

“The Gozitans are happily depressed”: narratives concerning the gozitan Mindset; past and present.”

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Introduction

The Maltese archipelago has always been the object of intense migration patterns and is a site of intense historical as well as modern competition over sovereignty. It is also the object of intense Anthropological intrigue specifically in the instance of Jeremy Boissevain and others. Possible reasons for this include its colourful history of occupations by various peoples from the Mediterranean, the Middle East as well as North Africa. It is also a series of Islands of immense strategic value, both historically and more recently as one of three southern maritime borders of “Fortress Europe”. Malta lies 200 miles north of Libya and 220 miles to the west of Tunisia. The most immediate observations of the Maltese lifestyle, their diet and religious disposition (98% being Roman-Catholic) one might be quick to discount their sustained relationship with North Africa in exchange for understanding Malta as a more conventionally-Mediterranean land.

This paper, consisting of around 20 interviews with varying degrees of formality, considers the prevailing consideration of a North African “Other” that appear again and again just outside the perimeter of everyday conversation. The study for this work took place over two consecutive summers on the Island of Gozo. Gozo is often posited as the purportedly more traditional and for this reason harmonious of the Archipelago and served as an excellent site of study in relation first to its relationship with Malta proper. A brief consideration of the islands previous occupiers might be fruitful. The Phoenicians occupied the island around 1800 BC, followed by the Greeks in 700 BC, The Carthaginians in 480 BC, The Romans in 216 BC, The Vandals and Goths in the 5th century. This is followed by the return of the Eastern Roman Empire in 6th Century, The Saracens in the 9th Century followed by the Arabs during the 9th and 11th Centuries. This reign was eventually overthrown by the Knights of St. John during the 11th and 16th Centuries.

Section One

Folklore and The Gozitan Mindset

The first section of this work considers the relationship between the two islands observing the all-too-frequently discussed dichotomies of Core/Periphery, Civilized/Uncivilized or Forwards/Backwards. The second section is a consideration of Malta’s position in the EU, and the perception of “Others” observed in everyday narratives, stories and anecdotes.

My first informant was an elderly Woman who was eating dates. One of the first things she conveyed to me was her mediocre proficiency in English. We chatted and she asked if I had a “Woman” and I answered that yes I had and she insisted I bring her to Gozo. She enquired as to whether I was going to see the festa to see the Fireworks festival (For More see Shaughnessy; This Volume) and I replied once more in the affirmative. She assured me that I must arrive early to go to mass, which was quickly followed up by questions concerning my religious denomination. Around this time this woman lamented that she might not see the Festa this year. This she blamed on her failing eyesight. There was a moments silence before my informant proceeded to tell me of a story that transpired a long time ago in the village of Gharb. This exact narrative appears verbatim, my informant was an exceptional storyteller, but I wish now to turn to Camilleri’s description:

The story of Heroic San Demetri is a moral fable of the supernatural. It concerns the plight of “Old Zgugina” a devoutly Christian widow and her only son who she “treasured”. It’s said that Zgugina worships and prays daily for

her son’s safekeeping. Camilleri notes: “Such prayers were sorely needed for Gozo at the time was being ravaged by hostile hordes of Muslim pirates” (Ibid, 11)

It should be noted that aphorisms such as “Fierce” and “Blood-Thirsty” are constantly invoked to characterize, while concurrently dehumanizing, the North African Pirates. One day it’s said that the pirates came ashore in search of “Treasure” and finding nothing at the widow’s house of value, they take her son captive and return to their offshore galleon. Zgugina does not abandon hope and races to the chapel at Kap San Demetri (San Demetri’s Cape). It is at this point that following a short prayer that the mural painting of San Demetri comes to life atop his horse. The ethereal form of San Demetri races across the seas in pursuit of the plunderers. Not long afterwards the spirit returns with Zgugina’s “cherished son” and before she gets the opportunity to thanks the spirit it has returned to the painting from which it came.

This is a uniquely Gozitan folk-tale, it is alleged, and is reinforced in mythology by the disappearance of the site at which these events transpired. The chapel at San Demetri, I was told by the woman that day in Gharb, sank into the sea after either a heavy storm or earthquake. It was soon rediscovered by divers some time thereafter. It has since been bestowed with an almost Atlantisean symbolic importance, being as it was discovered completely undamaged on the ocean’s floor. It is also said that the divers discovered it, with its door ajar, and full of breathable air. The verity of these claims, whether Malta is on an earthquake fault-line or the saint’s appearance as a drug-induced hallucination, should be cast to one side. We must suspend our disbelief and instead focus on this narrative as a mythico-context upon which meaning is ascribed and from which meaning is, and can be, elicited. The focus of this work is on the persistence, prevalence and permutations of this kind of “invasionary” narrative in the Gozo of today. Camilleri restates the importance of understanding these myths as they relate to the entire population of Gozo which now faces the ever-imminent threat of encroachment and “modernization”:

