

THE CONCEPT OF MENTAL DISORDER IN MALTESE TRADITIONAL LORE

P. CASSAR M.D., B.Sc., D.P.M.

Resident Medical Officer, Hospital for Mental Diseases.

Introduction.

THE study of popular beliefs and traditions throws an illuminating light on the mental organisation of our ancestors and of the unlettered section of contemporary society. It reveals how the primitive mind tries to explain the unfamiliar in conformity with mankind's budding experiences of a puzzling and often hostile world. Much of this lore appears incomprehensible and nonsensical to us to-day, but its meaninglessness, like the strangeness of schizophrenic thinking, will disappear if its underlying motive can be discovered. The interpretation of folklore can be a difficult and sometimes an impossible task, because the traditions that have reached us may represent the end-products of the imposition of several cultural influences which cannot now be differentiated. This is especially so in the case of a people like the Maltese, whose earlier modes of thinking have become inextricably mixed, through the centuries, with the beliefs and customs of the various possessors of these Islands.

Among the themes of folklore, that of insanity is one of the most intriguing for, like the problems of death and the supernatural, it has puzzled man since the earliest days of civilization. It has often terrified him, but certain aspects of it have also amused him as we can see from the many tales which have grown round the figure of some feeble-minded character like "Gahan". Whatever the form of emotion aroused in him, the theme of insanity has never ceased to appeal to man's imagination and to tax his capacity for speculation.

The beliefs, legends and practices

that have been evolved through countless years by our ancestors in their attempt to explain and to cure mental disorder are gradually disappearing, and it is just as well that they should be discarded in favour of the present more efficient theories and remedies at our disposal. We are not justified however, in despising and ignoring the medical lore of our relatively uncultured ancestors. Traditional medical lore is important historically because much of what are to-day untenable popular beliefs, represent the accepted teaching of medical men of the past. It is also valuable from the sociological point of view because, in spite of its decadent notions, it continues to exert a great influence on contemporary popular thought and constitutes, therefore, a potent force to be reckoned with in our efforts to enlighten the masses in mental health matters.

The aim of this paper is to record what the writer has managed to collect of past and present Maltese lore on the subject of insanity and mental deficiency. It would, perhaps, be as well to point out from the outset that the material is not abundant. Much may have been lost through forgetfulness and much may remain to be discovered. Apart from all this, however, the paucity of the material may also be due to the fact that cases of mental disorder were not so numerous in the past as they are now.

The bulk of the material contained in this paper may be conveniently considered under two headings:— (i) lore that regards mental disorder as a manifestation of supernatural agencies; (ii) lore which attempts to explain and to treat

mental illness on more or less rational lines.

The Supernatural Approach.

The Maltese word for insanity is "genn". It is derived from the Arabic "ghafrit ginn" which means "a wicked spirit" (1). Vassalli connects the word "genn" with the Latin "genius" and renders it in Latin as "spiritibus obsessio" and "insania, insanitas, furor, mania" (2). Obviously our word "genn" conveys the idea that insanity is caused through the possession of an individual by an evil spirit. Apart from "genn" we also have the phrase "ferh ta' genn" (literally, "the offspring of an evil spirit") which denotes either simple loss of control, — a state of frenzy which does not amount to insanity (compare "losing one's head"), — or a sudden outburst of excitement with or without violence and which is actually a form of mental disorder known to psychiatrists as "mania".

The idea of possession underlies certain remedies prescribed for the treatment of mental illness as can be easily ascertained from the following practices. One form of treatment in the case of a "fright" consists in the reading of a portion of the Gospel of St. John over the head of the person who has had the fright by the Papas of the Greek Church. This custom is mentioned in Dusina's "Acta Visitae Apostolicae" of 1575 (3). The writer recalls that up to 20 years ago, it was the custom in Senglea to take mischievous children to a priest for reading over their heads a portion of the gospel in order to allay their restless temper (4). One also frequently hears harassed mothers referring to their problem-child as being "indemunjat" (possessed by the devil).

Belief in demoniacal possession was almost universal in the early middle ages, while still earlier cases of possession by a malign spirit are to be found in ancient Hebrew literature (5). It is not surprising that this belief should be found among us.

