MALTESE CHILDREN’S RHYMES
AND POETRY
by J. Cassar Pullicino

The songs and ditties falling under the heading ‘Children’s Rhymes’ immediately conjure up recollections of our earliest existence and childhood activities, of games and emotions long since forgotten. I have used the wider term ‘Children’s Rhymes’, and not ‘Nursery Rhymes’ on purpose, for apart from those verses which are traditionally passed on by adults to a child while it is still of nursery age, there is another kind of verse lore passing between children beyond the age of six when out of sight of their parents or at play that in a very real sense also belongs to children.

Let us make this distinction clear. In defining the scope of their encyclopaedic work on Nursery Rhymes, Iona and Peter Opie write as follows: ‘As well as the nonsense jingles, humorous songs and character rhymes, it includes the more common lullabies, infant amusements, nursery counting-out formulas, baby puzzles and riddles, rhyming alphabets, tongue twisters, nursery prayers and a few singing games the words of which have an independent existence in the nursery…’1 Extending their field of study beyond the nursery the same writers stress that ‘the scraps of lore which children learn from each other are at once more real, more immediately serviceable, and more vastly entertaining to them than anything which they learn from grown-ups’. More importantly, these well known authorities on the subject state: ‘Such a verse… can be as traditional and as well known to children as a nursery rhyme; yet no one would mistake it for one of Mother Goose’s compositions. It is not merely that there is a difference in cadence and subject-matter, the manner of its transmission is different. While a nursery rhyme passes from a mother or other adult to the small child on her knee, the school rhyme circulates simply from child to child, usually outside the home, and beyond the influence of the family circle. By its nature a nursery rhyme is a jingle preserved and propagated not by children but by adults, and in this sense it is an ‘adult’ rhyme. It is a rhyme which is adult approved. The schoolchild’s verses are not intended for adult ears.’2
How do Maltese children fare in this tiny branch of traditional lore? To what extent do they share this universal experience and delight in apparently trivial verses that nevertheless endure for generations whereas newer compositions become dated and forgotten? There is a considerable Maltese material which can be grouped under the heading *Children's Rhymes*, whether of the nursery type or not. A few texts, tentatively recorded in 1904 by H. Stumme and by some local writers in the early years of this century, were expanded by the present writer in 1948 into a modest collection which has since doubled in size and awaits publication. The material is therefore available, and to a certain extent we may say that our young have definitely not lost the power of entertaining themselves and that they still cherish this part of their traditional lore. But a very real danger has reared its ugly head amongst us. Owing to social pressures and to a mistaken sense of prestige values equating higher status with 'Englishness' in speech and manners, many Maltese parents generally tend to discard the words and jingles in which they were themselves brought up in favour of English rhymes that are in reality alien to the Maltese tradition. Matters are not made any better in the schools, where Maltese rhymes do not figure in the organized play activities of the pupils. As verses learnt in early childhood are not usually passed on again until the little listeners have grown up, and have children of their own, what may well happen is a complete break in the process of transmission which, in some thirty years time, might result in the disappearance of a good part of our traditional nursery lore, and consequently in the loss or distortion of our national identity.

Nursery rhymes everywhere serve to measure the child's progress as regards ability to talk and repeat what it hears. For it is by dint of repetition and imitation that the child is ushered into its new world of aural and oral adventures expressed in simple rhyme and doggerel. The child experiences its first journey on its father's knee as it is rocked to and fro to the accompaniment of a special rhyme:

*Banni bannozzi,*  
*Gej it-tata ġej*  
*Bil-pastizzi u bil-babbtejn,*  
*Kollox ġhal…* (child's name)  
*W ġhal…, xejn.*

(Tarxien)

Our children's delight in this jingling sort of rhyme has its close counterpart in Sicily, where the first line of the verse bears an uncanny resemblance to the Maltese version:
Far away to the North and a thousand miles away from Malta, English babies receive a similar exhortation:

Clap hands! Clap hands!
Till daddy comes home;
Daddy's got money
And mammy's got none. 6

Lullabies or cradle songs also form part of nursery lore. Up to some years ago a traditional lullaby in Maltese survived in these islands, running into some sixteen stanzas of which, however, only two or three were well-known. It was first collected by L. Bonelli and published in 1895. 7 It is an exquisite piece of popular composition, rich in imagery and poetic feeling, opening with the following lines:

Orqod, ibni, orqod
Fil-bennien a tal-harir... Laam!
Sleep, sleep, little child
In the cradle made of silk...
Sleep!

