

**"TAL-GRIXTI"**  
A FAMILY OF ŻAQQ AND TANBUR MUSICIANS

Anna Borg Cardona, B.A., L.T.C.L.

On his visit to Malta, George Percy Badger (1838) observed that "native musical instruments", were "getting into disuse" <sup>(1)</sup>. Amongst these was the Maltese bagpipe known as *zaqq*'. A hundred years later, the *zaqq* was still in use, but evidently still considered to be waning. By the end of the first half of the twentieth century, the few remaining *zaqq* musicians were scattered around the island of Malta in Naxxar, Mosta, Siġġiewi, Dingli, Żurrieq, Birgu (Vittoriosa), Marsa, Mellieha and also on the sister island of Gozo, in Rabat. By the time Partridge and Jeal <sup>(2)</sup> investigated the situation between 1971 and 1973, they found a total of 9 living players in Malta and none in Gozo. Now the instrument is no longer played and may be considered virtually extinct.

*Zaqq* players up to the early part of the twentieth century used to perform in the streets and in coffee or wine bars. They would often venture forth to nearby villages, making melodious music to the accompaniment of percussive instruments such as tambourine (*tanbur*) or friction drum (*rabbaba, zuvżafa*). It was also not uncommon to witness a group of dancers closely following the musicians and contorting to their rhythms. This music came to be expected especially around Christmas time, Feast days (*Festi*) and Carnival time.

The few musicians known as *zaqq* players tended to pass their knowledge on from generation to generation, in the same way as other arts, crafts and trades were handed down. One such family was that of the Bugejas known as *Tal-Grixti*. Three generations of the family, including five members, played *zaqq*, *tanbur*, or both instruments.

WENZU: (1870-1941) Played *zaqq*.

ŻEPPI: (1894-1960) Played *zaqq*.

AWSONJU: (1896-1981) Played *zaqq* and *tanbur*.

NINU: (1925- ?) Played *tanbur*.

WENZU: (1930- ) Played *tanbur* & *zaqq*.

## WENZU BUĠEJA (1870-1941)

The earliest member of the Buġeja family known to have played the *zaqq*, and possibly not the first, was WENZU, son of Pawlu Buġeja of Birgu and Franġiska Farruġia from Gozo. Wenzu was born in 1870, and resided first in Birgu and later in Żurrieq. He married Pawla Manara who bore him five children: Żeppi, Awsonju, Franġisku, Pawlu and Karmelo. Wenzu made nougat (*qubbajt*) for a living, a line of work that was to be followed by several future members of the family.

When it came to the village festa he would, without fail, be seen setting up shop selling his traditional nougat. The fact that Wenzu was always necessarily present on all festive occasions, selling his nougat, was perhaps why he also found ample opportunity for creating the festive atmosphere with his *zaqq* playing. His grandchildren recall he was a very able performer on the *zaqq* and always knew him palying the instrument.

His children grew up in the nougat trade. In their tender years they also grew accustomed to hearing the sound of the bagpipe and accompanying it on the *tanbur*. To them, he passed on the art of making and playing the *zaqq*. Wenzu passed away in 1941, aged 71. Two of his children, Żeppi and Awsonju, continued in their father's footsteps, perpetuating the tradition of *zaqq* and *tanbur* playing.

## ŻEPPI (1894 - 1960) and his son NINU (1925 -)

Żeppi was born in 1894 in Żurrieq. He soon learnt the nougat trade from his father and continued to make nougat later in life. He also became proficient in making the *zaqq* as well as playing it. Żeppi left his home town, Żurrieq, and moved first to Qrendi and then to Marsa. He was by then married to Ġużepa Bezzina and had two children, one of whom, NINU, soon began to accompany him on *tanbur*. Żeppi passed away in Marsa in 1960, at the age of 66.

Żeppi and his son Ninu were particularly fond of performing out in the streets in Christmas time.<sup>(3)</sup> In Malta, the *zaqq* had long been associated with Christmas. Bagpipers would often travel to nearby villages playing their instrument, especially

on Christmas eve.<sup>(4)</sup> In parishes such as Naxxar, at this time of year, *zaqq* and *tanbur* musicians often stood and performed on either side of the church door (personal communication, Toni Cachia, Naxxar, 1997).

Žepi and Ninu were perhaps best known in the Marsa area where they would perform together in a traditional coupling of instruments. 19th century lithographs bear iconographical witness to this long-standing custom. Žepi also used to travel to Birgu on Easter Saturday. There, in the evening, he would play the *zaqq* in the streets of the town to the accompaniment of tambourine played by his brother Awsonju, who then resided in Birgu.