It is clear that the reading of the gospel in the cases cited above is a form of exorcism against the presence of evil spirits in the child. It is an instance of the employment of a supernatural power of a good kind to neutralise a supernatural force of an evil nature — a form of treatment that is widely used by the primitive medicine man (6). The belief in the value of exorcism for the treatment of mental disorder is to be found not only among uneducated Maltese, but occasionally even among the more cultured section of the population. The writer recalls the case of an old priest who was under his treatment for depression some years ago and who had gone to a high church dignitary to ask him to exorcise the evil spirit out of his body. It is not uncommon, also, to come across patients suffering from obsessions and compulsions of an obscene character, who are given to understand by well-meaning friends that their thoughts and actions are the attempts of the devil to damn their souls. In fact these patients complain of "tentazzjonijiet" ("temptations") when describing their obsessional thoughts and compulsive acts.

In the past, more energetic but less humane means than exorcisms were adopted to cast out the evil spirits. As late as the first quarter of the last century, insane persons who were detained at the Ospizio of Floriana were subjected to severe beatings, in the belief that they were possessed by the devil (7). There is a hint that even up to 1863 insanity was still regarded by certain sections of the community as a form of possession. In fact a statue of St. Vincent Ferreri (who was renowned for casting out devils) was donated in that year to the patients of the mental hospital at Attard.

Even to-day we still find the notion of possession appearing as a delusion in patients suffering from depression with a religious colouring. Such patients often express the belief that they harbour the devil inside their bodies, and they ascribe

their feelings of despondency and melancholy to his presence inside them (8).

Closely related to the belief in possession by evil spirits, is the belief in the so called "evil eye" for the warding and removal of which, various practices and charms have been devised (9). The conviction that certain individuals are endowed with the power of causing an injury or an illness by just looking at the person whom they wish to harm is widespread in Malta. This belief is sometimes met with in certain forms of mental disorder when it may be difficult at the initial stage of the illness, to determine whether it should be considered as a "normal false belief" or as a delusional formation. In not a few cases the influence of the "evil eye" is adduced by the uneducated patient as the cause of his mental trouble — a "theory" that may be upheld by the patient's relatives as the most probable explanation of the patient's unexpected illness. A particular person may be indicated as the individual responsible for casting the "evil eye" on the patient; or else no specific personal source is given, when the "evil eye" is conceived as being a malign influence permeating a certain locality. Thus a patient, who believed that her mental distress was due to the influence of an "evil eye", was advised by a friend to have the house blessed in order to cast out the "evil eye". A more radical remedy against this sort of influence, is for the whole family to move out of the house reputed to harbour the "evil eye".

Also commonly encountered is the belief that a patient's mental illness is the result of a spell cast upon him by an evil wisher.

Epilepsy.

Epilepsy is popularly known as "mardal-qamar" (literally "the moony sickness"), or more euphemistically as "marda tal-hass-hażin" ("to suffer from fits"). The name "tal-qamar" is derived from the belief held in the past that the moon and the planets could determine the occur-

rence of fits (10) — a belief that is still current in Malta even among educated persons.

This disease is looked upon with feelings of dread and awe by the uneducated section of the community, who, when they suffer from it, do their utmost to conceal its existence from their friends and neighbours. Epilepsy has obtained such a hold upon popular imagination, that some people, especially country folk, are even afraid of mentioning it and when they cannot avoid referring to it they make use of the phrase "barra min fuqna" ("God protect us") — an invocation that is also commonly uttered when mention is made of such other dreaded diseases as plague, cholera, leprosy, etc. Perhaps the dramatic signs and symptoms of this disorder — the sudden convulsion, the fall to the ground, the contortion of the facial muscles and the bluish discolouration of the face, the frothing at the mouth and the final unconsciousness — and the fact that up to very recent times it had defied all remedies, are responsible for the popular prejudice against the epileptic. This prejudice may also have arisen from the belief, commonly held in Europe in the middle ages, that epilepsy, like plague and cholera, was a contagious disease. It is known that an isolation hospital for epileptics was founded at Rufach in Upper Alsace in 1486 (11). It is highly probable, too, that our ancestors held the belief that the epileptic was a man possessed by evil spirits — an idea that was very common centuries ago, not only among laymen, but also among those who practised medicine. To this day "qam-mari" (i.e. epileptic) is considered to be a highly offensive and insulting epithet.

From Qala (Gozo) comes this fanciful remedy for epilepsy. A tortoise is killed and its blood is drunk by the person who suffers from fits. In order that the cure may be efficacious, however, the blood must be drunk immediately after the first fit appears (12).

Somnambulism.

A superstitious belief that lingered up to the end of last century suggests that it was an attempt on the part of our ancestors to account for the occurrence of somnambulistic phenomena. It was held that persons who were born on Christmas eve were transformed once a year on this day into a ghost (called "gawgaw") while they were asleep. Thus changed they were compelled to wander about frightening people with their groanings. Towards dawn they returned home in an exhausted condition. By the time they woke up in the morning they had re-assumed their human form but they were quite unaware of their nocturnal peregrinations. It was thought that this transformation was a punishment from God imposed upon those who were born on the same day as Jesus Christ, the explanation being that the Lord did not wish anyone to be born on the same day as his Son.