Dik ommok il-Madonna,
Missierek Gesù Bambin... Laaam!
The Holy Virgin is thy Mother,
And the Child Jesus is thy father... Go to sleep!

Apart from the opening and closing stanzas, the lullaby may be sub-divided into three main parts i.e. (a) a dialogue between Mother and Child, (b) aspects of the Holy Family's life during the Flight into Egypt, and (c) an invocation to angels, saints, etc. to induce the child to sleep. The identification of the child and its parents with the Holy Family lies at the basis of this popular composition. This motif has been current among Christian mothers since the early years of Christianity and the opening words of the song (Orqod, ibni, orqod) link up in wording and spirit with the lullaby, dating probably from the twelfth century, which the Madonna herself is believed to have sung to the Baby Jesus, beginning with the line Dormi, fili, dormi (sleep, my son, sleep). 8

The dialogue between the Holy Mother and the Baby Jesus in the cradle compares in its delicacy of feeling and pathos with that exchanged between Mary and the crucified Christ in the composition by Jacopone da Todi (1240-1306) entitled Il Pianto della Vergine (The Virgin's Lament).
In the second part we have various scenes depicting the episode of the Holy Family’s rest during the journey to Egypt – the Mother swathes the Baby Jesus in his swaddling clothes, St. Joseph rocks him in the cradle and sings lullabies to him. Comparable folk material from Sicily shows the Madonna in the act of breast-feeding the Divine Son, Ss. Martha and Magdalen help her put up the cradle, while St. Joseph rocks the baby to sleep. These variants of a widespread European tradition that has evidently travelled as far South as Malta draw their inspiration from an episode of the Flight into Egypt which traditionally records a rest on the journey and is known in Christian art as Il Riposo. From the 16th century onwards it has attracted many artists with varying degrees of success (e.g. Lucio Massari).9

In the third part of the Maltese cradle song we read that, in addition to supernatural helpers such as the Madonna, St. Claire, St. Joachim and the Angels, the tired mother invokes sleep itself. Sleep is personified as a person coming from afar and wearied out with his exertions, or described as something which the mother could wrap up in a paper and carry home with her:

Li kont naʃ dak ngħasek fejnu
Kemm kont ni ġri mmur għalib!
Gewwa karta bajda nsorrux,
'L ibni ċkejkex ni gỉ nthix.

Ejja, naghsu, ejja,
Ejja mill-b'ghod, għajjien,
Biex traqqadli 'l ibni ċkejkex
Ħalli mimnu nistrieh jien.

If I knew where your sleep is hidden
I would make haste and fetch it,
Wrap it up in white paper
And give it to my little one.

Come, o sleep, come,
Come from afar, however wearied you are,
Make my little one sleep
That I may get some rest.

In Sicily, sleep is likewise conceived as a person wandering on his never-ending job. The mother asks him: ‘Where are you off to?’ And he replies: ‘I go to induce children to sleep, and I make them sleep three times a day – in the morning, at noon and in the evening’. Like the Maltese song, the Sicilian verse invokes sleep to come from afar, Sonnu, veni du luntaru or from the East, Suonnu, veni di Livanti (Noto) or from over the seas, Veni, suonnu, di lu mari (Monterosso)10

Naturally this lullaby stands in a class of its own and very few nursery rhymes reach up to its standard. Some rhymes, however, are quite serious in tone and content. One well-known stanza, in particular, reflects our people’s preoccupation with the lack of sufficient rain in Malta:
Incidentally, this presents a sharp contrast to the English nursery rhyme in which English children drive off rain far away to Spain:

Rain, rain, go to Spain,
Never show your face again.

or, according to another variant:

Rain, rain, go away,
Come again another day.\(^1\)

Much closer in feeling are the Sicilian lines

Chiovi, chiovi, chiovi
E la gatta fa l'ovi,
E lu surci si marita
Cu la coppula di sita, ecc.

