

## **The Folklore of an Island**

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**F**or many years folklore was said to consist mainly of telling or retelling of stories handed down from generation to generation providing many peoples with stories of great human heroes of the past, of extraordinary events and dealings of supernatural beings with men. However, with the passing of time, as more scholars began to interest themselves in the activities of man, the word folklore, which was coined by W. J. Thoms in 1846, acquired a wide meaning, covering legends, fables, popular stories, proverbs and sayings, songs, melodies and folk-ballads, nursery rhymes, folk-games and pastimes, children's words, riddles, folk-toys and playthings, superstitions, the occult, popular spectacles and festivals, rites and ceremonies, marriages, birth and death, popular beliefs, dress and costumes, domestic and religious usage, food and drink, local and traditional crafts, occupations both in villages and in cities, and other aspects of the daily life.

It was to the credit of Giuseppe Pitre', the great Sicilian Folklorist, that the realm of folklore was extended to include all the manifestations of popular life. The science of folklore, therefore, has gradually evolved into the study of mankind and its activities (Cassar Pullicino 1992: 13-23).

### **GOZITAN FOLKLORE**

Gozitan folklore forms part of our great body of the Maltese national popular heritage. Maltese folklore would have been considerably poorer had it not been for the Gozitans who preserved many traditional usage and customs and had it not been for Gozitan scholars who worked hard and unstintingly to collect folk material for its proper and comparative study, and also for the benefit of future generations. In this context special mention is due to the great eighteenth century Gozitan scholar

Canon Agius de Soldanis and to another Gozitan, the late Dr. Anthony Cremona, known as Ninu. Other major contributors in this regard are the Jesuit Father Emmanuel Magri, Professor Joseph Aquilina, and other modern writers who in some way or another did their best to add to our ever increasing mine of information regarding the Gozitan aspect of Maltese folklore.

Gozitans and Maltese are one people, so they have a common heritage as regards their customs, traditions and beliefs. What, then, is Gozitan folklore? One should not expect to find a demarcation line between Maltese folklore on one side and Gozitan folklore on the other. However, Gozitan folklore does exist and this represents an identifiable aspect of Maltese culture. This consideration puts the study of Maltese folklore on better and more scientific footing, as variants are an essential element when folklore material needs to be examined from different perspectives.

### CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE

Examples derived from children's folklore will illustrate this point. Up to a few decades ago Maltese folk-nursery rhymes were very popular both in Malta and Gozo. In 1948, in the April-June edition of *Lehen il-Malti*, the official organ of the *Ghaqdata l-Malti* (Maltese Language Society), Joseph Cassar Pullicino, the well-known Maltese folklorist, published a collection of fifty nursery rhymes with a comparative study showing similarities with Sicilian parallels. If we take variants into consideration this collection may go up to some ninety rhymes. Only about five rhymes were said to come from Gozo.

In 1966 about 237 rhymes and dialogues from Gozo were published in book form (Attard 1986). Some of the Gozitan examples are more detailed, make more sense and have a richer educative value with regard to history. The following two number rhymes, the first coming from Cospicua in Malta, and the second, a Gozitan variant coming from Rabat, will make this assertion clearer.

The first rhyme comes from Malta:

One     –  ta' San Ġwann,  
two     –  tal-Gvernatur,

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three	–	ta' Mari',
four	–	ta' Vitor,
five	–	tax-Xiklifajf,
six	–	tas-Sur Ćikk,
seven	–	ta' Buleben,
eight	–	tas-Sur Gejt,
nine	–	ta' Wied il-Għajn,
ten	–	ta' l-Infern,
		naghtik daqqa u nixthek hemm!

This rhyme can be compared to the following Gozitan rhyme:

One	–	il-ħarufa ta' San Ġwann,
two	–	il-palazz tal-Gvernatur,
three	–	il-banda ta' Indri,
four	–	il-festa ta' Vitor,
five	–	la xitwa u lanqas sajf,
six	–	il-banda ta' San Frangisk,
seven	–	il-qasam ta' Buleben,
eight	–	it-tigieġa fuq il-bejt,
nine	–	it-tigieġa fuq it-tajn
ten	–	intik daqqa u nixthek 'l hemm.

