

Bocci u Brillu: A Few Notes on Throwing Balls

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S U M M A R Y

Bocci and brillu are two traditional games played in Gozo, which continue to draw interest from locals and tourists alike. Because of the confusion surrounding the history of these games along with other marbled games, this piece serves as an historical and functional clarification. Research conducted through participant observation and informal interviews informs the ethnographic accounts of how these games are conceived of and integrated into the space of leisure, work and social memory.

A R T I C L E I N F O

Keywords

Bocci, Brillu, Gozitan Culture, Theory and Ecology of Games, Fieldwork

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Introduction

This report explores two traditional games played on the Maltese island of Gozo. After introducing the reader to bocci and brillu, I will describe how these games are played (out) and unfold in the greater community. A focus of this paper will be to detail some of the games' rules. Attention will also be paid to the social context of the games, especially as they take on new formations and cultural representations.

Bocci and brillu do not involve or engage in national and church politics. While it is true that brochures celebrating Gozitan culture/autonomy, and even traditional Maltese culture, will oftentimes showcase pictures of brillu, the games themselves and their outcomes are not politicized. This is rather striking because politics pervade much of social life on Gozo. Whereas Ghana, Maltese folk singing, can be highly politicized in its themes and song content, it is rare for bocci or brillu to take on any political dimensions. Given that Gozo is often touted by locals as being more religious and thus 'conservative' than the rest of the country, it is worthy to note that these games do not reflect or overlap significantly with any religious issues and/or agendas.

Bocci and brilli can be understood as games because they require less physical exertion than typical sports. The Maltese word *logħob* (games) is used in association with bocci and brilli more than the term 'sport'. Time is not regulated or organized into discernible segments, nor is time built into the strategy and structure of either game. Furthermore, bocci and brilli are in a sense a celebration of the passing of time. They echo sentiments of leisure, and provide a public atmosphere of informal social interaction between players and onlookers.

To say that something is a game does not imply that it is less socially or culturally productive than a sport—which often commands a large following, economic investment, and 'the stuff' dreams are made of. As a leisure activity, bocci and brilli provide respite, play and self-exploration. Leisure can be thought of as time away from work and official duties. It is a realm of activities that people choose to engage in on their own, and in their own way, for purposes that have more to do with attaining pleasure and feeling 'good' and 'relaxed', than with economic gain.

Games such as bocci and brilli are organized along a set of rules, which can be broken and oftentimes they are (e.g. there are games which specify when certain rules are suspended). Games are not just chaotic free-play. Along with their rules and regulations, games tend to feature a range of possible social interactions (e.g. cooperation, competition, empathy, sharing, planning, negotiation, etc.). Of course there are games that people play by themselves, like *solitaire*, but social games like bocci, which involve more than one player and an audience are dramatically enriched by the game's inherent sociality.

Societies around the world conceive of games in a wide variety of ways. In western societies, games can have positive or negative connotations. In the case of the latter, one recalls Herman Hesse's novel, *Die Magister Ludi* (The Glass Bead Game), where scholarship and intellectualism evolve into a meaningless festival game. Games in this vein have a negative connotation, especially when they undermine philosophy, scholarship, and critical theory. For something to devolve into a game suggests a lack of commitment to meaningful change and ethical practice. Take for example what happens when the line is blurred between war games and real war, when war is reduced to nothing more than a game. On the other hand, games can be positive and associated with the concept of 'play'. Like sports, games provide an opportunity to engage in play—an activity touted in human development and evolutionary literature as adaptive, and important for social, psychological and physical training (Chick 2001).

Geertz's influential essay on the hermeneutics of Balinese cockfights, and his 'culture as text' approach (Geertz 1973) provide an interesting set of models to think with regarding the cultural and social dimensions of various Gozitan games. For instance, bocci and brilli are not master symbols or even key texts in which one can decipher the ethos of Maltese (or for that matter Gozitan) culture. Rather Geertz's notion that social activities like cockfights (and games) afford us a window into culture allows us to see certain aspects of society.