The reader will note several recurrent motifs which help bestow on these folk tales a kind of “collective identity”... the dark years of the 15th and 16th centuries. The era of pirate excursions have left a lasting impression on Gozitan folk identity.” (Page 7-8)

This speculation on the Gozitan collective identity, being informed by raids on their Island, does indeed have a pride of place in the Gozitan imaginary. It appears with the same kind of monotony in tropes as those observed in the work of

Paul Farmer. The reason for this is not only because the repeated attempts at gaining sovereignty of the islands, but that the Turks made slaves of the Gozitan people over a period approaching a decade and a half. Camilleri notes: "...The legends present an insight into the mind of the Gozitan and the things which simulated him in the past...where the moody seas bring forth terror from alien shores" (Pp 8)

What I feel Camilleri is trying to transmit is the fact that these things were of interest to the Gozitan in former times and the Anthropologist might situate himself in the modern day to see if there are any remnants of this mentality in anecdotes and narratives. I have tried to demonstrate in this section the prevalence of terms concerning invasion and safety which is found in prayer and religious redemption. The fact that an informant elaborated on this myth in the first instance serves, I have attempted to convey, the sustained relevance of these myths. The point, essentially, being that they have a sustained relevance by the liberty of their retelling.

Shortly after wishing my informant goodbye, and promising that I would indeed bring my Woman to the island of Gozo, we met a businesswoman whom I will refer to as Maria. We struck up a conversation over the fact that a research associate resembled her late husband and we got to talking from there. She had glowing reviews of where she lived and worked and afforded us many anecdotes of everyday life in Gozo. One trait among many was the resurgence of the idea of Gozo as a traditional, and for that reason, very safe and crime-free community. However she did make mention of a cautionary tale she insisted we know of before parting company:

"A Student like you... cycling his motorcycle was killed in a cave not far from here. They caught the perpetrators, and they escaped. Then they found them and put them in jail... There was also a man beheaded on Malta, so you must always walk in pairs... Beware, all people have both good and bad."

The wrong impression can easily be eked from a narrative such as this one. The hermeneutics of suspicion might cause the reader to reduce this to a "backward" or closed minded traditional mindset. One might see it as one stratum among the stereotypical conditions of a face-to-face community. However I contend that we must understand this narrative as a modern-day fable. This reimagining of the threat of invaders serves to hold a continual place of prestige as safety is so closely associated with autonomy, and for that reason must be observed and enacted by the outsider.

Section Two

Heterotopias, Foucault and Fables

Before entering into analysis of the data from my chief field-site and informants I would like first to offer and understanding from Foucault, from his work "Of Other Spaces". The work opens with a critique of linear time, which is that we have a telos or that time is unidirectional. As is typical of the rest of Foucault's work he underscores how the notion of time, is and has to be, a product of its time. Instead, he suggest, we might endeavour to study Heterotopias. Heterotopias, an exceptionally useful analytical tool for understanding cultures, are spaces that are both mythic and real and connected to the world at large. This can be across time and space and that Heterotopias can exist in contradiction to the reality it signifies. He juxtaposes Heterotopias and Utopias, the former being a very real observable and an analysable phenomenon and the latter being a fictional and unreal space. The necessity for an analysis of this kind is to restate the importance of folklore, not simply relegating it to the past, as a thing of great import in the Gozitan mindset. Understanding Gozitan Folklore is, I contend, seminal in to understanding Gozo's relation to North Africa.

The reason I have deployed Foucault's idea of the Heterotopia is that it can serve as an excellent frame of reference. Maria's narrative for instance is a heterotopia- it pertains to real events and has a moral that can be observed and upheld in daily life for the purposes of self-improvement. We might contend then that "safety" while on the island can only be granted through the enacting of certain criterion- walking in pairs. That is to say it doesn't exist independent of it being undertaken by human subjects, and so the storyteller is propagating a narrative to ensure the sustained safety of the individuals on the island utilising cautionary measures against a background of a multifaceted history which is invoked and is in-play, in the fullest Derridean sense. It is for this reason that a consideration of the invocation of Gozo's troubled past, and its related mythology (expressed in Folk-tales) is a necessary inclusion to the perception of Others in everyday life. This came across in its fullest expression during my time spent in the company of a vintner/winemaker in Victoria, Gozo's capital.