Considering also the large number of references to De Soldanis given by Cassar Pullicino in his study entitled *Kliem u Għidut it-Tfal* (Children's Words and Expressions), it is probable that the folklore material left by De Soldanis contains a great element of Gozitan traditional usage (Cassar Pullicino, 1945-47). Such words as *ħaj* (a car), *pipu* (a bird or a pigeon), *qajżu* (a pig), *xekkuka* (a sheep) and *kulaċi* (joining little fingers) are children's words originating from Gozo. Moreover, the Gozitan rendering of many lexemes included in his dictionary, if not a definite proof, is surely a very reliable indication of this assertion.

Another very strong Gozitan tradition is that of children's games. Before our streets and squares were invaded by modern heavy motor traffic, Gozitan children could run and play at ease and at leisure without fear of being hit by a motorbike or run over by a car. The fields and the countryside were also playgrounds for children. As is well known, boys and girls of a very young age all over the world like to play games. Our

children are no exception. Maltese and Gozitan children had their own peculiar ways of playing games. While Maltese children had their own *tule'*, *bumbard*, *ruhi*, *hadet*, *biha hajt* and *twila-la'* (Cassar Pullicino, (1960), Gozitan children had *il-Bżejqa*, *il-Qriba*, *il-Qabbuż*, *il-Kuklu*, *l-Iskorra*, *Gejder*, *Tmelliha*, *il-Ghoffu*, *Trajjos*, *it-Trija tax-Xaghra*, and many others. For many Maltese children these words are meaningless. But this is Gozitan folklore. The games just mentioned were described in full by the present writer in a booklet which was published way back in 1969 in which more than hundred folk-games were explained in detail for teachers, folklorists and educators (Attard 1969) Unfortunately we have no parallel publications from Malta despite the appeal contained in the Gozitan publication. This renders comparative study about Maltese and Gozitan folk-games a rather difficult and unreliable task.

At this point it is pertinent to mention *il-Brilli* (nine-pins) an old game for grownups usually played in the villages of Għarb, San Lawrenz and Kerċem. It is a very interesting old folk-game which in my opinion should be propagated by being taught in schools.

## GOZO'S NARRATIVE FOLKLORE

Children love to hear stories, even if the same story is repeated over and over again. Gozitan narrative folklore is so rich that very often foreign folklore enthusiasts wonder how in such a small island one comes across so many folk-tales, fables, aetiological legends and other local legends about practically every hill and vale, and every church and old building throughout the whole island.

Gozitan folk-tales narrate stories about Balmies and his enchanted horse, about the underworld, fountains of oil, the winds, the far end of the earth, giants and dragons, the inhabited citrons, Toninu and his envious brothers, and galleys sailing on land! (Magri 1902;1903;1904;1905).

The legends of St Dimitri, the miraculous stream of oil at Għarb, the coming to Gozo of the Capuchin Monks, the miraculous choice of a site for Qala's sanctuary, the wonderful bubbling water which appeared when building the first chapel of St Lawrence, the disappearance of the seven daughters of Selika into the whirlpool of Belliegħa cave, the brave girls



Selling milk the old way. Before pasteurisation was introduced this was a common sight in Gozo. *Photo: John Cremona.*

of Marsalforn bakery, the golden calf, the giantess who carried the stones of our prehistoric temples, the hearing of St Paul's voice while the Apostle was preaching Christianity to our Maltese brethren, are all local legends with a Gozitan touch, but not without some foreign influence.

