

BIRTH TABOOS

The concern with the processes of human reproduction and with the propagation of the species can be seen in the very first works of art which emerge from the mists of pre-history, authentic examples of which are to be found in Malta. This can be seen in the squat, female figurines excavated from archaeological sites in Malta. These figurines help us to infer that fertility has always been a basic human concern.

This concern in its turn led to various precautionary practices and prohibitions, spells and incantations, things to be done and things to be avoided at all costs. Most of these activities are of a taboo character. As far as they are related to the supernatural, we can call them religious practices, although during this early period there was no real distinction between magic and religion. Some of the attitudes have persisted down to our days.

Among these, the belief that the foetus, trembling in its mother's womb is vulnerable to external influences figures predominantly. Whatever the mother sees, transmits itself through nerve cells which will influence the shaping of the embryo. This belief, based on the principles of sympathetic magic subjects pregnant women to taboos.

Women avoid looking at ugly objects, monstrosities, deformed persons, animals and all sorts of unpleasant things fearing the possibility of the birth of similar offspring. Miscarriage is also feared. To ward off the evil influence, they make the sign of the cross with the thumb of the right hand on their bulging belly. The evil influence could be warded off by looking in a basin of water and thus wash it off in the same basin. Looking at beautiful objects will have positive effects on the embryo. The principles of

sympathetic magic are at work here just as in the case of the negative effects.

This belief is widespread in Malta among pregnant women, especially those for whom birth still offers that great sense of mystery, owing to their lack of knowledge about the biological processes involved in birth.

The negative aspect of looking at ugly images is more emphasised than the positive aspect of looking at beautiful objects. However, Ġanna Borg from Birkirkara said that her daughter gave birth to a son resembling Baby Jesus, because during Christmas time she used to gaze at the image of Jesus in the manger. Others speak of having children resembling saintly images kept in their bedrooms. Sacred images and statues found in the Churches and chapels of the village or town used to attract the mothers' attention, especially during the long hours they spent praying before them. Many a time this led to the custom of naming the child after the saint who has granted special favours. The ex-votos to be found especially at the *Tal-Hlas* Sanctuary on the outskirts of Qormi, *Tal-Herba*, Birkirkara, *Tal-Grazzja*, Żabbar and other sanctuaries in Malta and Gozo show the devotion of the Maltese towards sacred beings, to whom they attribute the birth of a healthy child.

Certain children are born with some part of their skin bearing a different shade of colour from the rest of their body. Most of these "stock marks" or "birth marks" as such "stains" are called, disappear altogether after the first months of the child's life, but some of them persist for life. Often these appear near the eye stretching to the cheeks, although they can be found in any part of the body. It is believed that the mark appears in the location of the body that the pregnant mother first touches, after her cravings are not complied with.

It is commonly believed that the cause of such "stains" (M. *Xewqa*, "wish") is to be found in an unfulfilled wish. Pregnant women must have all their wishes granted otherwise the result would be either a miscarriage or a child with a stock mark, showing the shape of the thing that excited the unsatisfied appetite of the mother. All the necessary actions must be taken to satisfy the mother's wishes so as to avert or neutralize the anticipated danger.

This belief is of wide prevalence among the Maltese who treat it as if it were a Church precept. The



The Fat Lady ... "fertility has always been a basic human concern"

pregnant woman together with her relatives and neighbours follow the rule or else they feel they have committed an outrageous act. Even unwitting infringement of the rule is not justifiable. To this day this belief is still firmly rooted.

Għalik jinqasam tas-sultan, "For your sake the king's property would be shared with you" is an expression referring to this custom, which shows the strength of this belief, which has however no medical support. (Medically speaking, birth marks are a result of defects in the formation of the baby when it is still in the womb).

Some speak of "stains" bearing the shapes of broad beans, paste, peas, grapes, wine, sausages, liver, etc. It is interesting to note that all these examples are characterised by their lack of defined shape – *Qrolla – dabra bħas-šħab . . . kif toħroġ*, "A red mark – cloud-like patch".

All those concerned with the birth situation must see that they take all measures to ensure that the birth of the child is safeguarded. This regulation of a precautionary character (sympathetic prohibition) must be followed to the letter. It is an obligation.

The following are recorded conversations I had with the following informants: Saverja Borg and Cetta Vassallo, 50-year old and 70-year old respectively from Żabbar (Conversation 1, May 1974), M. Axiaq, an 85-year old from Żebbuġ – Gozo (Conversation 2, September, 1974), Żaren Axisa, 80-year old from Għaxaq (Conversation 3, 4 and 5, March, 1975) and A. Smith, an 80-year old from Valletta (Conversation 6, February, 1974).

DOCUMENTATION

Conversation 1

Question: (Lit.) What happens when a pregnant woman looks at something ugly?

Answer: Saverja: The child would be a monstrosity . . . No . . . I do not believe that because . . .

Answer: Cetta: Oh . . . you should believe because Gangija had such a monster . . . She gave birth to a dwarf. He is still alive. Because she went to the circus, she saw a dwarf and was astounded. And she gave birth to a similar one. He is still alive. She caught it. Of course we do find such things. I know him myself. Today he is quite old . . . this dwarf.

Answer: Saverja: But I am only half convinced. I know a certain man whose mother was amazed on seeing a goat. His face resembles that of a goat, even his ears. (Laughingly) Of course they aren't as erect as the goat's but . . .

Conversation 2

Once there was a woman, who quarrelled with another woman who was pregnant, and she did not

offer her some of the food she was eating. When she went to confession the priest would not grant her absolution.

Conversation 3

I used to sell blood pudding. Whenever I met a pregnant woman, I used to cut a piece of blood pudding, hold it on the tip of my knife, in order to keep it clean and tell her: Here . . . eat it. She tells me: Thank you. I answer: No. It's not a question of thanking me. Take it, because that is not for you. Someone else is going to eat it. This someone else must not be the victim of your shyness. – (Understand? It is the baby.)

Conversation 4

In the past we used to have a dish known as *bubagra*, "a form of casserole cooking". This could be closed by a key. However the top of the dish was full of holes and one could easily smell what was inside. Once a man passed by carrying such a dish. And a certain woman fainted. Quickly people went to this man and asked him: Have you any of that meat left which you had in the *bubagra*? He answered: No. There are only a few bones left. They told him: Next time do close the dish when passing by. And they asked him to give them some of the remaining bones.

Conversation 5

There was a woman who had already had two miscarriages. In order to prevent any further ones, her husband employed a maid to help her. But her baby was born with its mouth wide open and dead. The mid-wife told her that the baby's death was due to a wish.

Conversation 6

When a woman is pregnant especially towards the end of her pregnancy, if she has a dog, of which she is very fond she must get rid of it or she could easily have a child with a face resembling a dog's . . . Children born with rabbit marks . . . a certain woman had half of her face looking like that of a rabbit. Some would crave for liver and give birth to children bearing a stain resembling liver on the part they touch. Some have a craving for wine and the baby will have a red stain on its face. They tell you: That is a wish . . . it will not go . . . it remains forever.

Tarcisio Zarb

FURTHER READING

- Attard, C., "Wegħdi li saru u grazzji maqlugħa mill-Madonna tal-Grazzja", *It-Torċa*, 11.9.1977.
Cassar-Pullicino, J., *Studies in Maltese Folklore*, Malta, 1976, 219–220.