

Inauguration Speech

H.E. Ugo Mifsud Bonnici

President of Malta

When Gozo was an island isolated from another island somewhat less isolated from the rest of the world, it acquired specific traits which are more than simple variations of the national character. So perhaps one is sometimes justified in using the appellation: "Maltese and Gozitans", because in certain contexts a difference is discernible. Gozo has the culture of Malta, but there are typical cultural idiosyncrasies brought about by special and particular historical circumstances.

In the Maltese Islands, Christianity is the most constant cultural influence. The presence of the Church is felt throughout Malta and Gozo. But whilst Malta, and especially, but not exclusively, those areas within the bastions, was directly exposed to lay cultural influences through the Order of St. John and its members, who were not only religious, through the presence of the British military forces, through commerce and its attendant social contacts, through the University which has always somehow transcended all religious conditioning, Gozo was more culturally dominated by religious influence. Accordingly, as expected by the paramount position occupied in Gozo's social and cultural life, this has resulted in a higher frequency of priestly vocations, in a more intense attention to churches, feasts and liturgical ceremonies, than that found in the larger Island. Until some time ago, the moral regimen of the individual by social conditioning was stricter and more intense than that in Malta. According to a high Vatican prelate, the diocese of Gozo provides the highest number of vocations in the world, as a proportion of the population.

Another characteristic trait of the Gozitan culture is the place occupied by operatic music. This was formerly part of a tradition common to Malta, but whilst this tradition does not seem to have been seriously disturbed in Gozo, in Malta, British influence was stronger and has somewhat

displaced operatic music, (Italian and French), from the taste of a section of the Maltese public. The appreciation of opera and the esteem for this type of music explains the fact that Gozo not only possesses two opera houses built without state aid, but sees opera productions very minimally assisted when opera everywhere has to be very heavily subsidized.

Objectively speaking, one can safely affirm that these two phenomena - one of significance in religious culture and the other in the culture of the art of music - really distinguish Gozo as an Island.

Other distinctions may be purely the fruit of subjective observation and should be premised by some preliminary reflections.

When one lives for an appreciable time in a country, one starts becoming aware of nuances in the language, in the mentality, in the culture which a hurried passage would not reveal. Malta is a small country, comprising two Islands of unequal size but which, one would have thought, share the same attitudes, styles of life and speech. However, in almost every town or village in the Maltese Islands there exists a distinct spirit which is a synthesis of many influences. Attitudes towards what one should wear, towards food, work, affluence, good manners, saintliness, sex, differ from town to town and from village to village. At times, villages quite near each other astonish us with their difference. Ghaxaq and Gudja, Safi and Kirkop, Imqabba and Qrendi are examples. Sometimes, one needs to have a fine ear to distinguish one village dialect from the inflexion of the next. On occasion, the pronunciation and intonation are markedly different. Żejtun, for example, possesses an accent which is unmistakable and which is far removed from that of its neighbour, Żabbar.

How can one explain these differences? How can one account for the different modulations in accent and pronunciation, beyond the actual setting out of the facts of linguistic study. But perhaps more important still, how does one explain away the *stadtgeist*, which distinguishes town from town and village from village? How isolated were the inhabited nuclei of the Maltese Islands from each other, up till a century ago? From whence their accretions? Was there an identifiable figure: perhaps the headmaster, the Parish Priest, the member of Parliament, the local chemist, or the doctor, that left a mark on the place? Sometimes, the influence of a particular Headmaster who in years gone by had led the

village school for a number of years, persists and one could attribute good results in that schools to his influence, even after a lapse of time. In the case of a number of characteristics of an older centre, one can analyse only with some difficulty the different elements which had influenced it throughout the centuries.

The alchemy of the different *charismata* of important personages, now forgotten, of the effects of traumatic events, now fortuities of history, is there, but it is far from easy to sort out the genealogies and decipher the reasons.

It is not an easy task to explain why Gozitans have their own distinct manner of pronouncing words and formulating phrases. Their intonation is also very recognisable. There are a number of words, such as *bajju*, which in Malta are not known. As Gozo has contributed some of the best scholars in the study of language, from Agius de Soldanis to Ninu Cremona and Guze' Aquilina, it would not appear out of place to hope that some Gozitan scholar might now research Maltese as spoken in Gozo and the various dialects of the Gozitan villages.

Perhaps most subjective would be the perception of the differences in mentality. First of all, the very concept of intelligence. It is well known that people in Gozo, as a result of circumstances, and by long tradition, reserve special consideration for the use of one's wits, prudence and circumspection, administrative stratagems, mental energy, well directed ambition, with a minimum of rhetoric. These may be results, but they are only explicable by the high esteem in which knowledge and observation are held in Gozo. Thus, the schools in Gozo achieve some of the best results. Also a good number of Gozitans have ascended the highest rungs of the *cursus honorum* in in the Maltese Islands: Presidents of the Republic (Buttigieg and Tabone); Presidents of the Courts (Dingli, Mercieca and Camilleri); and Bishops. The contributions made by Gozitan minds to Malta's political, artistic and scientific life are indeed important. One can observe in Gozo the phenomenon of people living in communities which realised that in the absence of resources and with the disadvantage in all dimensions, they had to further whet their mental capabilities.

One can also see another result of the particular circumstances of the Gozitan environment, in the attitudes to waste and profligacy. An

eminently agricultural island, with a restricted number of jobs and salaries, looked at money as a scarcity, not easily earned. The average Gozitan is therefore generous but rarely a spendthrift. Other parts of the Maltese Islands have taken on some Englishmen's penchant for considering money as easy come, easy go. All through the centuries, there were not many instances when money was flowing easily into the Gozitan's pockets.

In the same way, one can understand the proverbial reticence of the Gozitans, in speaking out or discovering what they know. In a society where everybody is everybody's acquaintance, and everything is known without being discovered, one feels uncomfortable in owning up to the discovery of information, leaked in whispers. The spoken word has a social dimension beyond its sound. It does not pass the critical sieve too easily. Restraint in speech is the result of a drill of self-control in exercise from childhood. The sincere declaration coming from a Gozitan is a deliberate act, as a conscious act of generosity and is therefore precious and to be relied upon.

The study of cultural diversity is important, indeed necessary, but also entertaining as much as the study of bio-diversity. Cultural evolution, as much anthropological as it is sociological, and indeed history, merits all our attention. That of Gozo presents itself well for scientific study, because the typical concentration is still there, though the isolation has diminished considerably and will continue to diminish. It is a unique case, which history will not repeat.

It is also interesting to note how the Gozitan spirit, the produce of the still of the special circumstances of this island, has contributed through its past representative figures to the political and cultural history of the nation. Many of Malta's politicians had Gozitan roots or were directly influenced by the Gozitan spirit of taking life seriously and in earnest. The Gozitan attitude was a determining factor in the movement towards the achievement of political independence.

The yeast from Gozo was definitely kneaded into the whole country's assertion of its independent nationhood.