The remedy against this transformation consisted in inducing the sufferer to sit up all night and to count the holes of a sieve from eleven o'clock at night to the following Christmas morning (18).

Vassalli, after remarking in his dictionary (12), that the word "gawgaw" is derived from the Syrian "hagogo" (ghost) confesses that he is unable to explain how this legend originated.

Most probably the tale springs from two distinct levels — the idea of the transformation occurring on Christmas eve being a relatively recent graft on to an older source dating from pre-Christian times. That this may be so is suggested by the inconsistent way of reasoning between its two levels. In fact, the transformation is looked upon as being an indication of divine wrath and displeasure, which is an instance of the old belief that illness is sent by God. The logical inference of such a conception would be that, since illness comes from God, healing must also come from Him or through Him. In the "gawgaw" tale,

however, the cure that is prescribed does not follow this religious argument but appears to be based on the rational principle that in order to prevent the transformation from taking place, the individual must be dissuaded from falling asleep — hence the endless task of counting the holes in a sieve. It is significant that the transformation was regarded as a manifestation brought about by or during sleep, and that if the latter could be avoided, the transformation did not occur.

Whatever its origin and development, it is evident that somnambulistic phenomena form the basis of the "gawgaw" superstition. The wandering away from home during sleep, the return in an exhausted condition in the morning and the subsequent amnesia for the night events are typical features of somnambulism. The alleged transformation of the sleeper into a ghost is the popular way of denoting the psychogenic dissociation or splitting which is responsible for the somnambulistic state. The execution of complicated acts, the presence of terror reactions or other dramatic behaviour occurring during sleep have always baffled and terrified the lay mind. It is not surprising that, in the past an explanation in supernatural terms should be sought for phenomena occurring during sleep at a time when the underlying mental mechanisms with which we are now familiar were yet undreamt of.

The Rational Approach.

The various concepts by which the popular mind tries to explain the occurrence of mental disorder on rational lines may be considered under these headings:—

I. PSEUDO-PHYSIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS.

(1) Suppression of menstruation is believed to cause insanity. The idea is current that menstrual blood is "bad blood" and if it is not shed when the

period is due, it rises to the head and produces madness. Hence the expression "telghalha d-demm ghar-rasa" ("the blood has gone up to her head"). Perhaps this idea originated from the subjective sensation of "flushes of heat" in the head, of which depressed and anxious patients often complain.

Insanity is held to occur also if a woman washes her hair during her menses.

(2) The action of alcohol on the brain is explained on very similar lines. It is believed that wine and spirits heat the blood and cause it to rush to the head thus inducing a fit of madness.

(3) Not only an excessive flow of blood to the head but also a diminished supply of blood to this part of the body is held responsible for the occurrence of mental disorder ("nuqqas ta' demm f'rasi").

(4) Masturbation in males is commonly regarded as being a cause of insanity. This belief is held not only by the illiterate section of the community but also, unfortunately, by persons who should know better, such as teachers and priests. This is not surprising in view of the fact that until quite recently even medical men listed masturbation among the aetiological factors of mental disorder.

(5) Mothers ascribe the appearance of epilepsy during adolescence to the natural processes of bodily growth which occurs at this time of life ("l-iżvilupp") and they expect that the disease will disappear when the boy or girl reaches adult age.

(6) Some fancy that certain physical agencies have some special influence on the brain. I remember, among others, the case of a stoker who was suffering from depression and whose wife attributed his disorder to the action of fire on his brain — "the fire has dried his brain" ("in-nar xoroblu u nixxiflu mohħu").

(7) "Fjakkizza" and "debbulizza" ("undernourishment") as a cause of in-

sanity, is very deeply ingrained in the popular mind — hence the treatment for all forms of mental illness consisting in the daily consumption of large amounts of milk, eggs and other "nourishing" food-stuffs ("sustanži") to strengthen the supposedly weakened brain ("mohħ fjakk").

Lack of fresh air ("nuqqas ta' arja") is also thought to be causative of mental illness.

(8) Overwork is often adduced as a cause of insanity in the case of intellectual workers. Hard manual work, however, does not seem to be regarded as being conducive to mental ill health.