It is interesting to note that members of the Bugeja family were known for playing both *zaqq* as well as *tanbur*. In this family, the two instruments were coupled together for generations and each member was most likely capable of playing both. One instrument was considered incomplete without the other.

The tambourines played by the Bugejas seem to have varied in diameter. Iconography likewise shows a discrepancy in size. Some 19th century lithographs, such as L. Brockdorff's *Žaqq player*, (1838), portray a very large *tanbur*, about 55 - 60cm, with discs inserted into the frame. The artist Gerolamo Gianni (1891), on the other hand, depicts a smaller sized tambourine of some 35 - 40cm diameter, also having discs in the frame.<sup>(5)</sup> Since there seems to have been no fixed size for the instrument, it is possible that tambourinists owned various sizes of *tanbur*. It is also possible, however, that there was an increasing preference for smaller tambourines as the years went by.

#### **AWSONJU (1896 - 1981) and his son WENZU (1930)**

Of Wenzu's other son, AWSONJU, substantial information has emerged. He was born in Żurrieq in 1896 and died in Birgu in 1981. He was generally referred to as "Is-Sonu". When he married Pawla Gauci, in 1923, he moved out of Żurrieq and settled in Birgu where he started a business, following in his father's line of trade, making nougat. He also made date buns (*Imqaret*) and sweets known as *helu tal-*

*biċċiet* sold at a penny a piece. He became particularly renowned, however, for his *penit*, a very sweet, pink and white candy stick, about 15cm. long.

Awsonju, in his black waistcoat, smoking his cigar, became a familiar figure in Birgu. He owned a small shop down by the fish market, close to the bastions in Triq l-Antika (Ancient Street), but he travelled far afield, by donkey, to villages as distant as Birkirkara and Naxxar, selling his goods. He is, in fact, registered in his son Wigi's birth certificate as *venditore ambulante* (Public Registry, 1924).

While in Naxxar, his children say he often visited a friend who made and played the *zaqq*. With him he discussed problems pertaining to the instrument, and this friend is also known to have made the bagpipe's chanter for Awsonju. Partridge and Jeal (1977: 140), when examining chanters of the various *zaqq* players, found Awsonju's identical "in form and hole arrangement" to the set by Toni Cachia of Naxxar. Toni himself (known as *Tal-Hammarun*) in fact confirmed to the present author that he had made a complete instrument for Awsonju.

In Birgu, the Bugejas were the only family who played the *zaqq*. Awsonju is today still well remembered playing the instrument in the *Cafe' de Brazil*, the popular bar in the Piazza. Tables and chairs used to be pushed aside to give him space as he danced entertainingly around the room while performing. He also played out in the streets, much to the amusement of the children who followed him shouting and teasing.

Residents of Birgu recall song accompanying the *zaqq* and *tanbur* playing. The only one free to sing would naturally have been the tambourinist, who sang to melodies played on the *zaqq*. What exactly was sung is unfortunately no longer remembered.

Awsonju usually performed on Christmas Eve, Carnival, Easter time, and on the eve of the feast of St. Peter and St. Paul (Mnarja), in Buskett. At Christmas time, he played the *zaqq* around the streets of the town. His son Wenzu would always

accompany him on *tanbur*, contorting in such a way as to complement his father's movements. In Carnival, Awsonju often made merry with the sound of the *zaqq*, accompanied by Wenzu on *tanbur*. He sometimes joined masqueraders in their revelry and was also known to hop onto a Carnival truck destined for the Valletta celebrations. On this occasion he was accompanied by several *tanbur* players.

The feast of the Resurrection of Christ (*l-Irxoxt*), was celebrated with particular verve in Birgu. Festivities, following the 40 days of fasting, previously took place on Saturday rather than Sunday morning. This was yet another occasion for nougat sales as well as *zaqq* playing. At first, Awsonju's brother Zeppi would visit Birgu, playing the Maltese bagpipe out in the streets on Saturday evening, while Awsonju accompanied him on *tanbur*. When Zeppi passed away, the *zaqq* was then played by Awsonju whilst Wenzu, his son, took over the accompaniment. It was Wenzu who generally played *tanbur* and also sang, but sometimes roles were reversed and he would play the *zaqq* while his father accompanied him on *tanbur* and sang to the melodies