(Termini)\(^2\)

Simple morning and night prayers also form part of Maltese nursery literature. The following night prayer heard in various villages up to some years ago is an example:

*Bambin ċkejken ċkejken*,
*Kollok xama' u libien*,
*Nirrikmanda ruħi 'l Alla*
*U l-bqija lil San Mikiel*.

Little, little Child (Jesus)
Surrounded with candles and incense
I recommend my soul to God
And everything else to St. Michael.

A number of rhymes exemplify popular composition as a direct result of the introduction of education. They are humorous verses employing mostly mnemonic devices for ABC instruction or for the teaching of the numerals in the Italian or the English language. The following lines were quite popular up to the last War:

(i) *ABC*

*L-iskutella bil-kafe;*
*Il-kikkra bil-plattina*
*U s-surmast ma jridx jaghtina.*

The bowl is full of coffee;
The cup and the saucer
And the teacher won't give us any.

(Tarxien)
(ii) One – ta’ Dun Ġwann,
     Two – tal-Gvernatur,
     Three – ta’ Mari,
     Four – ta’ Vitor,
     Five – wara x-xitwa jiġi s-sajj,
     Six – wara l-ghomma jiġi l-frisk,
     Seven – ta’ Buleben,
     Eight – tas-sur Gejt,
     Nine – ta’ Wied il-Ghajn,
     Ten – naghtik daqqa u nixhtek ‘l hemm

     (Bormla)

The inclusion of numerals in English in the last-mentioned rhyme presupposes earlier ones based on Maltese numerals. In fact in 1946 the late Luret Cutajar passed on to me the text of the following verse which was quite common at Zebbug in his boyhood days:

Žewġ imwejsiet
Tliet at-liet anġli,
Erba’ vaŋeliet,
Hamsa ħames pjagi,

Sitta quddisiet,
Sebgħa sagramenti,
Tmienja erweb,
Disgħa disa’ kori,
Għaxar kmandamenti,
Hdax-il appostlu,
Tnax-il artiklu

Tlettax-il benediktu
Erbax-il kelma
Li ħarġu minn fomm Alla nnifsu, uttered by God Himself.

However altered and incoherent, these lines form a link in the chain of a well known tradition known as The Twelve Words of Truth which is found widespread all over Italy and in various European and other countries. The Maltese version has no mention of
the first numeral \emph{wiehed}, 'One', which refers to God in extant European texts, and it is the only one running up to the number fourteen. Nevertheless, the text runs close enough to the versions from Sicily (Messina), Italy (Abruzzi, Cosenza, Basilicata), Portugal (prov. do Alemtejo) and Spain (Andalucia), which were published in 1882-1884, and in 1925-1932 to justify the general conclusion that the local composition follows the main current of the European tradition.\footnote{13}

One may add that A. Van Gennep gives a French rhyme containing, \emph{inter alia}, the following lines corresponding to the Maltese ones:

\begin{verbatim}
Un, est Dieu le Père...
Quatre, sont les quatre Evangelistes...
Dix, sont les dix commandements de Dieu...
\end{verbatim} \footnote{14}

R.M. Dawkins also mentions a Greek treatise by Anastasios Levides 'in the language spoken in Cappadocia' containing some mediaeval songs, among them 'a creed arranged by numbers: God is one; Second is the Virgin; Three is the Trinity; Four are the Gospels, and so on down to Twelve are the Apostles'.\footnote{15}

