

CARNIVAL IN GOZO: WANING TRADITIONS AND THRIVING CELEBRATIONS

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The aim of this paper is to show how the celebration of Carnival in Gozo can be inscribed into a more general revitalization of public celebration that is occurring in Europe. I show how carnival reflects and is influenced by economic and social development in Gozo. Villages have ceased to remain tightly knit agricultural communities, they have become integrated in more complex ways with the wider society. This change has in turn affected the type of celebration itself. Ritualistic patterns are being abandoned, or persist only because they are backed by the authorities. By contrast, the current expansion of public celebrations in Europe can be witnessed by the revitalization that occurs in the types of carnival that encompass new forms and new meanings. These not only generate new interest, but also penetrate the more rigid forms of celebration. I focus here on the three prevalent forms of carnival in Gozo, which are to be found mainly in Xaghra, Rabat and Nadur.

Carnival in the Maltese islands is one of the oldest theatrical expressions of which we have any historical trace. The first official theatre was inaugurated in Malta only in 1736, and no trace has yet been found of theatre in Maltese before the middle of the nineteenth century. By contrast, records of Carnival exist before the arrival of the Knights of St. John in 1530.¹ Historical records of Carnival in Gozo have not yet been brought to light, yet in the minds of the inhabitants, it has existed from time immemorial.² Its interest and attraction lie in its polysemic nature; in fact the structure and content of the festivity change from one locality to another, yet it appears that an upsurge in the development of a particular type of celebration is occurring at the same time as another form is declining. Carnival in Gozo today is certainly not 'dead'.³ The way it has evolved reflects the changes that have been taking place within Gozitan society.

In the last three decades, Gozo has evolved from an almost wholly agrarian community to one whose labour force is engaged in production and manufacture, as well as in the growing tourist industry. Means of transport and communication have been modernized, and this has helped the island emerge from seclusion. Many Gozitans who emigrated to the US, Canada and Australia in the fifties, have always maintained contact with their families, and many have come back to the island to retire. These transformations have altered the socio-economic situation of the island, and this change is reflected in public celebrations, particularly Carnival.

Presently, the Maltese Islands seem to be going through a period of general apathy towards official or organized festivity. Articles have appeared in the local press about the lack of audiences at theatres, and about the fact that the official Carnival in Valletta,

though more lavish and costly, does not draw the crowds it once attracted. In Gozo, this appears to be the case with regard to the official or ritualistic carnivals, to be found principally at Rabat and Xaghra respectively. Yet it would seem that a new upsurge is occurring in the more spontaneous, less organized forms of Carnival, of which the best known example is that of Nadur. This new interest would therefore reflect the new trends of revival in other European countries. Jeremy Boissevain accounts for this revival in the following manner:

'No single factor accounts for the revival, but around the beginning of the 1970s there were a number of developments which affected attitudes towards traditional public celebrations [. . .] A concern for a new concept, the "quality of life", emerged. [. . .] Many emigrants returned home. Local ceremonies were further stimulated by the increasing flow into the region of tourists [. . .] Thus intellectual interest in traditional feasts was complemented by the increasing availability of the manpower required to celebrate them.' (1992:10)

The aim of this article is to show how through Carnival, Gozo is part of a new revival that is appearing in different European communities. By focusing mainly on the three prevalent forms of celebration to be found in Xaghra, Rabat and Nadur, I shall try to indicate how, as in the case of larger European communities, 'economic and social modernization is affecting public celebrations in small rural communities' (Cruces and Diaz de Rada 1992:63). To do this, I show how changing trends in Gozitan development have influenced Carnival to the extent that formerly predominant types of celebration, closely connected to static societies belonging to the rural world, are now disappearing in favour of looser and more pliable structures, which are more suitable to represent a society in evolution.

Gozo – Geographic and Economic Situation

The island of Gozo is situated about eight kilometres northwest of Malta and has a surface area of 72 square kilometres. Topographically, the island is more varied than Malta. Its landscape is characterized by two main features: a fragmented plateau and a line of low lying hills which are penetrated by numerous sharply-incised valleys (Bowen Jones-Dudley-Fisher 1961:39).

Gozitan economy started developing quite late, in the second half of the seventeenth century, when work was started to render the island invulnerable to pirate attacks by the erection of proper fortifications. Until then very few people dared build their dwellings away from the protection of Rabat, in faraway places such as Nadur and Xaghra, because in this way they would risk being captured by the enemy and taken away as slaves. In fact, all inhabitants were expected to seek shelter behind the walls of Rabat at night, and at sunset the gates of the city would be closed (Bonnici 1984:13). 'With the building of a series of coastal look-out forts, which helped to secure the better landing places, villages started to develop' (Blouet 1972:98). Gharb (1679), Xaghra and Nadur (1688) were among the first six parishes to be established, and San Lawrenz was formed as a separate parish from Gharb in 1893 (De Lucca 1990:149). In fact, Xaghra and Nadur have the highest rates of population after Rabat, followed by Xewkija. It is in these villages that Carnival is celebrated in a different form to that of Rabat.