### **GOZITAN TRADITIONAL CRAFTS**

Legends and fables appeal to children and adults alike, and as children grow up to become men and women, they become more and more interested in getting a job. In bygone times getting a job in Gozo only meant learning a trade or a craft. By far the most ancient crafts in Gozo and Malta were farming, fishing, building and quarrying. All the other small crafts revolved around these important industries. Needless to say, Gozitan crafts had a Gozitan flavour.

The cheese making industry is a case in point. Gozitan cheeselets were a little bit larger than those made in Malta. They were made from sheep's milk rather than goat's milk. In Gozo whey is called *xorrox*. This technical term is unknown in Malta and it is called *ilma* which, strictly speaking, means water. So much so that *gbejniet friski* in Malta are known as *gbejniet ta' l-ilma*. Cheese forms made of dried stalks of rushes were also manufactured in Gozo and there were three sizes, smallest for Malta, middle sized for Gozo and the largest form for *gbejniet tan-nar*, an imitation of Sicilian cheese made of heated milk, also very popular in Gozo several decades ago. The cane-worker supplied the cheese hurdles (*qnieneċ*) made of local dried smaller size reeds. Dried cheeselets (*gbejniet moxxi*), salted and pepper cheeselets (*gbejniet maħsula / gbejniet tal-bżar*) would seem to have their origin in the Island of Gozo.

The traditional master-builder used to construct special windows for the drying of cheeselets (*twieqi tal-gbejniet*) and also small ventilated rooms (*kmamar tal-gbejniet*) wherein cheese hurdles were hung. The carpenter made a special mesh (*nemusiera*) which was kept in place by wooden strips. Such a mesh was made to prevent mosquitoes from entering the cheeselet room through ventilators. The cooper used to make wooden buckets for transporting dried cheeselets to Malta.

Gozitan cheeselets were an important item in our people's diet. Fresh cheeselet (*gbejniet friski*) could be eaten with bread at breakfast. *Mellusa*, is curdled milk spread like butter over a piece of bread. It was very popular in the village of Żebbuġ. A cheeselet on a pancake (*gbejna fuq fitira*) was also popular when in Gozo several kinds of pancakes (*ftajjar*), each prepared and sold according to specific occasion throughout the whole year, were important delicacies. Fresh cheeselets were also crushed to make ordinary cheese-cakes (*pastizzi*) and round cheese-cakes (*qassatat*) for Easter. In the case of the latter green broad beans were mixed with the filling for the traditional Easter *qsaset*.

One should mention in this regard, ravioli (*ravjul*) and *fdewwex* which were kinds of thin pasta cut in broad ribbon-shaped slices served in milk. In Malta they do have cheese-cakes, round cheese-cakes and ravioli but the filling or stuffing consists of *rikotta* and not crushed fresh cheeselets as in Gozo.



Lace-making was introduced in Gozo around the mid-18th century. It has become the most well-known traditional craft of the island. *Photo by courtesy of A. F. Attard.*

## **OTHER TRADITIONAL DELICACIES**

Gozo is renowned for its delicious nougat made according to a different formula from that of Malta. We still have *bankonċini* (very probably unknown in Malta) which are sweet biscuits consisting of white of eggs, sugar and ground parboiled peanuts. Genuine Gozo wine was the traditional Gozitan drink. Gozo wine shops were an established institution. Grape producing fields and vineyards are found all over the Island even to this day.

Dried fruits such as dried figs (*tin imqadded*), and its by-product *tin taċ-ċappa* (lumps of figs) as well as dried tomatoes were home-made items of food for many Gozitan families and featured as important Gozo delicacies of bygone years. We also had *għasida*, a kind of traditional porridge made of fine Gozo semolina or flour meal. The traditional bowl in which this porridge was prepared was called *imghasda*.

## FARMING IN GOZO

Our farmers used to spend many long hours in the fields. They needed nutritious food, suitable clothing which was hand made by our traditional female weavers, they also required hats to protect them from the scorching sunlight. These hats were made of dried palm leaves at the village of Qala. Many types of baskets were also made by cane workers at Xagħra and Nadur. These baskets like wicker baskets were of different forms and sizes, had different names and were used for fodder, grapes and fruit, and were also extremely handy for all kinds of work. Luckily, the craft of basket making has not died out yet. During the last World War, a family of rope-makers from Cospicua settled in Gozo and with them they brought the craft of rope-making. Regretfully this craft has died out in Gozo very recently.