Schoolchildren react instinctively against any form of authority. Quite a few songs about teachers are being created all the time, showing the inventive powers of the schoolchild. The following are a few examples recollected from my early school life at Tarxien. I am sure readers can add substantially from memory to this kind of rhyme text:

\begin{verbatim}
Il-Miss Tanti, ddog q il-landi  Miss Tanti beats upon the tin vessels
Fuq il-bejt taz-ziju Ġanni. On the roof of Uncle John.
\end{verbatim}

The following quatrains, while describing the child's joy at the expectation of a holiday, reflects the folk's comment on the use of night caps by the schoolmaster and of forks and knives by the headmistress:

\begin{verbatim}
Ghada m'għandniex skola,
Is-surmastru bil-barjola;
Is-sinjora purċinella
Kemm taż tiekol bil-furketta!
\end{verbatim}

Tomorrow we won't go to school,
The schoolmaster has his nightcap on;
The headmistress looks like a clown
How well she can eat using the fork!

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The following is another example of schoolchild composition in this style:

*Calleja hobż a nejja,*
*Gibli s-siğġ u w ogħod ħdejjja;*
*Gibli l-pimna u l-kklamar*
*Ha n pang ilek rast a ħmar.*

Calleja – unbaked loaf,
Get a chair and sit beside me;
Get me pen and ink
And I’ll paint you an ass’s head.

The Opies assert that the child’s delight in the coincidence of sound is nowhere more apparent than in the pleasure he takes in tongue-twisters.16 A few Maltese examples are enough to illustrate this kind of rhyme that still shows signs of vitality and tends to endure for generations:

(i) *Qaʃas tal-qasab imdendel mas-saqa* (Tarxien and Birgu)
(ii) *Ħawha ħamra mhawla fil-ħamrija ħamra fil-ħawt ta’ Hal Għar-ġur* (Tarxien and Birgu)
(iii) *Xbin, għid lil xbiżtek li xbiżteg għandha tifla* (Birgu)
(iv) *Dari rari tara lira... tara lira tara rē* (Qormi)
(v) *Platt fuq platt, platt taħt platt* (Tarxien)
(vi) *Toni tani tina, talli tani tina tajtu tuta* (Tarxien)

The art of riddling, at one time indulged in by adults of all classes and looked upon as an accomplishment of royalty in biblical times, has nowadays survived mostly among children. A ‘true’ riddle is a composition in which some creature or object is described in an intentionally obscure manner, the solution fitting all the characteristics of the description in the question, and usually resolving a paradox.17 The following examples come to mind straightaway:

*A riddle:*
*Dejnem timxi rasha ’l isfel. ‘Always walks on its head.*
*(Birż ebbuġa) (Solution: A nail in your boot)*

*Me riddle, me riddle:*
*Aktar ma tiekol minnha The more you eat (take) from it*
*Aktar tikber. The bigger it gets.*
*(Tarxien) (Solution: a hole in the ground)*

The descriptions which the rhyming riddles give of their solutions are usually phrased highly imaginatively in terms of something else. Thus, a bed is seen as a person who gets tired at night and rests all day *(bil-żejl għajjiena/bi nhar mistrieħa)*; the sky is a basket full of pears (roses) which, when turned upside down, will not fall *(kamnestr u bil-luq as(mimli ward)/wiċċu ’l isfel ma jaqax)*; the clouds look like a bed sheet with patches but without any
threads (liż ar imraqqa'/mingħajr ponti u lanqas ħajti); the sea is thought of as an old grumbler and as a garden without trees or flowers (xib gemgumi/gnien bla sig ar lanqas jfuri/jagħmel raghwa bla sapun); an onion is likened to a pretty white-faced girl wearing a pink dress who will make you cry if you ill-treat her (libsti roż/a/wiċċi bajdani/indum inbikkik/sakemm iddum/timmirattani); a cabbage is thought of as made up of numerous carpets set on top of each other, each more beautiful than the one before it (iktar ma tnebbi tapiti/iktar issibbom sibb). Such images are perhaps the fittest introduction to poetry that a child can have.18

