

# pregnancy and birth in maltese tradition

Dr. Paul Cassar  
S.B.St.J., B.Sc., M.D., D.P.M., F.R.Hist.S(London)  
Hon. Fellow of the Royal University of Malta  
Consultant Psychiatrist  
Health Department  
Teacher in Clinical Psychiatry  
Royal University of Malta

The key to the unfolding and understanding of the psychological and sociological matrix of a nation lies in its distant past. It is from this remote point in time, therefore, that we have to take our bearings in our exploratory venture for the practices and beliefs that guided our ancestors in their endeavours to keep the flame of life alive from prehistoric times to our own days.

From the evidence of the decoration of the earliest pottery to be found in Malta (Għar Dalam) it appears that the first inhabitants of the Maltese Islands came from the Stentinello area near Syracuse about the year 2500 B.C. (Trump n.d). Some of the archaeological survivals of this stone-age culture reveal the concern of these early inhabitants with the phenomena of procreation and the propagation of life.

Among these remains are the naturalistic stone carvings of the phallus (Zammit, 1930). One of these objects, now in the National Museum, Valletta, consists of three erect phalli (12 cm. in height) cut in relief and standing on a low platform; another specimen has the shape of a slab (14 cm. x 16.5 cm. x 4.5 cm.) with a rectangular depression in the centre containing in bold relief the upper extremities of two upright phalli. The fact that these objects were excavated from temples suggests that they were used in the worship of the generative forces of nature; indeed the group of three phalli has a projection at the back which may have served as a handle for carrying it about as a sacred object (Report of Museum, 1917).

Further suggestive evidence that links up with this period comes from Gozo in the form of an oral tradition according to which pregnant women from the village of Xagħra used to sit or squat on a large stone to ensure the safe delivery of their baby (Bezzina, 1968). It is probable that the stone referred to is the semi-dolmen of Sansuna at Xagħra which is also a neolithic relic.

The excavation of a statue of Priapus with head missing from a building at St. Paul's Bay recalls the Roman period in our history (218 B.C.-395 A.D.). This Roman god was represented in the visual arts with various attributes among which was the presence of a cock's crest surmounting his head (Mizzi, 1900; Knight, 1866). The rendering of the word *crest* in the Maltese language is *għalla* which has a double meaning for besides the cockscomb it also signifies *parturition*; hence the expression, refer-

ring to a pregnant woman, of *għamlet l-għalla* i.e. she is pregnant or has given birth to offspring (Ms. 143, RML).

A native plant which bears a striking resemblance to the male generative organ was used as a fertility charm by Maltese women up to three hundred years ago. This is the *Cynomorium coccineum*, incorrectly known as the Maltese Fungus, which was worn as an amulet against barrenness by our women who suspended it between their breasts. This custom disappeared in the 17th century when it attracted the attention of a Capuchin missionary and was denounced by the church authorities (Abela & Ciantar, 1780).

Proverbs are an indication of the wisdom accumulated through the ages by a community. They reflect its attitude toward the more salient experiences of life. Since pregnancy and birth form a focal point of these experiences it is not surprising that a number of Maltese proverbs should revolve round these themes.

The scope of marriage, and therefore of sexual intercourse, in Maltese popular lore is procreation. This is the concept behind the folk song which flatters the bride:—

*La tgħaddi sena minn fuqek  
Lesti l-ħabel għal man-nieqa,*

i.e. when you have been married one year, prepare the cord for rocking the cradle (Cassar Pullicino, 1949). Indeed a marriage without children is no harbinger of happiness (*Iż-żwieġ mingħajr tarbija ma fiehx tgawdija*); on the other hand, the birth of a baby, like a stroke of good fortune, fills the house with brightness (*Risq u magħmudija ġo kull kamra tidher dija*) and provides the parents with untold delight (*Min għandu l-ulied għandu l-hena fil-wied*) (Aquilina, 1972 a).