Agriculture (including gardening) was the traditional industry *par excellence* in Gozo. The methods used for digging, sowing, irrigation, harvesting, and threshing were different in many ways from those used in Malta. There were also important differences in vocabulary. In Gozo, technical terms are more abundant and more detailed, and very often more to the point. A very good book which could be used for a comparative study in this regard is that about Selmun written by Paul P. Borg. Two examples will illustrate this point: The plant which in Gozo is called *Xatbet l-Andar* (*Verbascum Thapsus* L.) is called *Xahbet l-Andar* in Selmun. Further investigations suggests that the Selmun people corrupted the original pronunciation of the plant's name, which literally meant the broom of the threshing floor.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Another example of linguistic differences between Malta and Gozo, is the rhyming quatrain of the folk-tale of the Seven Inhabited Citrons. The Selmun rhyme goes like this: *Ringi, ringi, ringi, / Sewda Gharbija, / Imniehrek langasa, / Xufftejk lenbija.* which in English can be rendered as "Ringi, ringi, ringi, a black Arab woman, your nose is like a pear, your lips like a large kneading bowl"

This is different from the Gozitan rhyme as given by Father Emmanuel Magri: *Girlingirlija, / swejda Gharbija, / imnieher il-langasa, / xufftejn il-lenbija.* Here we have the word *Girlingirlija*, whatever it may mean, but metrically more suitable. Instead of *sewda* the Gozitans say *swejda*, the diminutive of *sewda*, meaning "just a little bit black". The next couple of lines are two expressions in the grammatical construct state, linguistically more beautiful, richer, and more precise in meaning. In English the last two lines could be rendered as "with a pear shaped nose" and "with lips similar to the rim of a kneading bowl."



Traditional tools and implements of our farmers and fishermen are also an important topic which could be studied in comparison with that of Malta. Many of our tools and implements were made by our blacksmiths and carpenters. One blacksmith from Għarb even managed to invent the Gozitan knife, *sikkina tal-Għarb* famous in both islands for its durability and sharpness.

## THE BUILDING INDUSTRY AND STONE QUARRYING

The building industry has been with us for thousands of years. Indeed, according to the *Guinness Book of Records*, the Ġgantija Prehistoric Temples are the oldest free standing structures in the world. Gozo has a richer and more varied geological outcrops than Malta, and the Gozitan traditional quarrying and stone cutting industry are an interesting and very important sources of folklore material. Gozo used to have all kinds of stones quarried from various sites: soft *franka*, that is soft globigerina limestone, fine building stone, the real *franka*, free from impurities, hard upper and lower coralline limestone, the latter being used for monuments. We even have onyx from Żebbug with which several fine pieces of art have been produced for the embellishment of the parish church of that village. There is also a special kind of *franka* for the manufacture of stone-stoves (*kwiener*) which used to be exported to Malta and to Greece, and another special type of *franka*, a harder type for the making of puteals (*hereż*) for all the wells and cisterns of these islands.

The building industry is well entrenched in the hearts and minds of the humble people of this island, so much so that several Gozitans have become well known master-builders of churches, palaces and other public buildings.

The standard measurements of building blocks of stone in Gozo are different from those of Malta. Even when the Government intervened some years ago to reduce the standard measurements with a view to making smaller and lighter stone blocks for better and easier handling, the differences between Gozitan and Maltese measurements remained. In fact, just to give one example, common Gozitan building blocks have a height of 11 inches while similar Maltese stone-blocks are only 10.25 inches in height. A Gozitan master-builder informed the present author

that Gozitans were very keen on sticking to these differences in spite of Government intervention, and this, they said, for technical reasons known to them.

