

VANISHING FOLKLORISTIC USAGES

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With the passing of time, and of course with the progress generated in civilised and expanding countries, including Malta, various folkloristic usages are doomed to vanish. This may happen for the benefit of the whole population, but the loss of certain traditions may lessen the colour of the environment wherein we have to live.

To begin with, horse-racing has long been a very popular event, and it has always attracted great crowds of people, offering enthusiastic enjoyment to all and sundry. In various countries, today's horseracing is combined with lotteries and fabulous cash prizes, and this, to a certain extent, has changed the healthy competition and sporting aims of racing, with the commercial greed and anxious expectations of the competitors, who are generally more interested in the prize money than in the racing "ut sic".

Here in Malta, horse-racing is now more established as a snobbish sport, and has its fixed abode at the Marsa racing ground. The only traditional horse racing is limited to the Mnarja event, which takes place at Rabat, but in the past there were at least two other events of horse-racing which were truly enjoyable, popular, offering a festive mood for the people in all walks of life. These were the Saint Roque races, which took place from Marsamxett harbour to Floriana, along Great Siege Road. There was also the Carmelite races which started at Sliema, along the Strand to Gzira. I still remember them both, and feel nostalgic for those bygone days.

Other recollections of the past, are the performances of the popular bands, famous among which was that of "Il-Banda ta' Indri". These popular bands were rather popular, and in Valletta, there were, at one time, more than a hundred bandmen

forming various groups. Originally they were intended to celebrate some joyous event, such as a marriage, a win in a lottery, or a return from abroad, but later degenerated in the sense that they left no stone unturned to celebrate anything, including engagement of a daughter, winning a law-suit, birth of a child, and so forth, and instead of giving pleasure to the inhabitants of the city, they became a nuisance to the general public, and especially to the neighbours of the happy family, until the police had to put a ban on such noisy activities, bringing this tradition to an abrupt end.

Does anyone still remember the diving boys? They were urchins on boats in Grand Harbour, who solicited a coin from passengers on ships entering harbours, and they dived for it, retrieving it from the deep.

We still have the Dghajsa man, or boat man, whose boats, with high prows, stem and sternare gaily painted to the whim of the owner; these we do not see any more in their hundreds, but only sporadically in both harbours. The boatman is no longer shirtless and barefoot, as he used to be in the past days of great poverty.

Another scene no longer enacted, is that of the shopkeeper, selling his wares at his shop-door, excluding, maybe, the shoe-maker and the tailor, who, at times, are seen at their door, working at their trade, to the delight of the tourists. Also we no longer see the money-changer at his door, ready to give change in coins from one-third of a farthing to a pound note or more.

We still have the Sunday 'Monti'. This name originates from Strada del Monte, which was named after the Grand Master Del Monte. Today, this open-air market has been pushed out of Valletta, and is purely a business concern, rather than its former style of "lucky surprise market", where one could find

precious items among the amassed wares of mysterious origin. Today's 'monti' is a popular market where the hawkers display wares which could be found and bought at any shop in Republic Street, (formerly Kingsway) any day of the week. The 'Monti' of yore in what is now Merchants Street, displayed on either side of the street, all kinds of old and new odds and ends. One could find old iron, Indian shawls, ship cordage, figurines, glass and china ware, and at times bonnets, caps, hats and vegetables, together with clothing, cloth, birds, with prices varying from stall to stall, and bargains available. Second hand books and magazines offered fantastic opportunities, with magazines at one penny each, and good-conditioned books at sixpence. It was like a feast for Valletta, colourful and adventurous, which, I am afraid has lost most of its treasure-hunt spirit.

Carnival! Yes, whose carnival is it? This unique entertainment is today restricted to events in an enclosure, with entrance against a considerable fee, and a parade of floats, mostly commercial, and a few decorated trucks with companies, noisy and colourful, but enjoyed only by those who satisfy themselves with a fleeting show.

Years ago, Carnival was a different thing altogether. It was the public at large that created it, with masked parties invading the streets, making merry with friends, throwing sweets and confetti, and making the spectators feel participants in their merriment.

There was then the 'Konslu', a ragged person in tails and top-hat, with a roll of parchment in his hand, reading 'bandi' jokes and satirical remarks about personalities of high standing. He always ended by being the target for eggs and tomatoes, but everything was done in a hilarious manner, to the enjoyment of both the 'konslu' himself and the spectators.

The Palace Square became a veritable open ball-room where on one side took place the 'Parata' commemorating the Victory of the Maltese over the Turkish invaders, involving the giving of a bride to her bridegroom, generally a little boy and girl dressed in traditional wedding costumes. On the other side of the Palace Square was the 'Komitiva'. This was a dancing band which started moving from the lower part of Old Bakery Street, towards the Palace Square, where dancing took place by masked or mask-less couples in fancy dress. There was real revelry, with Carnival joy evident everywhere. Now all this has gone with the wind, and even Carnival appears to have become regimented. The people have lost the call of carnival, which is nowadays restricted to children, who are not worried with adult problems of life.

Another event which apparently has lost its glamour is students' graduation day. Pranks and fun have been suffocated and students' life is the worst for it. Students today have lost their exuberance, and have grown beyond their age, which does not augur well for a happy care-free life which we all desire.

Ghas-sena 1983, il-Kumitat hejja attivitajiet li ser isiru f' Settembru, li jkunu taħdita u ezibizzjoni. Għal din ta' l-aħhar huwa mahsub li tohrog harga speċjali ta' L-Imħazz. Il-membri jircievu cirkularijiet necessarji.
