

ENTERTAINMENT -

P A S T A N D P R E S E N T

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In 1894 Vincent Busuttil, a Government headmaster at Vittoriosa published a booklet entitled 'Holiday Customs in Malta', with a sub-title - Sports, usages, ceremonies, omens and superstitions of the Maltese people. For those who have not followed folklore and are not 'au courant' with the usages and customs of the Maltese people, this booklet provides a good introduction of Maltese folklore and a vivid picture of the way Maltese entertained themselves before the era opened up by the Cinema, Radio and Television.

Sporadic theatrical shows were attended by a section of the Maltese mostly those who lived in the capital city Valletta as well as the surrounding towns and villages, however, the peasants and other folk living in the far-off Casals had to wait patiently for their share of entertainment which took place during a village festa or some national festivity connected with a historical event.

Busuttil collected many of these events and attempted briefly to explain their origin and also their significance. He considered the Maltese people to be "very tenacious of their old usages handed down to them from time immemorial, as any other people the world over." He admitted that although various usages survive their motive in most cases is forgotten and that 'older mythologies are sometimes altered to meet the exigencies of the new creed.'

The booklet is divided into three parts; the first part refers to ecclesiastical recurrences; the second part is dedicated to sport and usages and the third part deals with omens and superstitions.

In the first part Busuttill deals with the ever popular feast days, emphasizing that these festas were enjoyed by all rich and poor alike. They are generally connected with the religion of the people and are held in honour of Our Lord, of the Blessed Virgin or the patron saints of every town and village.

A characteristic of the Maltese people is their light hearted merrymaking, which is expressed in all gatherings, be these private or public, but of course it used to be more evident on the occasion of the village festa in honour of its patron saint.

These festas today are losing much of the enthusiasm which surrounded them in the past and the reason is obvious as today the people, inclusive of workers, herdsmen and farmers have many more occasions to attract them. Besides there has been tremendous progress among all classes of the population and therefore various interests have cropped up thus diminishing the national and folkloristic impact owing to various new attractions.

The people today are interested in various sports, football and horse racing the favourites. Transport from one village to another and from all villages to the capital Valletta, has become easier and consequently people can now move from place to place quicker and more cheaply.

As a result the various attractions advertising either cinema shows, theatre performances or disco-dancing are within the reach of everyone. In addition to this we have Radio and TV programmes and a complete picture emerges of a New Malta embracing modern trends and consequently forgetting its old preferences for simpler and more national intercourse which used to be the apex of entertainment in past days.

Moreover as the Maltese people today have a high standard of living, poverty having diminished substantially, this new way of life engenders with it new tastes. In this respect we observe that the stalls that used to be erected in the streets or in the piazzas, offering cheap pastries and sweetmeats have today changed to more expensive ones and not merely restricted to pastizzi and kassatat, the majority preferring to have their refreshments in luxurious bars. The purely folkloristic remnants in this line are the gaily decorated stalls used by nougat sellers next to churches ~~xxx~~ during festas.

On the other hand, who still remembers today the picturesque figure, with an Eastern touch of the boy selling tumblers of iced waters from a barrel slung across his shoulders? Or else in the moon-lit evenings, the playing of mandolines, guitars and violins through the streets of Valletta- the musicians stopping now and then before the houses of the more popular and well known people or under the window of a musician's sweetheart?

Even the humble bars in out-of-the-way streets in Valletta or those of the Casals are no more frequented by the folk-singers of old, who before used to delight the bars' patrons with comic songs enlivened with plenty of local and pointed personal allusions, especially in 'spirtu pront' (unrehearsed competitions). Today it is either the Radio or the Television that keeps spell-bound the tired workers who still frequent such bars.

It is only in religious festas that the old folklore still persists, principally during the Inn rja and San Girgor festas.

Lunarja, a corruption of 'luminaria' from the illumination which takes place at the Cathedral Church of Mdina on the feast of St. Peter and St. Paul is characterised by merry-making and excessive eating and drinking at the Buskett Gardens till late at night. An agricultural show is held at the same gardens once again the liveliest connection with to-days entertainment is the horse racing which takes place, in the afternoon of June the 29th, which climaxes one of Malta's National festivities. On the other hand, San Girgor, though strictly connected with a vow made to St. Gregory to whose intercession the Maltese had recourse in 1519 when the Island was struck by an epidemic disease, the people, after having seen the colourful procession and the flourishing in the air of the fraternities' banners, in spite of police intervention owing to the danger which might befall on the spectators' heads end up at Marsaxklokk. Here again hearty eating and drinking takes place and children take a pre-summer dip in the beautiful skyblue sea.

In conclusion one may say that entertainment varies according to the march of time as well as to one's pecuniary possibilities, but the truth remains that our forefathers enjoyed their simple life in a much healthier way and with more enthusiasm than is done today. All this notwithstanding the sophisticated enjoyments offered at exorbitant prices and bereft of that community feeling, which once characterised Maltese entertainment in no uncertain manner.

L-GHAQDA TAL-FOLKLORE MALTI GHANDHA L-GHAN LI IGGIE IL-
QUDDIEM L-ISTUDJU TAL-FOLKLORE TAGHNA, BILLI THAJJAR LILL-
MALTIJN JAPPREZZAW U JIPPREZERVAV IL-MEMORJA TA' DRAWWJET,
GHERF, GHIDUT, ILBIIES, TWEMMIN U CIRKUSTANZI OHRA LI
IL-MALTIJN TA' QABILNA KIENU JHABTU WICCHOM MAGGHOM KULJUM.
L-GHAQDA TILOA' MEMBRI BI HLAS ANNWALI TA' 250 FIS-SENA, IZDA
TIDDEPENDI UKOLL MINN DONAZZJONIJIET BIEX TISTA' TLAHHAQ MA
L-ISPEJJEZ KBAR LI GHANDHA BIEX TORGANIZZA ATTIVITAJIET SIEWJA.