Other verses awaken the child’s sense of action and adventure. They may tell merely of some childish escapade:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I’ve got a tummy ache} & \quad \text{(Luqa)} \\
\text{Through eating unripe grapes;} & \\
\text{I hang to the vine trellis} & \\
\text{Like a sportsman’s dog.} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

One comes across the motif of trellis and grapes in various parts of Italy. A counting-out rhyme from Tuscany opens with the lines Sotto la pergola nasce l’uva/prima acerba e poi matura; the version from Abruzzo reads; sotto la pergola nasce l’uva/prima cerva e po’ matura; the Neapolitan corresponding verse is Tengo ’na prevula d’uva/meza acerva e mez’ammatura; in Sicily the word luna, ‘moon’ has substituted the word uva – a sure sign, according to Pittrè, that the rhyme was imported into Sicily from nearby Italy.19

Maltese children still recite the misadventures of the boy Ferdinand, who was baptized by the doctor to spite the priest:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{There was a little boy} & \quad \text{(Luqa, Tarxien)} \\
\text{Whose name was Ferdinand,} & \\
\text{The priest wouldn’t baptize him} & \\
\text{So the doctor baptized him} & \\
\text{To spite the priest;} & \\
\text{He went up on the roof} & \\
\text{And called the oil-seller;} & \\
\text{He went down to the cellar} & \\
\text{And began to shout like a monkey.} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

It is interesting to note how children have adapted this rhyme, substituting an international folk hero for the boy Ferdinand. In the early 30’s Charlie Chaplin had everywhere become one of the chief figures of the 20th century juvenile mythology, and in these
islands the sad waif, jauntily swinging his cane, wearing a seedy cutaway jacket, baggy trousers, huge out-turned boots, a dilapidated bowler hat and a tooth-brush moustache made such an impact on the mind of Malta’s younger generation that he immediately found himself enshrined in popular children’s rhyme. I clearly recall the words which were current among the twelve-year olds in those days:

One day
Charlie Chaplin kien ṣḥaddej;
Kien ṣḥaddej mimn Strada Rjali
Beda jkisser il-ṣanali;
Tellghuh fuq il-bejt,
Beda jghajjat lil taz-żejt;
Tellghuh fil-gallarija
Beda jghajjat daqs tarbija;
Haduh fil-katalet,
Beda jaqbeż daqs mulett.

(Paola)

With this compare the English rhymes:

(i) Charlie Chaplin washing up
   Broke a saucer and a cup;
   How much did they cost?

(ii) One, two, three, four,
   Charlie Chaplin went to war,
   He taught the ladies how to dance
   And this is what he taught them . . .
   Salute to the King,
   And bow to the Queen,
   And turn your back
   On the Kaiserine. 20

I give one further example of a simple rhyme that links our little island with the mainstream of a widespread tradition. Readers are no doubt familiar with the giant’s awe-inspiring rhyme in the fairy-tale book:

fee, fo, fi, fum!
I smell the blood of an Englishman.
Be he alive or be he dead
I’ll have his bones to make my bread.

In Maltese folk-tales it is the old woman to whom the young man has shown some kindness who uses the following rhyme:
Li s-sliem ma kienx qabel il-kliem Had you not saluted me before you spoke to me
Kont nibilghék belghá I would have swallowed you up
Ingh errghék ĝ erghá Digested you
Uniz irghék ž erghá21 And buried (lit. 'sown') you.

Now this links up with the lines heard by Fr. Magri on Mount Lebanon in the early years of this century:

Lewle salâmek Had you not saluted me before
Ma sabaq kelamek you spoke to me
Kont nfass'fsek int I would have crushed you
U'ghadamek And your bones.