Bocci

Bocci (aka *bocce*) is a sport in the family of boules, a type of game played with metal balls. The general aim of boules is to throw or roll one or more heavy metal balls toward some kind of a target, usually a jack or a marble-sized ball. Bocci has an ancestry that dates back to the early Roman Empire, and has developed to its present day form in countries such as France, Italy, Malta, and Australia.

According to earlier anecdotal accounts, Maltese bocci was first introduced during the period of the Knights of St. John. It was known then as the marble game or "*Loghba tal-Bocci*". Today, there is still some historical confusion regarding these 'marble games'. In fact, games such as bocci, marble games for kids, and brilli are all quite different from each other. Bocci in its contemporary form has more in common today with boules (bowls) and *petanque* than earlier forms of games involving just marbles. According to a 2008 Sicilian government report on the history of Maltese marble games, Floriana was the site of an early boules-like game, which was succeeded by what we know today as contemporary bocci (Compilation 2008). According to folk literature, glass marbles were not always available. Hazelnuts and round pebbles were substitutes when children could not access the glass marbles used as stoppers in ginger ale bottles (Lanfranco 2006). Nonetheless, bocci is played throughout Europe and in Malta; and it is played primarily between the months of March and October. There are more than thirty bocci clubs throughout the country of Malta, and many federations hold tournaments. The rules of modern day bocci can be easily found on the Internet, and the Gozitans do not deviate substantially from these. In fact, their metal balls and jacks are imported from France. A few words about the game's rules and strategies will help set the stage.

Like football, bocci is played on a pitch. But unlike football, the pitch is very small about 2.5-4 meters wide by 20-27 meters long. It is played on a hard surface covered



Figure 1: Photo Courtesy of Jessica Gergely.

with coarse-grained sand. This adds a dimension of unpredictability in the balls' movements across the fickle terrain. Bocci balls are made of metal and each team has different colored balls or patterns to distinguish them from each other. Bocci balls are spherical, and fit into the palm of an adult's hand like a smooth and heavy lawn ball. A much smaller ball resembling a dark marble called the jack (aka pallino and boccino) is carefully rolled to a position about 2 meters away from the end of the pitch. The two teams then have the chance to bowl or throw their bocci balls (usually a slight underarm cast like tossing seeds onto the ground) close to the jack. Only the team that is closest to the jack can score in any round of the game. There are many rounds to a match, and teams score anywhere from one to several points per round. Whichever team gets 21 points first wins. Each team usually has designated setters and knockers. The setters are the ones trying to get their bocci balls closest to the jack. The knockers are the ones that throw the balls underarm in order to knock their opponent's ball(s) out of the way, or to move the jack to a more favorable position.

What I would like to focus some attention on now is how bocci is experienced, or rather played out socially among the community members, and before the gaze of tourists in Qbajjar. The bocci pitch at Qbajjar is owned by the local government, but taken care of by members of the bocci federation (which is associated with the town of Zebbuq). There is a covered pitch with a roof and flaps that can be drawn down in case of rain (replete with indoor lighting), and an outdoor pitch directly to the right of that. To the left of the indoor pitch, when looking straight on, is an impromptu coffee and teahouse run mostly by older women. There are a few tables and chairs, and one can always find a handful of women playing cards, drinking tea or just chatting. Men dominate bocci; in fact there was only one woman sitting down on the rails of the pitch. Her husband, a retiree was a regular player, and when I asked her if she had ever played, she replied yes, but added that she doesn't here because the men won't let her. Her husband, Rigo, heard this and quickly pointed out that bocci balls are heavy and not suited for women. Maria quickly added, "You men just like to control everything." Because much of women's leisure time is conditioned upon their roles as mothers and caretakers of the house (Borg and Clark 2007), women have taken on leisure activities within the domestic space. At Qbajjar, a very telling phenomenon occurs—the older women are the caretakers of the players. They serve tea and coffee, sitting at their tables waiting to make sandwiches and provide comfort to the players. The older men are out 'in the field' playing bocci. A domestic

and public distinction along gendered lines preserves itself even in the space of leisure.

