

SOME EFFECTS OF TOURISM ON MALTESE FOLKLORE

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The First Changes

There is never really a first change, because change is a continuous process, but significant global changes could be easily discerned when Malta started to change its primary function as a British naval base in the middle of the Mediterranean. During the nineteenth century, up to the 1970's our islands had geared their economy in association with this function, and apart from endemic trades and activities concerned with domestic and internal life and problems, other trades and crafts had established themselves to cater for the numerous servicemen continuously coming and going on short visits. These ancillary trades and activities, based on the needs of servicemen, and often their families were mainly centred around the harbours, chiefly consisting of bars, restaurants and souvenir outlets, apart from the usual brothels and other forms of entertainment which included the cinema and a few dance-halls.

Most of the activities associated with Malta's function as a naval base, were only marginally utilised by local inhabitants, but since between the two world wars, many Maltese "middle class" families started to associate with British service families, administrators, and other visitors, and often adopted some of their customs, which included the partial use of English in everyday language, throwing parties, and celebrating Christmas the English way, when the general population had a different way of life.

But tourism was not then an actively organised aspect and visitors for leisure purposes were few and far between. But as soon as Malta started to lose its strategic military and naval importance, becoming independent and then a republic in the '60's and '70's, things had to change drastically. Trades and activities once linked with income from naval, military and N.A.T.O. bases, had either to die out completely or adapt and change into other activities concerned with the building boom which developed with the advent of foreign settlers and local expansion. But the administration had to centre on industry and export; there being no natural resources in Malta, except people, sea, sunshine and stone, tourism had to be one of the mainstays of the income. Tourism was never before taken up as an industry, and quick measures had to be taken, culminating in a ministry for tourism, an institute for tourism studies, courses and qualifications for tourist guides and enterprises, and a general consciousness supporting and exploiting tourism.

Besides the original idea of folklore where we centre our studies on the sayings, legends, thoughts, beliefs, superstitions, festivities and religious activities of the common inhabitants, we now also include in folklore generally, many other aspects, including trades and crafts, utensils and tools, etc...

Without going into the whole list of such activities which existed around the harbours when Malta was a naval base, we may only mention the numbers of photographers who produced innumerable pictures of sailors landing ashore and postcards of ships entering harbour. These are now replaced by postcards of local interest for tourists; in previous times such cards were also available, but now the navy ships have gone. Where once shops and trades were sited close to military and naval facilities, they have now spread to where tourist could be reached. The numerous harbour boats or dghajsa of the past and the boatmen have disappeared; now there are harbour cruises on launches owned by various organisations especially for tourists. Where boats disappeared from the harbours, others are exploiting the tourist source at the Blue Grotto, Zurrieq, where formerly no one went for leisure; now fishing boats carry tourists taken there for the purpose.

Folklorisms

With the increase in tourism, large numbers of organisations and hotels have cropped up to provide all sorts of facilities imaginable, apart from the numerous hotels and restaurants, food and entertainment. To give a local character or atmosphere to hotels, restaurants and other establishments, bygone as local carts, kitchen utensils and old tools, fishing tackle and other representative items are used for decorative purposes around the place. In entertainment it is also widespread to see singers and dancers dressed up in old local country or city costumes, playing and dancing well-worn local tunes with more recent adaptations.

I must here say, that if I were a tourist myself, I would prefer to stay at a hotel and thence go out on my own to see whatever I want in my own time to wherever I want, to see and meet with the real life of the people. This is not possible for many of the tourists, for they have their itinerary all cut out for them, and since most of the real, original habits, dress and way of life of the Maltese have in many ways changed with the of the times, the songs, costumes and activities now lost, are enacted for the benefit of tourists with many modifications, and represented in the numerous forms of souvenirs available everywhere they go.

Festivities

Tourists are not only taken around by organisations to historical, and archaeological sites, but more recently they are also being taken to one or other of the many typical village or town festas, either on the actual day for the procession, or else on the eve for the band marches and fireworks. Such visits by tourists to local festivities do not affect the inhabitants or make them change their ways to adapt to them, except for an occasional invitation for a drink in a festive home, or a "Tourists Are Welcome" notice stuck on to the doors of band and other clubs which support a bar.

However, there are occasions linked with festivities which have affected advantageously the Maltese tourist organisers in another way. For the Good-Friday processions held concurrently in several towns and villages some tourist enterprises have developed a system where reserved stands are set up in vantage points along the procession or pageant's route, where tourists could watch comfortably seated for a fee. This is a new exploit, advantageous to the tour organisers and seat or stand suppliers, usually satisfactory for the tourist, but the latter will be unable to feel free to walk around, mingle and watch from other sites, and the cool or cold of this season doesn't always help matters when one has to sit for two hours or more in the same spot.

Carnival is another festivity which is a main attraction for the tourist industry, although it is not of the same style as that of other countries well known for this manifestation. Tourists are taken to various places for carnival, because as was also done in times past, some villages and towns organise their own. Here, stands are also put up at Valletta where bookings can be had to watch the defile, dances and other competitions in a walled-up enclosure. I may here be allowed to say that personally I am against an enclosure for a public occasion. Carnival is for all to enjoy in public, and enclosures reserve dances, for example to the paying few. Needless to say numerous concerns, hotels and clubs organise their carnival dances in private, but those in village and town should be free for all.

Other effects

It is normal to assume that in principle, a tourist industry is always profitable from the lucrative point of view. For example, the horse-drawn cab or local *karrozzin*, is still plying the roads to carry tourists, especially at Valletta and Sliema; to all intents and purposes it should be extinct and obsolete, but it is still on the road for the tourist, since the prohibitive prices charged and anachronistic function are not for the local inhabitants. Lace making, introduced during the nineteenth century, was always limited in local consumption, but profitable for the outlets, if not for the lace-makers themselves. This small industry still flourishes for the souvenir market, with prices which have to be kept low in competition with machine-made lace. When tourism is a going industry it is apt to cause changes. When changes take place, one cannot say that these are for the better or for the worse, because the changes are a complex, and do not involve a single aspect; but these changes may be too much in proportion to the number of people benefiting from tourism. The building of roads, parking spaces, hotels, shore concessions and other facilities have depleted too much of the environment and diminished the tranquillity which these very tourists may be after. Gozo is a good example of this, which, from an attractive, peaceful island all the year round, with its endemic crafts and activities, has turned into a hectic spot, especially in summer, since tourism caught up with it. A place may have touristic attractions, but it depends on how many tourists it could handle at one time that will determine whether it is kept intact in its character or loses everything irreparably. It is not only the space that is lost with unwieldy tourism and efforts to satisfy it, but also the general atmosphere made up of the interaction of architecture, the natural environment and the life and customs of the people.