II. MECHANISTIC CONCEPTS.

Certain expressions in our everyday language denote a mechanistic conception of cerebral and mental processes. Thus "mohħu żurżeqa" (applied to a person with a bad memory) implies the idea of some object which, because of its sloping sides is incapable of supporting any thing placed upon it. "Mohħu ma jerfax" (applied to a person who is slow to learn) reminds one of a structure that is so weak that it lacks the necessary strength to support an object. "Mohħu hafif" has a similar connotation. The dynamic view is obvious in the term "għandu barma nieqsa" (literally "to lack a twist") and "għandu rota nieqsa" (literally "to have a wheel missing") used to describe an insane person. The phrase "il-menti tiegħi waqfet" ("his mind has stopped working") is interesting, because we find in it a reference to mind and not to brain as in other expressions. But here, too, the conception of mind is not that of an abstract entity but of a machine — some sort of clockwork that "stops working" when it goes wrong.

III. PSEUDO-PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPTS.

(1) It is a current belief that a fright may cause insanity and it is not uncommon to hear mothers, who have borne a

mentally deficient baby, to ascribe the mental condition of their offspring to a fright which they had experienced during their pregnancy ("qata' fil-guf"). A person, according to popular lore, can be frightened into madness if he is exposed to situations which are likely to cause sudden and unexpected fearful emotions, such as throwing cold water on the face of a sleeping person.

Various remedies to ward off the effects of a fright have come down to us:—

(a) A baby who has had a fright is dipped into a bath containing some flowers procured from the Sepulchre on Maundy Thursday. The dipping must be carried out on Easter Sunday.

(b) A puppy is killed and boiled in water. The broth is then given to the person, upset by a fright, to drink. The boiled puppy is then thrown into the plate while the patient is not on his guard in such a way as to startle him (15).

(c) "Sewwili flixkun" (literally "to prepare a bottle", i.e., a mixture) consists in the concoction of a potion which when drunk is supposed to prevent the deleterious effects of a fright. Up to some years ago there was an old woman at Birkirkara who enjoyed a wide reputation among the country folk for the efficaciousness of her mixture, the ingredients of which she would not divulge (16).

(d) The advice is often proffered to urinate immediately after one has had a fright. Perhaps the idea is to get rid of any noxious substances that are imagined to have been produced in the body as the result of the fright. In fact, when one has had a great fright he is spoken of as having passed blood in his urine.

(2) The occurrence of the so-called "lucid interval" and of apparent remissions in mental disorder has long been noted by Maltese folk. They tend to mistrust persons who have had an attack of mental disorder because they have an un-

duly pessimistic idea as to the final outcome of a mental illness. In fact, popular wisdom warns us that "il-mignun dejiem mignun, u meta juri li hu f'sahhet ghaqlu ftakar filli jista' jkun" ("once mad always mad; even when a madman appears sane, remember that he may not really be so").

Mental Deficiency.

Mental deficiency appears in our folklore in the character of "Gahan"—the good humoured, mischievous simpleton. Numerous stories have been spun round this character. Here are two illustrative examples:—

(a) Gahan's mother fell ill and her doctor asked her to preserve a sample of urine for examination. When the doctor called the following day, Gahan presented him with a chamber-pot full of urine. The doctor expressed surprise at the great amount of urine passed by his patient, but Gahan promptly reassured him, saying: "Besides my mother's, the chamber-pot contains also my urine, but my portion is on top" (17).

(b) On one occasion Gahan's mother went to church and left him alone at home. Before going away she told him to close the door when he left the house. He literally obeyed his mother's injunction—"igbed il-bieb warajk" ("pull the door behind you") — and having dislodged the door off its hinges, he dragged it along to church with him (18).

Etymological and historical arguments have been put forward (19) to show that the stories, as well as the name of Gahan are of Semitic origin, while Magri (20) argues that the tales of Gahan were brought by the Phoenicians to Malta and the Barbary Coast whence they were taken to Sicily by the Arabs. If Magri's theory is accepted, we have to conclude that the Phoenicians, who came to Malta many centuries before the Christian era, were well acquainted with the lighter side of intellectual backwardness.

The expression "dönnok ġahan" is still heard to-day and means "you act like a fool". Another saying, with the same connotation, but which does not seem to be current now, is "dönnok Canu". According to Bonelli, Canu was a simpleton who, during the siege of Malta of 1565, threw a pot containing burning material on his own comrades instead of on the enemy. The same author reproduces another tale centering round the stupid behaviour of a wife and a group of fishermen whose grade of intelligence must have been very low indeed (21).