A picture of a saint adorns the wall of the pitch, and when I asked whether or not there was anything religious to bocci, a few of the players laughed and said, "You could try saying a prayer before you play, but I don't think it helps." Many of the men had muscular forearms, and several sported a rough and sturdy stride, the result perhaps of a lifetime of tilling the hard soil. Most of the men retired from factory jobs, but many of them still worked the scattered plots of family land. I could see it in their eyes: These players were fishermen, farmers, and custodians of time. After their graceful throws and violent knocks of the metal balls, they would gather round the jack like ancient senators, measuring distances with whatever piece of dried grass found its way onto the pitch.

The bocci site at Qbajjar is akin to a porch stoop. It is a communal place where local people gather. The locals see the world, the ocean, and in turn tourists often sneak a peak into their world as well. For the most part, the players and those hanging about know each other personally. Furthermore, the games provide a context for facilitating the daily news. Everyone shares in the delight of a good shot or the agony of a missed opportunity. Empathy, celebration and gossip intermittently weave into an afternoon or lazy night of hanging out at the bocci pitch.

Brilli

Brilli, on the other hand, is a very old game with roots stretching back before the arrival of the Knights of St. John. It is now only played on Gozo, and in particular in an area near the western town of Gharb. Upon first glance, brilli resembles bowling because there are pins and a wooden ball. Even though many people play bocci, brilli is only played by handful of men—and only in San Piertu Square on Gozo. People on Gozo say that brilli is an older game than bocci, and certainly much has been written about brilli as a part of Gozitan folk culture. Air Malta flight magazines often feature touristy pictures of men playing brilli.

Brilli, which is sometimes referred to as nine skittles for the nine conical pins made of wood, resembles bowling to some extent. The skittles are arranged to form a square-diamond (three rows, each row containing three skittles), and the object of the game is to knock down the skittles to score points. Each game can last several rounds, and each round consists of two throws. A rather heavy and



Figure 2: Photo courtesy of Ruben Cuschieri.

dense wooden ball about the size of a grapefruit is used. The object is to get 24 points, and if someone surpasses 24, then they are bust and immediately sidelined until the next game.

Arthur Taylor elaborates on the skittles (pins) from a recent trip to Gozo. He says that, "Different pins have different names and values. The centre one, called is-sultan, counts nine points, the corner pins, is-secondi, are worth six points, while the others, qarmuc, count one. The aim of the game is to score exactly 24 points. Each time you throw, you get two goes with the ball - first, from the agreed starting point, the messa, and then from ir battatura, which translates as the place where the ball settled after the first throw"(Taylor 2009).

The first throw (il-moll) scores differently than the subsequent throws. Knocking down just the is-sultan gains 18 points, while knocking down just the is-sekond and the qriemec gets you 12 points and 1 point respectively. If more than one type of pin is knocked down on the first throw, then only 2 points for each pin is gained. The second throw is launched from where the ball happens to stop after the very first throw (il-Hazz). The points earned for knocking down the is-sultan, is-sekond, and qriemec are respectively 9,3 and 1 after the very first toss. There are even several scoring versions of the game. For example, during my visit to San Pietru, the men assigned 18 for the middle or is-sultan pin, and 6 and 2 respectively for the is-sekond and qriemec on the first toss.

After both throws are made in the first round, and no one has yet scored 24, a second round ensues. Typically, knocking is-sultan scores 2 points, while everything else gains only 1. This scoring regime continues for the rest of the game. The strategy involves knowing how to throw or roll, and navigating the cobbled and pothole stricken streets. Usually there are five to seven men who play brilli on Sunday mornings and holidays. Before each game, the players draw straws by spontaneously showing a number from one to five on their hands. They go around adding up the different fingers, sometimes twice, in order to reach a desired number. Whoever provides the last hand of fingers to reach this number gets to go first and pick the starting point. At San Pietru, the winner of the game gets twenty cents from each of the losing players.

Not only are there different scoring regimes, but there are two distinct types of brilli games: "Il-partita" (translated as the game and historically the preferred style) and "It-troffa" (translated as tuft of hair). According to Attard:

"Il-Partita" is a game played in pairs. For an odd group of players, the odd one out will play for two. The team that manages to get 24 points exactly wins the game; this is called "ghluq" (gheluq or a game closer). One point over is called "moghdija" (translated as path), and immediately the team loses. In "it-Troffa", the participants play in singles. The player scoring the highest points after one or two throws is declared the winner."(Attard 1969).