Very close to the Maltese welcome greeting are the words uttered by the għul (ogre) in Dr. Legey's Moroccan Tales (xxiv, p. 105):

Kou'n ma slâmek sbeq slâmi, Had not your greeting preceded mine
ndir lbamek fi dorma, I would have made a mouthful of your flesh,
ou demek fi jorma, A throatful of your blood
ou 'azamek nterkonboum bin snâni. And I would have crushed your bones between my teeth.

And now we pass on to children's games and their rhymes. It is well known that in some games children employ a special formula instead of the usual counting of fingers opened by the players. The leader repeats the rhyme as he points at the players in turn, one accented syllable to each child, and the child on whom the last word falls is the one chosen to take a part different from that of the rest.22 These formulas, though often gibberish, have recognisable metrical shape. One of them, heard at Tarxien, runs as follows:

Kemm trid bombi biex tispara How many shells do you require
il-kanun ta' Birkirkara? To fire the cannon of Birkirkara?
- Ix-xadina fuq il-mejda - The monkey is on the table
Qieghda tiekol plat, kawlata Eating a plateful of meat soup.

Apart from counting-out rhymes, however, rhymes often accompany the play to add zest to the game. While turning round and round in a ring, children say:
This is one of the most popular nursery games — the song which instantly rises from the lips of small children whenever they join hands in a circle. With this compare the English version:

Ring-a-ring o' roses,
A pocket full of posies,
A-tishoo! A-tishoo!
We all fall down. 23

The corresponding rhyme from Sicily goes like this:

Rota rutedda,
Lu pani a fedda a fedda,
La missa sunò,
L'ancilu calò,
E calò a dinucchiuni.
Quantu è beddu lu Signuri!
Olè! 24

Some games are in dialogue form in which the players may participate. One well known rhyme is the following:

Baqrambù
Bil-kalzetta u biż-żarbun!
X'kilt illum?
— Kejla ful.
Xi xrobì fuqba?
— Bajda friska.
Mela għaddi ġewwa
Wi tikt fuq,
Ar' tissirli l-friskatur,
Għax mbux tieġbi — tas-sinjur;

(Tarxien, Birgu)
Not so well known is the following version heard at Birkirkara during the last War:

_Tat-tila tula!_  You of the long cloth,
_X'kilt il-lejla?_  What did you have for supper?
-_ Hobż u ġbejna._  _- (A piece of) bread and cheese._
_MINN fuq?_  And after it?
-_ Terz ilma._  _- A measure of water._
_MINN isfel?_  And then?
-_ Terz inbid._  _- A measure of wine._
_Għandek xi kelb jinbah?_  Is your dog barking?
-_ Għandi: Wu! Wu!_  _- Yes: Wu! Wu!_

These apparently nonsense rhymes assume importance as the vehicle for the transmission of a vestige of cultural contact when one realises the direct relationship between the Maltese lines and the following 'rengaine populaire' from Lebanon given in 1928 by Feghali:

_W'ain ként el-bârha_  Where were you yesterday?
_'end'ebte sålha_  At my sister Salha's house.
_'aš ta 'mtak_  What did she give you to eat?
_gébnè mǎlha._  Salted cheese.

The best known dialogue rhyme is perhaps that associated with the game known as _Tal-Paxxatore_ or, from its opening line, _In giro in giro ngella_. I am sure most readers remember it from their childhood days, so I am not repeating the words here. Instead, I shall call attention to the fact that, in substance, the Paxxatore or Ambassador (Ambasciatore) who praises the love-sick knight and helps him in his quest for a wife fulfils exactly the same function of the _huttâb_ or marriage-broker in ancient Maltese marriage customs. The Ambassador's game has been found in Italy, Albania, Spain, Portugal, and France; in Sicily a particular version of it was confined mostly to private schools up to the turn of the century. It links up these islands with a widespread European tradition of chivalrous customs.

