are two Sudanese 'Zar spirits' with similar names: Gougi (جوجى) and Nas gougou (ناس جوجو). The latter is actually a collective name meaning Gougou people. Zar ceremonies are held among the Sudan-Arabs for people – mainly women – suffering from depression, hysterical diseases or sometimes also chronic diseases with continuous pain. If all efforts to treat them with drugs or to change their environment failed, somebody may convince them that they are possessed by spirits. If one can make a pact with such a spirit, he may give temporary relief to the patient. The two above-mentioned spirits are considered to belong to 'savage pagan tribes'. In a performance for the sake of 'Gougi', who is supposed to be a 'sahhar (man-eater and wizard), I saw some years ago a woman wearing a skin belt with claws of sheep hanging down from it. This was the dress required for a ritual dance in his honour. None of the great Sudanese tribes is called 'Gougou', but I do not know whether any less known sub-tribe could have such a name.

On the other hand I can also think of another explanation. In the area of Kafiya Kingi in Southern Darfur close to the intermittent stream 'Bahr el Arab' I saw recently that the villagers store millet (Sorghum and Pennisetum sp.) and other grain crops like 'telbun' (Eleusine coracana) and sesame in little huts of clay or fencing material which are put on a platform. In the language of the Kreish these stores are called 'Gougou'. The territory of the Kreish extends to Bahr el Ghazal Province and as they form an important tribe their neighbours may share with them a certain terminology (cf. also Torhill 1948, 286). Thus 'Nas gougou' could be understood as people building this particular type of grain store. The

Kreish and other tribes of this area are now professing Islam but their economy is still mainly based on fishing, hunting of small animals and collecting the honey of wild bees.

#### FRIGHTENING DURING A PEACEFUL, HOLY NIGHT:

There is a tale ('Sage') about a cruel German knights who every year on a certain day forced one of his farmers to give him his best cow in order to feed his hunting dogs. Then he hunted even on holy Sundays. After his death God punished him by turning him into a wild ghost hunter roaming through the air with his dogs and frightening the people of his village not only on the particular day when he used to demand the cow but also during the 'twelve nights' between Christmas eve and the New Year (Burdé-Schneidewind 1969, 71 No. 88).

In the Scandinavian countries people believe in frightening riding shosts of a similar type appearing just during Christmas time and 'fodder for horses' is hung over to doors and windows as a traditional decoration. In Norway and Northern Sweden these ghosts are called 'oskoreidi' or 'jolaskreidi' (von Sydow 1935, 115). 'Oske' or 'Oski' is a surname for the ancient northern god Odin (Rydberg 1927, 316) who is supposed to guide this troop of hunters. 'Jola' refers to 'Jul', the Scandinavian name for the winter solstice and for Christmas. Those wild hunters of the sky are, according to von Sydow, a personification of the dreadful winter tempests, whereas the 'jolaskreidi' are also imagined as dead members of the family returning in this shape to their homes at Christmas with bad intentions to disturb the celebrations by fright and to spoil the food, in particular the specially brewed 'juleøllet' (Christmas beer).

Neither Christianity nor Islam have been able to suppress completely such ancient pagan traditions. In Muslim countries the most holy time of the year is the fasting month: Ramadan. In the nights of Ramadan the Sudanis of Tunisia used to perform frenetic masque dances called Bou Saadia (برسعدية), which were frightening for many women and children (Ben Abdallah 1970). On this occasion they danced in the streets with skin masques covering their faces and hoods decorated with cowries and mirrors, sometimes also with the head of a bird. They were dressed only with an apron of fur or a belt decorated with animal tails and while singing and whirling round they accompanied themselves with brass instruments resembling great castanets which they moved in both hands. Usually one of their friends would accompany them, beating a drum and collecting money from those who watched. The

Tunisians considered this mainly as a kind of savage rite and mendicancy. However, the Sudanis are Moslems, too, and some of them can relate about the origin of their Bou Saadia dances and try to give them a religious meaning (Jahn: to be published). In addition Tunisians knew also the so called 'ghula Ramadan' ( غولة رمضان ) or Ramadan ogre, a man who completely disguised under his garment and danced with a long stick which had a terrifying ugly head on top (Sadiq Er Rezqi 1967, 411). Even in the capital some Sudanis may still be invited to a private house to dance for a Ramadan party, but folk-life in the streets has died out.

#### NEW VARIANT OF THE BELIEF IN 'ALTER EGO'?

A transformation of a person during his sleep can either be imagined as a perfect transformation from man into ghost in which the sleeper disappears, or only as a temporary migration of his soul. The beliefs in the so called 'Alter Ego' or 'Second Self' leaving the body of a sleeping person in the shape of an animal, black smoke, blue haze, a shadow or a ghost were found in Europe, Asia and Africa (Lixfeld 1972, 81, 89). The Alter Ego returns after some time and if the human being awakens he may remember what happened during its absence or he may not. The details given in the Maltese tale do not allow one to decide how the transformation of a person born on december 24 took place.