On the 28th of June, eve of the feast of St. Peter and St. Paul (*Mnarja*), Awsonju would usually go to Buskett to sell his nougat and other delicacies made for this very popular summer feast. There, he found time to play the *zaqq* and he even participated a few times in the Mnarja festival. In 1954 there were only 3 participants on the *zaqq*, namely: Toni Cachia (*Tal-Hammarun*) from Naxxar, Awsonju Bugeja from Birgu and Pawlu Gatt known as *Iż-Żubin* from Mosta.<sup>(6)</sup> In 1955, Awsonju took part again, this time accompanied by his son Wenzu on *tanbur*.<sup>(7)</sup> Wenzu had also become his father's accompanist and the two, like Zeppi and Ninu, had begun to perform regularly together.

Wenzu, worked in his father's nougat shop together with his brother Wigi. There, between them, they manufactured the traditional sweets and also sold them. Some kinds, such as *mqaret*, and *helu tal-biċċiet*, were sold regularly whilst others, particularly the different types of nougat, were generally prepared for the next festa.



fig.2 Awsonju & Wenzu Bugeja. Eve of Mnarja, Buskett, 1955.  
(Photo Times of Malta)

Wenzu was considered the *tanbur* player in the family. He played tambourines of various sizes, large and small, usually with metal discs inserted into the wooden frame. Larger frames, rarely seen today, could reach an average diameter of 60cm. Membranes were generally goat, sheep or cat skin. Awsonju and Wenzu, in fact did own several different sizes of tambourines which had all been purchased, probably from Naxxar. One of these (fig.1), measuring 30cm in diameter by 10cm depth, has rows of metal discs inserted into the painted blue frame. Each row contains six pairs of discs. The skin is tightly stretched across one side, with furry side placed beneath.

A photograph taken in Mnarja in 1955, for the Times of Malta shows Awsonju playing the *zaqq* accompanied by his son Wenzu on the *tanbur* (fig.2). Wenzu himself recalls his father slipping the instrument into a sack hoping the evening would offer them some moments of respite. When the rush for *qubbajt* and *mqaret* was over, they in fact did find some time for merriment. Awsonju, in the photograph is caught in the middle of gyrations while performing to an appreciative audience. He is here seen kneeling down on the ground playing his *zaqq*. Wenzu is standing by his side beating rhythmically on the vertically held tambourine which he is seen striking with the fingertips.

This particular *zaqq* in the photograph, Awsonju's son Wenzu recalls, was actually made of the skin of a large black dog which had been tragically run over by a car. The skin had been dried and treated with salt. The dog, for purposes of the *zaqq*, had to be skinned in such a way as not to rip in any part. Only the head side could be cut. All other parts of the skin had to be left intact. The legs of the dog in the photograph are firmly tied and decorated with ribbons, thereby sealing possible ruptures at the lower end of the legs. In the delicate job of skinning, Sonu often got help from the local butcher. The skin was then usually rubbed well with salt and hung up to dry in the back room of the shop. When the process of curing was over, the skin was ready to be transformed into a musical instrument. Sonu's son Wenzu was quick to relate an anecdote of the time when his father had hung up a lovely calf skin, which, much to his chagrin, was pounced on by a cat.

## AWSONJU'S ŽAQQ

Awsonju's instruments were essentially made out of a complete animal skin, one two-piped chanter (*qxejra*) with a bull's horn (*qarn*) attached and a blow pipe (*qasba*.) Chanter and horn were tied securely to the neck side of the animal, and the blow pipe usually to the right fore-leg.

Awsonju held the inflated animal skin beneath his left arm, legs pointing upwards. He blew into the cane pipe inserted into it's right foreleg, whilst playing with both hands (right hand below left) on the chanter which was fitted into the neck end. (fig.2).

## BAGS

Bags belonging to Awsonju were usually made of complete dog, goat or calf skin. These have unfortunately disintegrated over the years, since skins are very prone to moth infestation, especially if not properly cured or cared for. Well treated skins, however, can last a lifetime.

## CHANTER-PIPES and REEDS

Awsonju, at least later in life, preferred to get the chanter (*Qxejra*) from his friend in Naxxar, rather than make it himself. It is probable that though Awsonju had played the *zaqq*, all his life, he always relied on his father or his older brother Žeppi to actually make the instruments and, possibly, also to tune them.