Contrary to Rabat, where there was a marked class difference between rich and poor, the villages had more homogeneous communities, dedicated mostly to farming and fishing. It is interesting to note that because of its vicinity to a proper harbour, the

community in Nadur was the most prosperous in Gozo, surpassing that of Rabat, as its position enabled it to develop commercial ties directly with Malta. This fact created intense rivalry with the capital, which exists to this day: 'As Rabat was the place which was supposed to govern Gozo, Nadur's independence on occasion would raise protest and evoke the jealousy of Rabat and of other villages' (Bonnici 1984:51; my translation). Nadur did not have to depend on the island's political and economical powers for its economy, and could therefore develop in a relatively independent manner. On the level of celebration, this meant that Nadur was in a better position than any other village to maintain its own tradition. This would explain why its form of carnival revelry, which in the past was also present in other places, has not only persisted but developed.

Up to 1987 the bulk of the Gozitan community was still employed either in agriculture or fishing. In that year the total number of manufacturing industries in the Xewkija industrial estate was five. In 1991 this had already risen to fourteen. There was also a 48% increase of employment in the private sector and 52% in employment with Government and parastatal bodies.⁴ In his analysis of the development of human resources in Gozo, Lawrence Zammit states the following:

'An interesting analysis is the economic sectors in which the Gozitan gainfully occupied population works. 51% of those working in the private sector work in production, that is agriculture and fisheries, construction and manufacturing, whilst 49% work in market services. In Malta and Gozo as a whole the trend is identical. What differs is employment in the various sectors. 17% of those working in the private sector in Gozo are in agriculture and fisheries, whilst for the economy as a whole it stands at 4%. In fact, 27% of all persons working in agriculture and fisheries work in Gozo' (1992:42-43).

It is important to note, however, that full time employment in farming is on the decrease, and in fact most farmers have taken up this activity part time.⁵ This means that people have moved on to other areas of activity, and farming has become secondary. In cultural terms, this also means that former communities whose sole concerns previously centred around the land have come into contact with new realities. Also the development of the tourist industry, both from Malta and abroad, as well as returning emigrants, have brought Gozitans into more direct contact with different lifestyles and mentalities. All these factors have influenced Gozitan outlook, and consequently, Gozitan forms of revelry.

The Significance of Carnival

Carnival is the expression of a community. The event can be described as a 'text, a vivid aesthetic creation that reflexively depicts, interprets and informs its social context' (Manning 1983:6). This text is expressed through performance: a certain number of people transform their appearance and their behaviour during a limited period of time, in a particular space for their own benefit and that of others who watch them. This performance is usually characterized by 'unusual or transgressive behaviour, which can be defined as different, dishomogeneous with regard to the rest of the community, and as such incomprehensible, extraneous, worrying, amazing, fearful or, on the contrary comic, grotesque, splendid' (Sordi 1982:21; my translation). Like all performance, this places Carnival in an 'extra-ordinary' framework (Barba 1993:23)⁶ which is defined by Turner as follows:

'What we are seeing is society in its subjunctive mood, its mood of feeling, willing

and desiring, its mood of fantasizing, its playful mood, not its indicative mood, where it tries to apply reason to human action' (1992: 123).

On the surface, Carnival text expresses an unreal, irrational world, where all is possible but not necessarily true. Yet reality penetrates this text through symbol. Thus through uncommon behaviour, Carnival provides a means of communicating the inexpressible. We can therefore apply what Babcock affirms with regard to culture to this particular context:

'Through various forms of symbolic inversion [. . .] culture frees itself from the limitations of "thou shalt not's", enriches itself with subject matter without which it could not work efficiently and enables itself to speak about itself' (1978: 21).

This significance of Carnival, therefore, derives from the fact that it allows the community to express its concerns about and attitudes to life in a way that escapes censorship, owing to the fact that it is situated on a symbolic level.⁷ The change in outward appearance and behaviour place meaning on another plane; it creates new signs⁸ by combining different possibilities of significance which go far beyond the scope of ordinary reality. Carnival's 'dominant symbols, costumes and clowns, convey a sense of the *mundus inversus* by transforming ordinary reality into an alternate domain of symbolic discourse' (Manning 1983: 27).