As to the causation of mental deficiency, I have already mentioned that a pregnant woman who has experienced a fright is supposed to give birth to a mental defective. It is also popularly believed that any intense emotion, such as joy or grief, in a pregnant woman may cause imbecility in the offspring, while some forms of emotional upset during coitus may also result, according to folklore, in the birth of a mentally deficient baby.

Some of the gross manifestations of intellectual subnormality have impressed the popular mind, which has recorded its observations in the form of proverbs and aphorisms. The inability of the weak-minded person to count figures forms the basis of "mhux iblah, jaf jghodd sal-ghaxra" (literally—"he isn't a fool, he can count up to ten"); the not infrequent association of imbecility and idiocy with physical stigmata has given rise to the saying "mhux iblah daqs kemm hu ikrah" ("he isn't as big a fool as he is ugly"); while the lack of criticism and judgement shown by the mental defective is pithily summed up in "l-iblah taqlalu ġħajnu, jiřrah" ("pluck out the eye of a fool and he will rejoice over it").

Senility.

In our days, when the management of senility has been recognised as being mainly a psychiatric problem, it is only natural to ask ourselves whether there is any indication in our folklore as to how old people fared in the remote past. We have no direct evidence pointing to the fate of demented seniles, but some insight into the ideas of our ancestors regarding the disposal of old people may be gained from a consideration of the "Għaġuża" tradition and from a tale reported by Bonelli (22). From this story, we learn that there may have been a time when it was the accepted custom to dispose of old decrepit folk by walling them up alive into caverns and leaving them there to die.

The "Għaġuża" was the oldest person living in the parish (so the legend runs) and she was killed at noon on a Thursday in the middle of Lent by being hurled down from the steeple of the parish church or of a convent (23) or by breaking her body into two (hence the saying "l-ħaġuża f'nofs ir-randan tingasam") (24). The "Għaġuża", apart from being old, also had the reputation of being a wicked and deceitful woman, whence the phrase "ħaġuża hażina" and the saying "ma tridx temmen l'għaġuża" recorded by De Soldanis in his dictionary (25). This author suggests that this legend originated from the Roman custom, by which old people holding administrative offices were disposed of by being thrown from a bridge into the waters below. We do not know whether similar customs were ever established in Malta. It is not improbable, also, that the "ħaġuża" legend is a survival from the days when o'd crones were accused of witchcraft and condemned to die a brutal death on this score.

(1) Cremona, A. — "Some myths and beliefs in Maltese folklore" in "Melita", Vol. III, page iii; and "Race, Language and Myth" in "Melita", Vol. I, page 394.
 (2) Vassalli, M. A. — Ktyb yl klym Malti — 1796.

- (3) Quoted by Mr. J. Cassar Pullicino in "An Introduction to Maltese Folklore", 1947.
- (4) See also A. Cremona's "Race, Language and Myth" already cited.
- (5) Holmes, G. — "The Evolution of Clinical Medicine", in "British Medical Journal" of 6th July, 1946. See also the case of King Saul in the Old Testament.
- (6) Marett, R.A. — "Psychology and Folklore", 1920.
- (7) Cassar, P. — "The Institutional Treatment of the Insane in Malta", 1949.
- (8) Our ancestors also believed in the demoniacal possession of animals, as the custom of blessing animals on St. Anthony's day appears to show. We read that the devil used to assume the form of a beast when he tried to tempt St. Anthony to fall into sin. See Rev. G. Far-rugia's — "Id-drawwiet tal-Maltin", Bóok 85 of "Mogħdia taż-żmien", 1909, pages 10 to 11.
- (9) Busuttil, V. — "Holiday Customs in Malta", 1894; and J. Cassar Pullicino, op.cit.
- (10) Holmes, G. — op.cit.
- (11) "Epilepsy through the ages" in "Therapeutic Notes" of September, 1940.
- (12) Told to me by Mr. J. Cassar Pullicino on the 13th September, 1949. He got this information from an old peasant of Qala.
- (13) Busuttil, V. — op.cit.
- (14) Vassalli, M.A. — op.cit.
- (15) Busuttil, V. — op.cit.
- (16) Told to me by Dr. J. Pisani in December, 1949.
- (17) Bonelli, L. — "Saggi del folklore dell'isola di Malta", 1895.
- (18) Cassar Pullicino, J. — op. cit.
- (19) Cassar Pullicino, J. — op.cit.
- (20) Magri, F. — "Hrejjej Missirietna", Vol. II, Page 20, 1902.
- (21) Bonelli, L. — op.cit.
- (22) Bonelli, L. — op.cit.
- (23) Busuttil, V. — op.cit.
- (24) De Soldanis — MSS. 143, Royal Malta Library.
- (25) De Soldanis — op.cit.