The fact that Awsonju bought his chanter from a *zaqq* maker in Naxxar indicates that there existed communication and interchange of ideas between instrumentalists from distant villages. It also, however, reveals another interesting detail. Those who made, tuned and played their own instruments automatically considered anyone buying parts as inferior. Getting the instrument tuned by another party was further scorned upon, and this, Awsonju is also alleged to have done for a fee of 3d in Naxxar.

The one remaining chanter belonging to Awsonju (fig.3), is made up of two metal pipes, each 1cm in diameter, the one on the left having five equally spaced



finger holes, the one on the right having one single hole (Fig.3a). The two pipes are placed firmly side by side and cupped into a piece of cane which is partly cut open, forming a yoke. They are well wedged in and then securely tied to the cane yoke with jute. The chanter pipes and yoke measure a total length of 21.5 x 2.5cm.

On the back (Fig.3b) side the cane is also cut, this time at the other end, to fit two little whistles (*bedbut pl.bdiebet*) one 6cm x 0.5cm, the other slightly smaller 5.5 x 0.5cm. These are actually very slim hollow reeds, closed at one end. Sharp slits are cut lengthwise into them. The open end of the reed is inserted into the metal piping. As all players of reed instruments know, these little reeds are capricious and always need warming up before being played. They are tuned by blowing, turning them slightly and adjusting them within the metal piping till the required pitch is achieved. The whole chanter is subsequently firmly tied onto the neck of the animal skin from the reed side, and into the horn from the side of the metal piping. (fig.5.) The yoke is embellished with a carving of an eight pointed cross on the cane section above the fingerholes.

### HORN (QARN)

The horn attached to the chanter was generally that of a bull (*barri*) or of an ox (*gendus*), previously quite commonly used for ploughing the fields. The horns would usually be placed in a bucket and totally covered in salt. Their outer shell would generally come off intact and this would be used as the bell in the *zaqq*. The narrower end was then carefully cut open and inserted into the chanter. In the exemplar belonging to Awsonju (fig.4), the narrow end of the fragile, curved horn is reinforced with a copper ring and the wider end, with a metal clasp. There is also one air hole drilled into the centre of the inner curve of the horn.

---

fig.1 *Tanbur* (30 x 10cm) belonging to Wenzu Bugeja.

fig.3 Chanter showing (a) pipes with finger holes (b) reeds

fig.4 Curved Horn used as bell.

fig.5 Chanter and Horn attached.