Traditionally, the village of Żebbuġ in Gozo has always been the village of master-builders. Victor Vella built the *Ta' Pinu* Basilica, the dome and roof of Żebbuġ Parish Church and the Kerċem Parish church. Victor Vella built the Żebbuġ Cemetery and for some time worked, with Joseph Dimech, on the Ġhajnsielem new Parish Church, one of the largest monumental churches in Gozo. Louis Vella built the dome of the Xagħra Parish Church, the Monastery of the Friar Minors (*Ta' Ġiežu*) at Mġarr, Munxar and Fontana Parish Churches, and the Chapel of Our Lady of Lourdes at Mġarr. Michael Vella built the church of Perpetual Adoration, *Ta' Savina*; Xavier Vella built the dome of Vittoriosa Collegiate Church, the dome and the naves of St George's Parish Church in Rabat, the original Church and bell-towers of the Qala Parish Church, the chapel of the Sacred Heart at the Seminary and the steeple of St Augustine's Church in Rabat. Other localities of Gozitan master-builders are Xewkija and Rabat, though every village at one time or another had its own master-builder.

We also had the humble and unknown master-builders who erected our rubble walls all over the countryside, which have been with us since Neolithic times. Since then the whole of Gozo has been terraced with fertile fields enclosed by rubble walls.

Stone quarrying in Gozo and the study of the traditional building industry and local architecture are two primary sources of folklore material with considerable richness of technical terms and other information. Gozitan craftsmen know well the meaning of such words, which may be somewhat different from the meaning current in Malta, and this leads to an important consideration regarding the misuse of certain traditional terms.

### ***Tampering with Gozitan Folklore!***

There were instances when Maltese writers on Gozitan folklore used words which are not current in Gozo or which in Gozo have a different meaning. Just to give one example, a Maltese scholar, not being familiar

with the Gozitan term, *pett*, a technical term in stone quarrying meaning a hole for two iron wedges (as given by Father Magri) altered its meaning and gave his own incorrect interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

As stated earlier Gozo's folklore has distinct characteristics when compared with that of Malta. For example, Carnival in Gozo has never been ushered by the *Parata* performed on Carnival Saturday. Nor is the *Kukkanja* of Gozitan origin (see Mifsud-Chircop 1990: 183-184) – it was re-introduced in Gozo only recently. The traditional Carnival dance in Gozo is *Il-Kumittiva* and not *Il-Maltija*, though they are similar. Carnival in Gozo is mostly characterised by people wearing all sorts of strange costumes roaming in the streets late at night, some of them with white bed-sheets on to appear as ghosts! Similarly, in Gozo the *čuqlajta* as far as the present author knows, has never featured *in lieu* of bells on Good Friday.

## MEDICINES, PRAYERS AND SECRET FORMULAS

Another important aspect of Gozitan folklore relates to folk-medicine and folk-remedies. These remedies were resorted to when a member of the family fell ill. Many wild plants and herbs had medicinal value. There were all kinds of recipes on the use of these herbs. Other folk-remedies including such items as salt, vinegar, honey, barley, carob syrup, oranges and lemons and other fruits, the water of certain wells and cisterns containing running water, sea water, and even the use of lighted candles placed on the body and extinguished by placing an empty tumbler over it (*fintusi*). Many a time religion was mixed-up with superstition. A pious Gozitan named Francis Mercieca, known to all as Frenč tal-Gharb, was able to find a folk-remedy for nearly all the diseases and ailments by which people became afflicted and thus he became famous throughout Gozo and Malta.

Fumigation on Easter Saturday with blessed dried olive twigs and palm leaves, together with the reciting of folk-prayers, could ward off the evil eye, a much dreaded superstition among Gozitans. It is also a known fact that certain secret formulas, known only to fishermen, could calm down

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2. This is the original and correct meaning given by Magri (1904: 73). Mifsud Chircop (1994: 176) gives an incorrect interpretation.

and stop a water spout at sea. Water spouts at sea are very dangerous indeed and fisherman will never disclose the exact words, otherwise they may lose their power. Old prayers such as *Il-Vrajs* and *Il-Brajbu* helped Gozitan Christians to die in peace with God and go to heaven.