In Central and Northern Sudan and among Tschad-Arabs beliefs in an Alter Ego are restricted to twins. While a twin seems to be asleep a cat (or in the Tchad an animal of undefined nature) is sneaking in the houses of the neighbours. Some relate that it knocks down their household utensils and even breaks their plates or glassware. If the animal is not blamed and punished for this it will not snatch any of their food like fish and meat, because these are 'good people'. In the Tchad a 'good mother' discovered by this test is later blessed with children. In houses of bad people the animals may both destroy things, make noises and take away food. However it is very dangerous for twins in this shape to be hurt or killed. The human body will suffer at the same moment the same harm. It is also dangerous to awake a twin by force because one is never sure whether the 'Alter Ego' has already returned or not.

The Nubians in the Northern Sudan have some magic practices to prevent the dangerous transformation of their twin children. One of them requires an old woman to hold a *doka* ( دكة ) or baking plate of burnt clay or nowadays of iron for some minutes over

such a child when it is new-born. Some relate that she may also place a black *burma* ( برمة ), a cooking pot of burnt clay over the new-born. Probably this is some kind of a symbolic rite referring to a 'rebirth' and the clay vessel might be understood in this process as a second womb (Jahn: to be published).

#### THE SYMBOLISM OF THE SIEVE:

According to the Maltese belief the transformation of a person into a Gawgaw ghost on Christmas eve is God's punishment, because he does not approve the birth of mortals on the same day when Jesus Christ was born. The remedy against this transformation consisted in inducing the sufferer to sit up all night and to count the holes of a sieve from eleven o'clock at night to the following Christmas morning (Cassar-Pullicino 1976, 226).

The 'counting' of the holes is certainly an activity which needs much concentration and therefore prevents the victim from falling asleep. In a religious tale of this kind one would have expected that he should count prayers or blessings he is reciting by the aid of a rosary, but instead of this he is given a 'sieve'.

The sieve had already acquired a meaning in birth rites in pharaonic Egypt. In the temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri a scene shows the gods determining the duration of the new-born royal infant's life. Anubis is represented trundling a sieve (Blackman 1927, 287). If the Fellahin women of Upper Egypt are about to give birth they either sit on a special chair or squat on the ground and they press their arms on a large winnowing sieve standing on its side (Blackman 63, Fig. 29). On the seventh night after birth they let the child asleep in such a sieve put on a basket which is filled with different types of grain. On the next day the midwife tosses and shakes the baby several times in the sieve together with some of these grains (Blackman 1927, 77).

On the Sibou' ( سبع ) or seventh day celebration, when the child is named, tradition-minded people in villages and towns of Lower Egypt still lay the child in a sieve on a piece of cloth. In rural areas the sieve is made of thin strips of leather from the skin of an ass which is known to last for an extremely long time. In a similar manner Allah may grant a long life to the new-born child. The midwife then shakes the child seven times in the sieve. After that she puts it in front of the mother who has to step seven times over it, unless she chooses to step seven times over an incense burner (Osman Khairat 1969, 21). Among Bedouin tribes in the eastern Sinai like the Tamilat and Hatim the sieve is covered with a rag and serves as a cradle for 40 days (Osman Khairat

p. 26). In the Oasis Kharga a person who seems to have a constant destination for happiness is called 'mugharbal' ( مـغـرـبـال ), which is a derivation from the word 'ghurbal' ( غـرـبـال ) = sieve, and refers to a baby placed at the sibou'-ceremony in a sieve with blessings for happiness during all his life (Osman Khairat p. 27).

The Egyptian sieve traditions migrated also in a western direction, but in the Maghreb countries the present interpretation sounds doubtful. In Tunis people say that the midwife lays the baby-boy at the seventh day celebration in a sieve in order 'to become a farmer' and the girl 'may get married to a farmer' (Alia Bayram 1971, 15).

Westermarck (1926, 250, 390) thought that the sieve in the Moroccan rites on the seventh day is taken as an 'instrument of purification'. It is either shaken over the head of the child or used as a tray for a bowl of water, henna and a boiled egg and the midwife puts the child over it.

In conclusion it seems to me that the sieve which, according to Maltese folk belief, was used to prevent the dreadful transformation of a person born on December 24 into a *Gawgaw* ghost was more than a mere 'tool for counting'; it was probably an instrument of protection and blessing for an unfortunate victim on his critical 'birthday'.

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