CONTESTING THE PAST..... Oral History, Folklore and Other Visions
by John Chircop

Traditional historians are preoccupied only with what is empirically believed to be factual and its documented evidence. They are a species belonging to hard facts, chronological sequences, exact dating, locations and happenings. Empirical documentation still remains the basis on which traditional historians build up their histories. Locally, traditional historians are still in the primary level of rationalizing the historical; of trying to weed legends out of historical facts.

In fact, polemics are still going on at academic level about what is, and what is not mythical. Myths are hurriedly brushed out from the historical into folklore. Thus, academics occupied with history are, in this process, disengaging themselves from history as they leave the study of myths to others. They do not stop and think of the possibility that myths could form part of the historical experience.

However, as history deals with humans who had always had their subjective inner life and their symbolic communicative levels, historians have to rethink some of their positivist dogmas and open up their fields of study. They have much to learn from students of myths, especially those who are trained in the skill of listening to people. It is here that the historians and the folklorists have the most to learn from each other. To the former folklore encourages us to pay more attention to stories and give much more space and time for them, allowing descriptive or documentary detail to appear, as it were, in the interstices of the narrative rather than making it the chief object of our work". (1) With this view in mind, historians will gain appetite for the whole human sphere. They will find that the traditional academic divisions of the social in the objective and the subjective areas (as if they were two worlds apart) does not stand any longer. Instead, historians will become aware of the historical intermixture of the two.

Thus, it is within this view that the accepted academic boundaries between subjects, begin to be seen as a bulwark against innovative intellectual development. As importance begins to be given to the integral person, (with due importance given, not only to the rational, but also to the irrational sphere) the historical experience becomes multifaceted. It is this radical conception of history that will give the mortal blow to the outdated empiricist history of Rankean memories. This will give birth to the acceptance of the person in history. This organic interrelationship with the social and the economic, will become the most important aspect of study. The structure of everyday life in its multifaceted dimensions will become the main objective of academics dealing with the past. A holistic approach will become a good sense for all historians. (2)

An articulated interdisciplinary approach has become indispensible for today's historian. Taking folklore as an example, it has been totally ignored by historians, except for some refer-
ences of a concrete nature. This situation has come about because historians have not been interested in the symbolic life of the collectivity. They saw greater priorities in a field where basic histories are non-existent.(3)

The process by which historians weed out myths from historical "facts" has not taken into consideration the human experience related to the whole question. Myths have been most important for people. They embedded their minds and engulfed their world views. Historians must study them as such; as world conceptions of whole nations, classes and individuals. Labelling them as false beliefs cannot compensate for their power in certain historical situations and as determining social experiences. In this context, the relation between the private and the public becomes a primary concern for historians.

Studies in integrational attitudes and experiences become fundamental as myths pass from one generation to the next in various forms. Stories, folk-songs and ballads are some of the transmitting forms which historians have to accept as primary sources for their investigations. This approach is instrumental in studying seriously many aspects of the human experience. For instance, how can a historian interested in the development of nationalism in Malta (as elsewhere) ignore such potent forces as collective myths which were at the basis of such symbolic entities? Is not nationalism a symbolic category? Is it not a popular myth? (4)

Becoming interested in the collective symbolic level in history, one begins to consider the great strength which myths still have in the daily life of the people. Myths are constantly regenerated and created anew or reshaped within different environmental or historical experiences. It is in this way that people make sense of the past and feel themselves part of the social entity in time.

All this necessitated the adoption of new methods for investigation in addition to traditional ones. It is here that historians have much to learn from the folklorists' methods of collecting and using oral traditions. Historians must learn to listen to story tellers and folk singers, and then adopt methods connected with the collection of oral sources. This would necessarily mean reconsidering some traditional concepts connected with their occupation, especially with regard to evidence. Historians should not only deal in archives, but with living people. Thus they have to learn the techniques of listening and interviewing.(5) Lastly, this would mean a totally different approach to society around them. Snobbery plays no part in the characteristics of this new type of historians.

The importance of oral documentation is felt when one considers that the great majority of people, until very recently, have lived in a society where the overwhelming means of communication was oral. In this type of society "the vague collective memory is formalized, systematized, replenished with details and shaped into formal tradition, time and again."(6) This becomes more important to the historians interested in non-literate societies or social groups. Their collective beliefs, aspira-
tions, taboos and traumas as well as forgotten everyday facts, are all variously transmitted orally from generation to generation. Thus, either historians begin to consider these new approaches, or Maltese history will have a very painful future. The past will have no future. Maltese history, like the third world of which it forms part, "needs to be decolonised, to be rescued from the tyranny of official documentation, to be allowed to study all facets of the past."(7) The past must be contested.

References and notes
3. For instance, the basic economical and social histories of Malta are still unwritten.
7. ibid.

Fl-istampi li jidhru wara din il-faċċata:
L-artiklu li ġej jittratta dwar il-Karnival ta' l-imghoddi, ghalhekk wara din il-faċċata qed jidhru żewġ illustrazzjonijiet li ghandhom x'jaqsmu mas-suġgett.