The great esteem with which motherhood is held by the Maltese is expressed by the saying *il-mara tqila ġo did-dinja turi l-ħila* i.e. a pregnant woman shows her worth in this world; while the disappointment due to failure of conception is shown by the words *Mara bla żaqq bħal tieg bla daqq* (A woman without a large belly is like a wedding without music). But a childless woman must not get discouraged for she may yet become fruitful. Indeed *Jekk fil-qamar tħuf (il-mara) issaħħaħ il-ġuf* i.e. if a woman, desirous of offspring, "walks in the moonlight, she strengthens her womb", the idea behind this proverb being the popular belief that the moon excites one's sexual urges; so much so that childless women are advised to have intercourse on a full-moon night as in this lunar phase conception is more likely to occur than at any other time. The saying *il-qamar mimli, imma le jsellimli* (Aquilina, 1972 b) alludes to such an eventuality. Literally translated, the saying stands for "the moon is full but it does not greet me", i.e. the moon is

full my menses have stopped and I have conceived.

The woman knows whether she is pregnant or not at the time when her menses are due, the absence or presence of her menstrual flow denoting her condition in accordance with the saying *Meta tasallek il-ħasla tħabbarlek il-għażla*. But even if no pregnancy occurs there is always hope of conceiving in the future as long as the woman menstruates for *Min iħammadar jgħammadar* i.e. she who menstruates (literally "reddens") gets impregnated (Aquilina, 1972 c).

The handicaps of pregnancy have left their impact on the popular mind. The enlarged size of the abdomen in advanced pregnancy for instance, renders awkward and cumbersome the woman's movements. Thus *marā b'tarbija ma tesagħħiex ta' Brija* i.e. for a woman with child, (the wide road) of Ta' Brija (in the village of Siġġiewi) is not wide enough for her (to pass through); in other words the pregnant woman's place is at home. Then there is the disfigurement of her body which, however, can be hidden from public view up to a certain extent, by wearing the *għonnella*. This was a form of black head-gear, now hardly ever seen, which descended from the head to the back and almost down to the ankles and was so wide that it could be brought forward in front of the abdomen and wrapped round the lower part of the body. In fact the saying goes:— *Mara bl-għonnella qatt ma taf x'għamlet u x'kellha* (You can never tell what a woman did or whether she had any children if she wears this form of apparel) (Aquilina, 1972 d).

Pregnancy can interfere with the woman's routine activities. *Il-mara tqila tirbaħ l-għažż u titef il-ħila* which, literally translated, means "the pregnant woman becomes lazy and loses her ability" that is she is incapable of coping with her chores and becomes indolent.

"Quickening", i.e. when the foetus begins to move about in the womb, is supposed to afford some relief to the mother (*Meta t-tarbija tibda tħuf isserraħ l'ommha mill-guf*); but the woman who gives birth to twins must be prepared to endure a prolonged labour (*Kull min itewwem fil-ħielsien idewwem*) (Aquilina, 1972 e).

A special hazard of pregnancy which must be guarded against is the emergence of longings or desires which cannot be satisfied for, according to popular belief, the newborn will bear the brunt of a birth-mark resembling in form and colour the object of her unfulfilled desire. *Mara bix-xewqa*, warns the proverb, *lewn uliedha jiġu mżewqa* (The children of a pregnant woman with an unsatisfied wish will bear on their skin the colour of the object desired) (Aquilina, 1972 f). For this reason whenever an expectant woman expresses a wish for some item of food, her family or the neighbours do their best to satisfy her craving as soon as possible lest the baby be born with a skin mark (Cassar, 1965 a) on a part of its body corresponding to that touched by the mother when expressing her wish. A pink birth-mark denotes a desire for a

flower; a red tinge, for wine; and a brown one, for coffee or chocolate. According to shape birth-marks are interpreted as representing strawberries, shellfish, etc. (Repertorio, 1843). If a person neglects to satisfy the wishes of a pregnant woman, he or she will suffer from a sty by way of punishment (Arrigo, 1973 a).