The players at San Pietru play a mix of the two types. During my visit, there were only six men playing, five retirees and a high school teacher. One player in particular, who appeared to be the second oldest member of the circle, was the most vocal and energetic. Although his black hair was thinning, he had it slicked back and was nursing a toothpick. He wore sunglasses and displayed a few faded tattoos on his forearms. After a successful throw he would rush over to me, grab my arm, and the arms of his friends and point to the skittles and say, "Can you fucking believe that?" He also showed the same excitement and disbelief when he addressed me about the events of 9/11. Apparently he had just watched Michael Moore's movie and was more than eager to share with me, quite physically actually, his own conspiracy theories. He would grab my arm, then my shoulders, shaking them and saying, "Can you fucking believe it?" When his throws would miss the skittles entirely, he would start cursing in Malti. There was something of a 'living museum' quality to the brilli game. These men were conscious that they were preserving the game. They forgot how their grandfathers played in pairs and in teams, but they developed their own version of the '24' game.

Conclusion

Gozitans are proud of their uniqueness, that it takes a fifteen-minute ferry to reach them from Malta island. The small stretch of sea, while an inconvenience for Gozitans looking to commute for jobs and universities, divides and maintains this celebrated difference. In the late summer of 2009, I attended an EU financed project for Gozo called the Leader Project. The presenters were trying to convey a sense of Gozo's uniqueness as a challenge and a resource for initiating rural (and sustainable) development projects. In conveying this, they drew upon an awkward phrase: 'Gozo's Intangible Heritage'.

What bocci and brilli point to is an appreciation of what it is to be resourceful. What is striking about these games and the rural life on Gozo are their hyper-tangibilities. Priests on noisy old mopeds driving down Triq l-Gharb, know just

what volume and pitch to blow their whistles, cutting across a slight breeze, grabbing the attention of villagers walking down the street. Communication is conducted not only face to face, but also with a good amount of arm grabbing, and expressive body language in concise spurts. Figuratively, they rub against each another to affirm not only a common bond, but to reveal the solidarities of personalities evolving out of working on and in the land. Children used to play on the streets in front of their parents before there were cars and paved roads. In the past, parents would bring their mattresses to sleep outside in the hot summer nights in order to enjoy the stars, and to be near their children who were certainly playing various games like marbles.

What Geertz said about the Balinese and their cockfights makes sense here. For the Balinese man, betting in the cockfight teaches him about his culture's ethos and what emotional sentiments are expressed collectively. Playing bocci and brilli (like participating in the cockfight) amounts to what Geertz terms a sentimental education; games can be a cultural touchstone for opening up a person's subjectivity to himself (Geertz 1973). Bocci and brilli do not encapsulate as much cultural symbolics as the cockfight, but they do display some central features of the Gozitan way of life. There is an intimacy with a forgiving and unforgiving land. Bocci and brilli's earthiness attest to the Gozitan's experience with the land. These games are played in and for the public eye; they are not played in private homes, but out on the street—like the land—open for inspection, marvel and appreciation.

Because of the very short nature of my observations, an investigation of games like bocci and brilli on Gozo could benefit greatly from more data and analysis on the games' unwritten rules. Future research could address: What are the various tricks, deceits, and strategies of experienced players? How do these games affect different age sets, and how do the old versus the young experience these games and the notion of 'play'. Future research could also explore the aesthetic dimensions of brilli, along with how games are preserved and kept alive. Getting the players' own account of the games should be a fruitful start for keeping the ball rolling...

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bocci and brilli was conducted in October 2009. I spent three afternoons in the coastal town of Qbajjar (a ten minute walk from the salt pans of Marsalforn), where I observed several games of bocci at a pitch on the beach. I spent three Sunday mornings in San Pietru Square (really just a street intersection with a bus stop) watching a handful of old men playing brilli on the outskirts of Gharb. I also conducted several informal interviews with the players, and conducted archival research at the Gozo National Archives Library on Triq Vajringa.

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