Ara Pagna 100

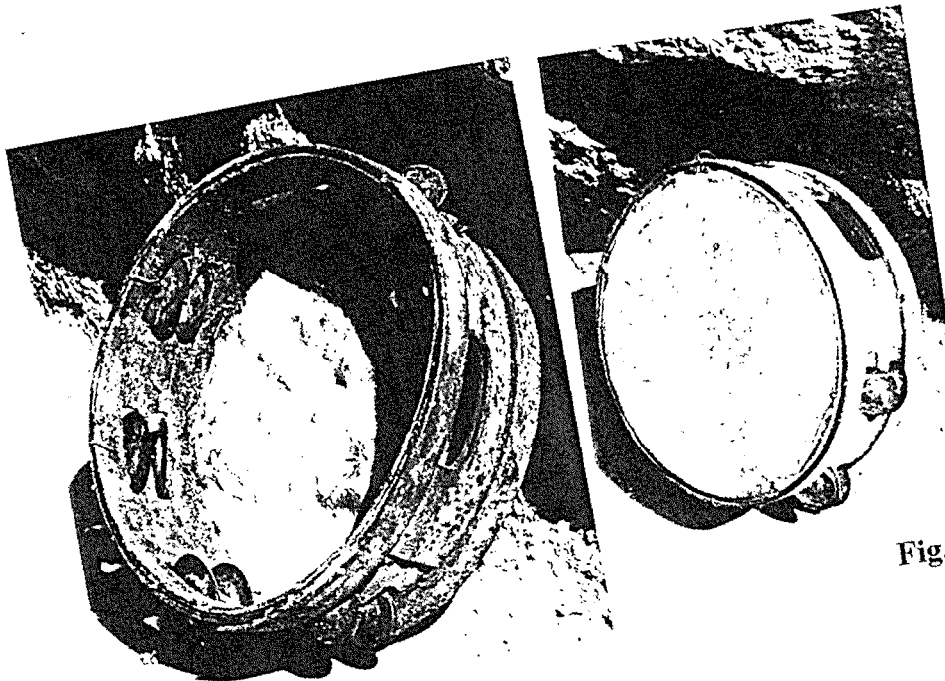


Fig. 1



Fig. 3a



Fig. 3b

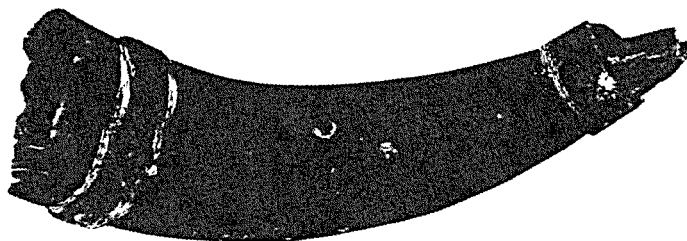


Fig. 4

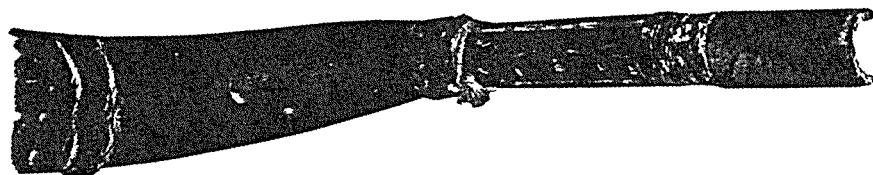
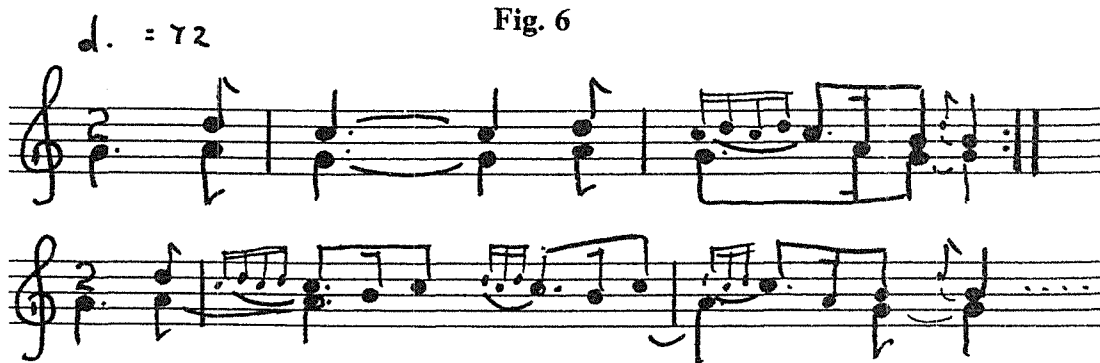


Fig. 5

## MUSIC

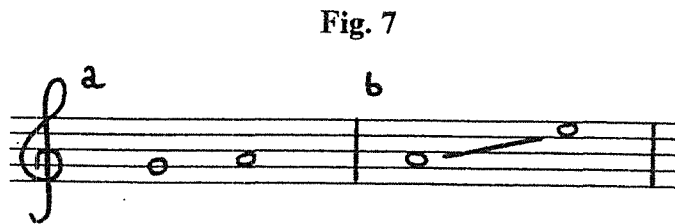
Awsonju was, in his time, considered a master performer who delighted all his listeners. To complete the picture, I quote an extract of the transcription of his music, which has fortunately been preserved for us by Partridge and Jeal (1977: 133). The musical passages were transcribed for them by P.R. Cooke.



The pipe with the single hole plays two notes G and A (fig. 7a).

These are prolonged and repeated beneath the melody, thus giving the drone sound.

The five-holed pipe plays a range of 5 notes, treble A to E. (fig. 7b).



We see there is a total range of a mere six notes. The dotted rhythm used by Awsonju is a noticeable feature. The tempo of the music is at a moderate 72 (dotted) crotchet beats per minute. Also worthy of note is the frequent ornamentation used in the melody, most often consisting of "trills" on the notes C and D. Melody on the *zaqq* had a very limited range, which necessarily had always been compensated by rhythmic interest on the *tanbur*. This explains why the two instruments had always been so intrinsically knit.

## THE ŽAQQ'S STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

When Awsonju Bugeja passed away, the *zaqq* was never played again by members of his family. His son Wenzu, though having learnt how to play the instrument, felt that people no longer cared for that type of music. The bagpipe was therefore dismantled and the tambourines which had always been part and parcel with it were sold, sadly never to be heard again. Žepi had long passed away, and his son Ninu, like his cousin Wenzu, no longer felt the inclination to play the primitive instrument.