Section Three

"Geneva" and Contextual Description

Off to one side of the busy Piazza in Central Victoria you can find a small bar which has been there in excess of 100 years. The current tenant Stephen (a pseudonym) is an elderly gentleman, a retired school teacher, who opens up

shop from around 11:30 to 13:00. I would be told later that the bar was once very busy in the 1920's when it was purchased for around 100 Maltese pounds. At this time it went by the name of "Geneva" and attracted customers from the surrounding area, as well as Malta. The owner took great pains in showing me the art-nouveau fixtures, early roman inspired designer tiles and marble slated tables. The bar, including an area behind the counter was no more than 200 square feet, but the glass cabinets featuring dust coated bottles, the many mirrors and its high-ceiling made it feel extensive. The room had four tables and a variety of chairs of differing design and one special chair upon which Stephen would always be seated. Over the two summers I developed a strong affection and knowledge of the place and became more and more accepted there as time went on. This I feel was evidenced by the fact that I was allowed to smoke indoors, which is usually reserved for locals who could explain themselves quite readily to the police in the event of them being caught. The bar has been in Stephen's family for generations. As a young man Stephen travelled to Malta to teach English, which he did for three decades until his father died at the age of 55 due to complications with a valve in his heart. Stephen attributes this to his Father's alcoholism (It's said that he drank a half-bottle of Scotch daily), which informs Stephen's moderation of alcohol to the present day. Over the course of fifteen or so meetings he never once joined me in having a glass of wine. He preferred to drink wine only with food, and proceeded to tell me which varieties of wines make the perfect accompaniment to which meats. He also told me the correct posture to adopt when drinking. This ceremonious consideration of wine-drinking obviously informed how he thought about Gozo's youths:

"The festa is on tomorrow...I don't like Festa. Too many people. There is a name for that. Claustrophobia. Do you understand? I used to go to Floriana (on Malta Ed.) and there were 100,000 people there...Now it is only teenagers drinking tots (Rounds of drinks, usually Vodka) and Cisk (a local lager). They just get drunk. It's not about the saints anymore."

Firsthand observation led me to believe that there was an element of truth to this, and this almost off-hand comment was probably for many the truth of the matter.

There were times however that Stephen got quite incensed and was uncharacteristically maddened. One occasion occurred when he was repeatedly visited by a policeman. He mentioned a car parked outside the bar which was not normally there:

"It is a Peugeot. Today I am waiting for my son. I will have to close early. He has a corn on his foot. Do you understand that? I have the car, and I don't have my mobile, and he has difficulty walking you see..."

It was at this point that a policeman entered and the two discussed a matter in Maltese which appeared to be of great importance. Stephen returned to his seat a little while after, somewhat humbled, and said:

"Someone has phoned and is saying my car is an obstruction! I moved it, but it's not an obstruction! I am waiting for my son and he's not well! That car is twenty-three years old... (He proceeds to tell me a brief history of the French Automotive trade.)"

At this point in the narrative the antagonist is still unverifiable and so Stephen appeals to empathy, and I find myself being of the opinion that he's been wronged. This is done by reiterating his son's illness. However when Stephen is able to put a face, and more importantly a nationality, on the faultfinder things become very different. He returned after another visit, this time a more heated argument with the same policeman and appeared very irate. He said:

"They're saying my car is an obstruction!! I am 80% sure I know who it was [Names the owner of a Cafe adjacent to the Bar]. If it was a pedestrian he would've complained and been on his way. Do you know what we call people like that?? Maltese Bastards!"

Having a 74 year old man characterising the Maltese as bastards might be, to some, indicative of a secret umbrage the Gozitans feel for their neighbours. However this kind of differential categorisations does not serve very fruitful when approximating what Camilleri calls the Gozitan "mindset"- It is far more likely that any individual who has been angered would react in a way not too dissimilar from this one. I feel the true revelatory moment in this interview would come later. Still visibly angered and hurt Stephen went on to say:

"I could reopen this shop! Stock it with Beers and pizza and outcompete them, and not just in price! They would taste good! They have- Have you seen?- a table in the street! They're not happy having them just in the square-but on the street! That's dangerous! I am simply waiting for my son. I am not an obstruction. I will open my doors and stock beers, and pizza. (A moments' pause). Not this year, probably..."

It was during this pause that Stephen had gathered his thoughts. Dwelling on the idea of retributive action I asked:

“Why don’t you complain about the table? I mean if...”
At which time he cut me off.

“No. They can complain. I won’t respond. Because then I am making myself unhappy, and I want to be happy. Gozitans are happily depressed.”

And that was it. Stephen had gone from seeking empathy, to being enraged and then finally sublimation with the understanding that all Gozitans, like him, are happily depressed. It was for this reason he sought or exacted a type of revenge. Instead he united himself with words to the rest of Gozo, and moved on. The Gozitan mindset for this reason might be seen as an inhabitable space where making shrewd compromises in reality can bring us closer to happiness.