More serious bodily changes can be induced in the foetus by the mother if she is not careful to avoid looking at ugly or deformed creatures; in fact no less than the birth of a deformed baby or an outright monstrosity. It is of interest to note that this idea was still upheld by some members of the medical profession in Malta up to the mid-eighteenth century so much so that a Maltese physician of this period did not hesitate to record the case of a pregnant woman who, having looked at the picture of a Moor, gave birth to a dark skinned child (Cassar 1949). To prevent such possibilities the pregnant woman, who has been exposed to unwanted sights, makes the sign of the cross with her right hand over her abdomen to ward off the harmful effects of any mental impressions she may have received (Repertorio, 1843).

The possibility that the baby might be born on Christmas Eve was a cause of some anxiety to the prospective mother for it was believed, even as late as the close of the last century, that those who were born on the 24th December were transformed once a year on that day into a supernatural being, called *gawgaw* in Maltese, during their sleep. Thus changed they roamed about the neighbourhood frightening people with their groanings. Towards dawn they resumed their human form and returned home in an exhausted state with no recollection of their nocturnal adventures. This transformation was regarded as being a punishment from God imposed upon those born on the same day as his Son for it was held that the Lord disapproved of anyone being born on the same day as Jesus Christ (Busuttil, 1922 a).

Certain bodily changes induced by pregnancy may provide a clue of the sex of the yet unborn child. Thus if the woman's complexion becomes pigmented or speckled, the chances are that she is bearing a girl; but if her abdomen is very prominent, she will give birth to a boy (*Meta l'omm tul it-tqala ikollha wiċċha qisu bil-ġlata jew nemex aktarx tkun tifla t-tarbija; meta tkun ikkupplata aktarx li jiġi tife*). However, the phase of the moon has also to be reckoned with for babies born during the first quarter are likely to be boys while those born during the second quarter will probably be girls (*Mit-trabi li jitwiċidu dawk ta' l-ewwel kwart aktarx ikunu irġiel u dawk tat-tieni kwart nisa*). To confirm the forecast, the woman ties her wedding ring to a string and dangles it in front of her abdomen; if the ring sways sideways, the offspring is female; if the ring swings backwards and forwards, the baby is a boy (Arrigo, 1973 b).

It is difficult now-a-days to envisage a modern house comprising in its construction a "labour or delivery room" in which the woman

gives birth to her offspring; yet in the not too distant past several houses, even when they were of small dimensions, had such a feature incorporated in their plan. This room was known as the "alcove" (*l-alkova* or *arkova* in Maltese popular parlance). It is found in both town residencies and village dwellings. One such alcove was built in a house at Żabbar as recently as seventy years ago (Attard, 1973).

The alcove was on the ground floor or in an upper storey depending upon the size of the house. One entered it through an arched opening in one of the walls of an ante-room known in some districts as *id-dar*, literally "the house". The alcove is a diminutive room with a floor area of about five by six feet being just sufficiently large to contain a double-bed (*is-sodda tal-għamara*). In some instances seen by the writer the floor still retains the flag-stone covering that formed a distinctive feature of the traditional Maltese flooring.

The arch giving access to the alcove may be plain and undecorated (Żurrieq) or else is framed by an elegant cornice carved out of the stone. In the ornate arches, the keystone bears reliefs of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and of Mary surmounted by an open or closed crown (Żabbar). The monogram M for Mary, the Madonna, and the initials IHS may be incorporated in the carving and placed in the space between the crown and the hearts.

In some cases (Żabbar) the archway is flanked by a narrow and low rectangular doorway which just allows a person to pass through (Fig. 1). A curtain, as large as the arch, conceals the bed from view. The ceiling is lower than that of the ante-room and is supported by one single beam. Over this ceiling is a sort of storage space or attic (*l-għorfa*) access to which is gained through a small window high up on the wall and which is reached by means of a ladder. On one specimen seen the attic is lighted by means of a small aperture (Żabbar). In another instance the low ceiling has been removed to make the alcove more spacious. The original window giving access to the attic has been blocked.

The alcove itself has no window and receives air and light from the window and doors of the ante-room. Occasionally the back wall of the alcove facing the archway has a small recess or niche to one side which in the past contained a sacred image and a lighted oil-lamp.