Going to heaven implies death (Cassar Pullicino 1981: 39-44). It is not possible to include all customs associated with death and funerals in this brief presentation, and only a few will be mentioned here. A custom prevailing in Gozo was the hiring of poor women and beggars to pray over and watch the corpse for the whole night. Another Gozitan custom associated with funerals, prevailing in some villages of Gozo, was that mourners accompanying the corpse to the burial ground following the funeral mass, used to return in procession to the room of the deceased where they knelt down and recited the rosary (Cremona 1973: 301-304).

Until a few years ago the people of Gharb used to attend a funeral with their *kabozza* on, worn the wrong side. The *kabozza* was a traditional Gozitan cloak which, according to some scholars, originated during the times when our Islands were under the Arab domination.

## CLOTHING

Old *Ex-voto* pictures, another folk-tradition in Gozo, usually provide considerable information about Gozitan clothing in the past. There was a numerous collection of such *ex-voto* pictures in the National Sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception at Qala. Unfortunately they were all destroyed on superior orders from Malta. The reason given was that they were occupying precious space! This goes to show that acts of vandalism do not always come from lowly and uneducated people.

Gozitan costumes can also be studied from the drawings in land terriers kept at the National Library of Malta, paintings in private collections and churches, references in old deeds and wills, court sentences, official orders or *Bandi* and research work on such old crafts as weaving, lace-making, and the extinct craft of the dying of draperies by local dyers.

Until quite recently such words as *flanella*, (flannel), *terha* (sash), *qorq* (sandals), *ghonnella* (faldetta), were very common household words. As

a matter of fact, the *ghonnella* died out in Gozo only a few years ago (Cassar Pullicino 1966: 149-225).

## FOLKLORE IS STILL ALIVE

Gozitan folklore is not just something of the past. It is still alive. We still have our own festivals in honour of our patron saints. The characteristic elements of these *Festas* are band marches, fireworks, very often of a very high standard, the parade with the statue of the patron saint, the horse-races, the religious procession and the concluding band marches with much fun and merry-making.

The mid-August feast of *Santa Marija* has, in addition, an accompanying Agricultural and Industrial Show, which may have originated from the fruit and vegetable fair which several centuries ago used to be held along the street leading to the Citadel.

Saint Gregory's Day (12th March) and its penitential procession was in the past an important date on the Gozitan religious and cultural calendar, but it is not longer celebrated since it was suppressed due to parochial feuds and litigation. But a number of traditional folk-fairs have survived, including those at id-Dwejra, at l-Ghadira ta' Sarraflu, within the Citadel, at Marsalforn and other parts of the Island.

The Gozitan community does its best to keep alive certain typically Gozitan traditional crafts such as lace-making, weaving, extraction of salt from sea-water, cane-work, hat-making, stone-carving, bee-keeping and the extraction of honey, rope-making, extracting of orange water from the blossoms of citrus trees, wine-making, fishing, baking bread and other Gozitan traditional dishes in old village bakeries, and other old crafts of the Island.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has only touched upon a few items of Gozitan folklore, and space constraint does not permit the coverage of other matters such as marriage customs, proverbs and riddles, the pottery industry, Christ-

mas, local designs for different uses, street niches and other devotional items, and so on.

It should be emphasised that by studying Gozo's folklore one would not be studying only Gozo's past - but also the living Gozo. Times have changed and are still changing. Nowadays we see boys wearing earrings and long hair, girls wearing all revolutionary styles and fashions, they drive cars, go to the disco and dance all night long to noisy music. This is modern folklore, the living folklore of our times and Folklorists should observe and study it, so as to leave their findings in writing and in pictures for posterity.

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