That is not to say that there is a prevailing tendency to understand invasion as imminent or possible. One must enact and be aware of one’s “safety” as noted in Maria’s narrative to ensure one’s sustained survival. This was brought to the fore during another conversation with Stephen:

“S: Would you like to hear an anecdote?
(I nod earnestly)

“This is a funny anecdote. And it’s true! It’s a true anecdote. A farmer was woken up one night and his wife is saying to him that she thinks she heard something downstairs (Would traditionally have housed farm animals). Something outside is moving. And the farmer goes down and picks up a... Do you know what a club is?

(He makes a bludgeoning motion. I nod)

And he has the club. And the noise is outside. There is a noise outside. And he hits it- Anddi you know it was his own sheep!! And that is true! (We both laugh) I have another one. Some people don’t know. Are you Catholic?

“Yes I am.”

“The sermon was about not being shaken.

Never surrendering to Satan. And the priest preached: “I will not surrender to Satan! I will not!” and everyone in the mass said that. One man who said “I will not! I will not!” went home to his farm. He was working and suddenly he felt something at the back of his neck, it was moving down... The raiders you see would do

that... to hold you on the ground by the neck. He thought this and said “I surrender!! I surrender!!” And do you know what it was?

“No.”

“It was (flattens his hand at about head height) his tool that had fallen on him!! And he said I surrender to his own tool!”

These two anecdotes, a method of conveying information that is overlooked in many disciplines as being merely-anecdotal, illuminate the humour in misattribution. The first thing to observe is that the Gozitan in both instances is characterised as an arable farmer, well-meaning individuals that are both presented with situations which are remnant of former ages. “The Raiders” are still very much a part of the Gozitan mindset. It is interesting to note that Stephen had to break up the momentum of the second anecdote to make explicit the implicit practice of pushing individuals to the ground which is what the raiders did. It appears to locals this fact would be all too apparent. Also integral to the stories is that raiders are always thought to be there, and in both instances never were.

Section 4

Encounters with Others and the European Union:

That’s not to say that Gozitans have never encountered Libyan or Tunisian (these two nationalities appear time and time again in conversations) individuals. Another customer at the bar, whom I met only three times, Alistair told me that his daughter had moved to Italy to teach prison wardens Arabic. The reason cited for this was that Libyan immigrants arriving in Italy were sent to prison and no one was able to communicate to them in their own language. Alistair also insisted that year on year growth of North African immigrants to Italy was exponential. It was at that time I questioned whether many migrants arrived to Malta. I was told:

“Yes. Two men arrived in Gozo from Libya. Not long ago. Well the police called the coast guard of Libya to hear of what should be done. They waited. Then the man in Libya said: “Find a gun and shoot them dead”. Of course the Gozitan police couldn’t. I believe they were sent to Sicily.”

This is the final feature I will consider for analysis. Until now this work has focussed on linguistic expressions of the Gozitan mindset and his relation with the Other. However this statement demands that we consider a quantitative aspect to, what so far has been, qualitative research. The Tampere Project established in 1999 by the European

Union was an effort to cull immigration through the Southern Maritime Border of Europe. This border of Europe consists of Italy (Sicily, Lampedusa) Spain (Including the Canary Islands) and Malta and Gozo. As stated previously Malta is located 200 miles north of Libya and 220 miles west of Tunisia. It would be expected that Malta would have a significantly higher immigrant population but figures from January to August 2006 show completely unexpected results:

Malta's figures are around 1/10 compared to that of Sicily and Italy in 2006, with an even lower proportion than that in 2005. What I would ask that the reader consider is the fact that Sicily is almost 100 kilometres to the north of Malta. I had the opportunity to ask my informant in Stephen's late one evening for a possible reason as to why this might be.

I received the following response:

"Malta and Gozo have always been important. Many, many peoples have passed through here. And lately the EU (Malta is a member state as of 2004) have done a peaceful takeover of Malta to tell us to stop."

My time in the field came to a close shortly after this aspect of Malta in relation to the wider European community arose in conversation. And it is at this moment that I will bring my analysis to a close.

Conclusion

The necessity for further pursuit towards understanding the Gozitan Mindset:

In sum this work has examined the Gozitan mindset in relation to Folklore and the related narratives elicited from informants that serve to illuminate everyday life in Gozo. Through conducting fieldwork with the informed consent of my participants I argue that moral narratives of safety and awareness, as well as a historical awareness of raiders in the past and in the present can help to approximate an altogether greater understanding of the heterotopias that is everyday life in Gozo. I believe an approach that considers sacred spaces (such as Kap San Demetri) multi-faceted approaches to eliciting narratives (moral and otherwise) and abandons the necessity to "totally" diagnose the Gozitan national character will allow the continuation of exceptionally fruitful work to be produced year in, year out at the Anthropological Summer School and by Xpeditions.

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