This one family of *Zaqq* and *Tanbur* players originating from Birgu had, over the years, given pleasure to numerous people in various villages. The family had dispersed itself and as a result had been active in Żurrieq, Birgu, Qrendi and Marsa as well as in the nearby villages they chose to visit. This type of music, as well as the instrument itself, however, were by no means always considered pleasant by all and sundry. It might here be appropriate to quote Ballou's view on the subject when he witnessed peasants dancing in an "inland village" (1893: 247 - 248): "The accompanying music...was produced by a home-made instrument, which reminded one of a Scottish bagpipe, only it was, if possible, still more trying to the ears and nerves. It is known here as a *Zagg*. It is made of an inflated dog-skin, and is held under the musician's arm, with the defunct animal's legs pointing upward. A sort of pipe is attached to this air-bag, which is played upon with both hands. It is hardly necessary to say that a more ungainly instrument could not well be conceived. A tambourine accompaniment, performed by another party, is usually added to the crude notes of the dog-skin affair."<sup>(8)</sup>

Some sixty years on, the "dog-skin affair" was struggling for survival. The heaviest blow to *Zaqq* and *Tanbur* playing, came with the availability of entertainment from alternative sources. With the introduction of Rediffusion, television, radio and cinema, street entertainers began to lose their relevance in society and were slowly being ousted out of existence. On top of this, the ever-increasing popularity of the

accordion, with its potential for a much more extended and varied melody, was an added factor that helped further in the abandonment of the *zaqq*. As a result of the introduction of accordions and concertinas, melody began to gain importance, perhaps at the expense of rhythm. This undoubtedly stirred a wind of change into traditional maltese music.

The *zaqq* clearly could not compete with the range, variety or even the volume that the accordion proved capable of. On the other hand, tourism and the Mnarja festival,<sup>(9)</sup> at the same time, were both acting beneficially towards the *zaqq* and managed to gain it a slightly longer lease of life into the 1970's - By the end of that decade, however, it's light was undoubtedly spent.

The accompanying *tanbur* decreased in dimensions, but managed to linger on, and lingers still in some areas,.....together with the *zaqq*'s usurper.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: I am grateful to Wigi and Wenzu Bugeja, John Galea and his father, all of Birgu, for helpful information, and to Marquis J.P.Testaferrata Bonici for assistance in tracing documents.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. BADGER, George Percy. *A description of Malta and Gozo*.  
Malta: printing and lithography by M.Weiss 1838.
2. PARTRIDGE, J.K., and JEAL, Frank. "The Maltese Żaqq."  
*Galpin Society Journal*, vol.30, U.K. 1977: 112-144.
3. DOUGALL, Angelo. "Daqqaqa taż-zaqq u tat-tanbur" *L-Imnara* no.17, (1993): 88-89, refers to a poem written by Anton Cassar "Il-Ballata tal-Marsa" 1993, in which there is mention of the said Żeppi (Bugeja) and his son Ninu: "*U fit-toroq kienu jghaddu / Żeppi l-Grixti jdoqq iż-zaqq / It-tanbur kien idoqq ibnu / U kienu jferrhu lil kulhadd.*" (And in the

streets there would go by / Żeppi l-Grixti playing the  
zaqq / His son would play the tambourine / And together  
they would make everybody happy.

4. A striking similarity of custom can be observed in Sicily. In his *Folklore di Sicilia*, 1965: 152, Antonio PAGANO records that: "...la mattina di buon ora durante questo periodo, dai paesi addossati ai monti, si odono venire ancora i ciaramellari per la rituale novena."
5. An oil painting of Street Musicians outside Porta Reale, Valletta, by Gerolamo Gianni, dated 1891, portrays a zaqq player accompanied by a tambourinist, both in traditional peasant clothing. The painting is presently found in the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta.
6. AQUILINA, G. et al. "Il-Konkors ta' l-Ghana fl-Imnarja" *Lehen is-Sewwa* 21 ta' Lulju 1954, p.5
7. CASAPINTA, J. et al. "Ir-Rapport Dwar il-Konkors Tal-Ghana" *Lehen is-sewwa* 20 ta' Lulju 1955
8. BALLOU, Maturin H. *The story of Malta*. Boston: The Umberside Press, 1893
9. For details regarding l-Imnarja adn its festival see:  
CASSAR-PULLICINO, J. "Documentary material relating to l-Imnarja" *Litterature Orale Arabo-Berbere* No. 14, CNRS - ERA 375, 1983