We have described, with illustrations of comparable material from a Mediterranean or European context, the main types and characteristics of children's rhymes in Malta. There remains to say something about the way in which this mini-literary form may exercise some effect on the developing imagination of the young. By and large, these rhymes stimulate the child's powers of observation. The magic jingle of an opening verse such as _Indi, indô/ digli digli ndô_ is immediately followed by three lines conjuring up
a household scene wherein a white dress with a heavy frill (\textit{libsa bajda bil-pantò}) is being washed, ironed and delivered – an old-style service on an individual basis common enough before the days of our present dry-cleaning establishments:

\begin{verbatim}
Indì, indò,
Digli digli ndò
Libsa bajda bil-pantò;
Nahsilbielek, nghaddibielek,
Nibghathielek ma' Vitor.
\end{verbatim}

(Birkirkara)

From an analysis of Maltese rhymes collected so far, one can say that there are no fanciful flights of the imagination that are completely removed from reality. The images are in some way or other linked to everyday scenes and occurrences which, however, mean quite a lot to the child and open up magic vistas for his enquiring mind. In one particular version of a well-known rhyme, imagination grows rife and although some lines sound rather illogical they help to build up the general sense of wonder so dear to the child:

\begin{verbatim}
Pizzi pizzi kanna
Dolores tą' Sant'Anna
Sant' Anna tal-Murina
Habbà l-biċċa l-pellegrina;
Il-berritta ħamra ħamra
Bil-bukbett, tal-ġiżimin;
Ċejja mara mimm Ħaż-Żabbar
Bil-geżwira u bil-fardal;
Eppejpija eppejpo!
Xoxxa lavanda
Spara kanun
Ballà fejn tmur?
Tmuer il-Lubjana
Taqtà' pezza Indjana;
Tmuer il-Buskett.
Taqli l-bajd u z-zalzett;
Eppejpija eppejpo!
Bella kaxxa ġiggijò!
Mgharef (dghajsa) tal-fidda
Bandiera tal-ħarir;
\end{verbatim}

Pizzi pizzi kanna
Dolores of St. Anne
St. Anne of the Marina
A grain for a cape's length;
A red red cap
With a jasmine posy;
A woman is coming from Zabbar
Wearing a kilt and a pinafore;
Smell the perfume
Fire the gun
Where does the ball go?
It goes to Ljubljana
And cuts a length of Indian fabric;
It goes to Buskett
And fries sausages and eggs;
Eppejpija eppejpo!
A fine box of fireworks!
Spoons (a boat) of silver
And a silk flag;
Ixtri lu biċċa gubbaġd
Itmagħbielu, bellagħbielu
Habbatlu rasu md-haħt
(Birkirkara)

Buy him some nougat
Make him eat it
And strike his head against the wall.

The first line of the Maltese rhyme may have some relationship to Neapolitan Pizzu, pizzu, pizzuluni, or, in Pomigliano d'Arco, one of the provinces of Naples Pizza, pizza, pizzipogne, and Calabrian Piz-pizzinguda, not to mention a possible link with cannella and Marina in the following four lines from Palermo:

Pisa pisella
A culuri di cannella,
Cannella accussi fina
Di' santa Marina...

Finally, in an interesting note on this game in the December, 1976 issue of il-Malti, 'Kilin' mentions that Francisco Gomez de Quevedo in his brilliant picaresque novel 'Vida de Buscon Publos' (1626) (Part II, Chap.V) describes how the innkeeper's daughter played the game Pizpirigaña in much the same way as Maltese children play pizzi pizzi kanna, reciting the following rhyme:

Pizpirigaña Pizpirigana
Mata la araña Kill the spider
Un cochinito A little pig
Muy peladito With plucked bristles
'quien lo pelo? Who plucked his bristles?
La pícara vieja The mischievous hag
Que está en el rincón Who sits in the corner
Alza la mano Raise your hand
Que te pica el gallo And the cock will nibble at you
Un mőñito azul A blue bow of ribbon
Y otro colorado And another coloured one.