On the whole the alcove has an atmosphere of cosiness and intimacy; so much so that when it was not needed as a labour room it was used as a bedroom by the wife and husband. When the wife became pregnant and term approached, the alcove and its bed were occupied exclusively by the mother-to-be, the husband sleeping by himself in the ante-room usually on a settee known as *il-kanapè* (Attard, 1973). Following the birth of the baby, its christening reception, for relatives and friends, was held in the ante-room (Bezzina, 1973).

It is not known when the alcove as a delivery room went into decline but an informant from Żabbar tells me that she gave birth to her last child twenty-four years ago in the alcove. Another woman from Żurrieq, now aged fifty-one years and the last of eight siblings, states that they were all born in the alcove.

Although the alcoves have now outlived their original function, some of them have been lovingly preserved forming a quaint feature of Maltese domestic architecture. Others have been mutilated or destroyed when old houses were renovated. One must stimulate interest in the alcove and encourage owners of houses containing it to preserve it, for unless it is protected it runs the risk of being lost for ever in the current spate of house-remodelling. Besides being of considerable evocative charm, the alcove constitutes a distinctive facet of our birth lore and a social and medical land-mark reflecting the life-style of a vanished epoch and the shift from domiciliary midwifery to the maternity hospital.

Not all women favoured delivery on a bed in an alcove; on the contrary some of them preferred to give birth to their baby in the sitting position making use of the parturition chair or *siġġu tal-qabla*.

This piece of furniture, differed from an ordinary chair in two ways:— (a) the seat had a horse-shoe shaped aperture, and (b) an arm rest was fixed on each side of the seat so that the woman by holding on to each arm rest during her pains was able to increase the force of the uterine contractions by bearing down.

Some of these chairs were hinged so that they could fold down flat — *siġġu li jingħalaq* — for easy conveyance by the midwife; the non-collapsible type was usually carried for the midwife by a boy or young man on his head. From this custom derives the Maltese saying *qrieh għax iġorr is-siġġu tal-qabla* i.e. he has become bald from carrying the birth-chair on his head — the implication being that he lost his hair from the constant friction of the chair on his scalp.

In some specimens the chair had a leather belt attached to its back which was brought forward and fastened over the woman's abdomen to prevent her pelvis from sliding.

As the final expulsive phase of labour approached, a large earthenware bowl — called *lembija* — filled with straw was placed on the floor beneath the chair so that if the baby was not caught in time by the receiving hands of the midwife, as it came out of the birth canal, it would slip on the soft straw inside the bowl. A variant of the *lembija* usage was the attachment of a kind of drawer underneath the opening of the seat. This drawer was made of strong cloth like a hammock and was pulled out from under the seat to receive the baby during the last pangs of delivery.

In the eighties of the last century the use of the parturition chair was condemned by the Pro-

fessor of Midwifery of our university — Dr. Salvatore Pisani — who warned midwives against its use because the sitting position was responsible for the laceration of the birth canal with unpleasant complications for the mother. His opinion carried so much weight that its use was made illegal by the Police Laws of 1883.

In spite of these legal sanctions it was not easy to persuade parturient women to do away with the chair and as midwives were prohibited from using their own chair, some families had one constructed for their own private use. In fact these chairs were still employed, although sporadically, at the beginning of the present century in some of our villages. (Cassar, 1973 a).

The mother-to-be and her family, however, did not rely solely on the midwife's assistance to ensure a smooth delivery but resorted also to other ancillary measures. Until half-a-century ago, they used to acquire part of a plant (*Anastatica hierochuntica* L or Rose of Jericho) known in Maltese as *warda tal-passjoni* (passion flower) which they placed in a vessel with water. This plant, indigenous to the Middle East, grows about six inches high and forms spikes of small white flowers. After flowering, its branches lose their leaves and become dry, hard and woody. They turn upwards and bend inwards at their free extremities but if placed in water they open up to regain their original form no matter how hard they may have become (Delia, 1970).