The rhymes we have been speaking about, whether of the nursery or playground type, may be either said or sung. By their very nature they were destined to be recited, not written down, let alone translated or preserved in print. And yet, unless they are collected in book form and suitably studied, preferably within a Mediterranean context, they are liable to disappear like so many other floating traditions that pass out of sight — and out of mind. Their claim for serious attention by the scholar has been forcefully endorsed by Arnold Van Gennep: 'Aussi l'étude de ces formulettes n'est-elle
There is a sort of magic about children's rhymes that makes one cherish the recollections of babyhood and childhood. But it is also something more than that. As the reviewer of The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes put it in the 'Times Literary Supplement' of November 9, 1951: 'it is the something which seems to have gone out of present-day poetry: the singing quality, the music, the irresponsibility, the lilt, the memorability. Never mind if the words make nonsense: they are evocative, and they cannot be forgotten... whatever their origin, whatever their age, whatever their authorship, that is the tribute that no one can deny them. They stretch back not only into the past, but also forwards into the future'.

With these thoughts I hope we will all be in a position to treat this humble form of literature with sympathy and understanding.

4 CASSAR PULLICINO, G., 'Ghana u Taqbil it-Tfal', in Leben il-Malti, Ghadd 206-208, April-Gunju 1948, pp. 33-66. On September 15, 1948 Circular No. 39/48 issued by the Assistant Director of Education drew the attention of teachers to this study '... which should prove very helpful... in connection with the teaching of Maltese songs and ballads'.
With regard to number six, the 'masses' of the local text may link up, however remotely, with the 'burning candles' or 'lamps' of the versions from Abruzzi, Basilicata, and Spain. Coming to number eight, the explanation of 'eight souls' current in Malta has its counterpart in the Abruzzi as 'aleme ggiuste' and in Cosenza as 'animi giusti'. The association of number nine with 'angels' is close to the 'angelic choirs' mentioned in the Abruzzi, Cosenza, Spain and Sweden. Both in Malta and in the Abruzzi the number eleven refers to 'the apostles', who re-appear in Sweden as 'disciples'. Curiously enough, number twelve in Malta is equated with the twelve articles of the Apostles' Creed, whereas in the Abruzzi, Cosenza, Basilicata, Portugal, Spain and Sweden the reference is to the twelve Apostles. Malta is one of the few countries where the rhyme is extended beyond the number twelve. The thirteen 'blessings' of the local verse to a
certain extent are compatible with the interpretation of "trireci grazie ri Sant' Antonie" given in Basilicata.

Finally, the survival of this text in Malta as a children's rhyme should not blind us to the probable magico-religious origin and function of the formula, as stressed by R. Corso in an erudite study entitled 'Superstizioni Euroafricane' (Folklore X (1924), pp. 7, 13) containing some Berber variants of the formula from Morocco and Algeria, besides one from Calabria.

17 Ibid., p. 74.
19 Pitri, G., op. cit., pp. 33-34.
21 Magri, M., X'jgħid il-Malti, fuk Missirijietna u l-Ġgantti ('Mogħdija taż-Żmien' Nru. 39) 1904, p. 116. The words of the formula are erroneously given here as 'li l-kliem ma kienx qabel is-sliem' but are correctly printed 'li ma kienx is-sliem qabel il-kliem' in the texts of Magri's stories, e.g. in the story of 'The Seven Citron-Maidens' ('Mogħdija taż-Żmien, Nru. 18, 1902, pp. 60-61)
23 Ibid., p. 364.
25 Feghali, M., Synta xe des Parlars Arabe actuels du Liban. p. 467. Versions of this and other comparable rhymes from the Arab speaking countries are included in my study Some Parallels between Maltese and Arabic Folklore, which awaits publication. In this respect one may also refer to J. Bezzina's article 'An old Maltese Rhyme and some Parallels from the Middle East' (Maltese Folklore Review, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1962, pp. 74-8) dealing with the well-known lines beginning Darba kien hemm sultan.
27 Ibid., pp. 37-41.
28 Van Gennep, A., op. cit., p. 162.