A woman from Attard — who possessed one of these dried plants brought to her from "Palestine" — told the writer that the association of this plant with child-birth derived from the legend which related that while the Madonna was nursing the new-born Baby Jesus in Bethlehem she used to spread his washed nappies for drying on the branches of this plant which thus acquired its wondrous powers (Fenech, 1971). In fact the belief was current in Malta that as soon as the branches of the plant opened out the expectant woman would begin to feel the labour pains and would eventually be safely delivered; the pains, however, would disappear immediately the plant was removed from the water (Cassar-Pullicino, 1947).

The story has been told of a "passion flower" that was mislaid in the confusion that ensued during the confinement of a certain woman. She eventually gave birth to three sons but the plant was nowhere to be found. At last someone remembered that it had been placed in a drawer. When this was opened, to the amazement of everyone, it was found that the stem had brought forth three branches covered with leaves (Busuttill, 1922 b).

Not all confinements however had such happy endings. There were instances where a narrow pelvis or some other abnormal condition in the mother presented an obstruction to the exit of the foetus through the birth passages. In such cases the so-called *qasma tas-sultan* or Caesarean operation had to be resorted to in an effort to save the lives of both mother and child.

When the operation, for some reason or other, could not be carried out and the mother died in childbirth, both the State and the Church enforced its performance on the dead mother by a surgeon in a desperate bid to save the child; and when no surgeon was available, the parish priest himself was obliged to carry it out under the penalty, if he failed to do so, of "fulminating excommunication". In the absence of a surgeon and the parish priest, the task of opening up the abdomen of the mother and extracting the baby fell upon the midwife (Cassar, 1973 b).

Faced with the uncertainty and unreliability of human aid, women in childbirth fortified themselves by seeking the intercession of the Madonna and the saints in their hour of travail. Prayers were offered to St. Blaise, a fourth century bishop and physician, "to enlarge the width of the birth passages and shrink the size of the baby's head" to facilitate the expulsion of the foetus. The *Madonna tal-Flas* (Our Lady of Delivery) and the *Madonna taż-żellieqa* (literally Our Lady of Slipping) and St. Lukarda were invoked for the same purpose (Cassar, 1965 b). At Naxxar, St. Victor was venerated as a saint protector of pregnant women who used to drink water containing some powder obtained from his bones to ensure a smooth labour. This custom commenced in the late eighteenth century when his skeleton was brought from Rome and deposited in the parish church of Naxxar (Galea, 1937).

Another religious practice intended to avert an abnormal labour was the wearing by the parturient woman of a ring that had been blessed on the feast of St. Peter (29th June) during the ceremonies held in a church dedicated to this saint at Żejtun (Vella, 1927).

St. Raymond Nonnato, who flourished in the thirteenth century and who is reputed to have been born through Caesarean section, is nowadays called upon by expectant women who offer him a lighted candle during labour (Anon 1950). Other saints are appealed to and many of our churches are the depositories of small paintings and of silver *ex-votos* in the shape of babies in swaddling clothes offered in thanksgiving for the happy birth of a normal baby.

Another form of thanks to the Almighty for a safe delivery was the tolling of a church bell — known as *il-qampiena tal-lawdi* (literally "the praise bell") at the behest of the mother, the number of strokes sounded depending upon the amount of money paid to the sexton. This custom was still extant up to three years ago at Birgu (Spiteri & Bezzina, 1973).

We began this search for the stirrings of primitive man's concern with generation in the dim days of the pagan prehistoric temples of our Island; we have reached the end in the Maltese Christian churches of our own days. The godheads have changed but man has not. Indeed, in spite of the fact that in the intervening span of thousands of years he has devised a variety of strange beliefs and quaint ways for allaying his preoccupations, there is one single

motif which underlies and unites this traditional lore and gives it meaning, i.e. the perpetual need of humanity for relief from anxiety, for supernatural support, for kindling the spark of courage and for the renewal of hope when facing the awesome and still mysterious phenomena of conception and birth.

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An  
alcove  
at  
Zabbar.

(Photo by courtesy of  
Dr. C. Attard)