As Manning states, this transformation of reality can be expressed on two textual levels. On one level, performance in Carnival can take the appearance of 'celebratory ritual'. In this case, the text is essentially metonymical, that is 'a limited number of highly condensed forms represent and integrate a wide spectrum of cultural data' (*ibid.* 27). Roger Caillois defines this type of performance as 'ludus', a game which 'represents how, in the space/time of the subjunctive mood of cultural action, human beings set up arbitrary obstacles [. . .] totally engrossing the player in a world of play framed and enclosed by its intricate rules' (Turner in Manning 1982: 107).⁹ In the Gozitan carnival this takes the form of ritualistic dances, or other highly stylized and controlled forms of performance. As a consequence, 'it conveys a version of the social order that is meant to be believed, or at least acknowledged and adhered to, and over which society exerts control' (Manning 1983: 27). The ritualistic nature of this type of performance is meant to bring reassurance to the society it is performed for. It achieves this effect not only through its content, but through the possibility of this being repeated an infinite number of times: 'People, ancestors and gods participated in simultaneously having been, being and becoming [. . .] Mnemonic devices insured that the performances were "right"—transmitted across many generations with few accidental variations' (Shechner 1989: 36). Dance condenses and stylizes social reality in the intricacy of its patterns. Yet it forms a coherent whole which is easily transmissible across entire generations.

On another level, Carnival performance can assume the form of 'celebratory play'. This is metaphorical in nature i.e., its 'semantics are open-ended, unorthodox, fragmented and often highly individualized, enabling [it] to elude control and to transcend and subvert ideology' (Manning 1983: 27). This kind of celebration, characteristic of Nadur, Xewkija and 'fringe' celebrations, is therefore identified by a free, loose structure. Metaphor is thus situated at a level that Caillois terms as 'paidia'—'diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety . . . uncontrolled fantasy' (Turner in Manning 1983: 106). It allows for suppleness, adaptability, because it can integrate heterogeneous elements into one coherent framework, that of play. Yet by its nature, metaphor allows for a multiple reading of the carnival text. Though on the superficial

level celebratory play provides apparently carefree entertainment, its structure situates meaning at a much deeper level, as its pliable nature promotes social and psychological awareness and change. As Bakhtin states:

‘In public places during Carnival, the temporary elimination of all differences and hierarchical barriers among individuals, the abolition of certain rules and taboos which prevailed in real life, created a particular type of communication, both ideal and real at the same time, and impossible in everyday life. This is a familiar and unconstrained contact among individuals who are no longer separated by distance’ (1970: 24; my translation).

Carnival is not simply a safety-valve, a mechanism among others which allows society to observe, represent and evaluate itself. It contains in its very structure the possibility of social criticism and transformation: ‘Cultural performances are not simply reflectors or agencies of culture, or even of changing culture, but may themselves be active agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting “designs for living”’ (Turner 1992:24).¹⁰

The ‘extra-ordinary’ manifestations of Carnival in Gozo vary greatly from one place to another, yet they fall under the two general classifications of ritual and play I have discussed. In this article, I shall illustrate how carnival as a celebratory ritual is characteristic of Xaghra and Rabat. I shall point out how in the first case, social reality has been radically transformed over the years, and has thus deprived the metonymic structure of its carnival of meaning, since performers and watchers can no longer identify or relate to the kind of reality it pertained to. The highly stylized form characteristic of Rabat did not evolve naturally, but it was imposed hierarchically. I will show how the artificiality of this structure does not really reflect the whole of the Gozitan community, although each village is explicitly requested to contribute some form of performance to it. It is held in place only because it is backed by ‘officialdom’, which pumps money into it to keep it going. As a consequence ‘when those who control celebration are also those who dominate the social order, there is a tendency to ritualize that dominance in order to sustain and legitimize it’ (Manning 1983: 7). I shall contrast the decline of the ritualistic type of carnival with the success of the looser structure of celebratory play, which inscribes Carnival in a more general trend of revitalization across the continent.

Carnival is not the only type of celebration in Gozo. Indeed, in many villages it is considered marginal, and attention focuses rather on the feast of the local patron saint.¹¹ What attracted me initially to examine this particular celebration was the variety of its manifestations. Although these different forms of revelry are the expression of tiny communities, they could be inscribed within a general framework of carnival revelry in Europe. Moreover, from what I could see, Carnival seems to be the only celebration where members of the same locality are all drawn into a common desire to have fun, and on the surface at least, no internal factionalism appears to mar the feasting. Rivalry is shifted to another level: the village communities rival with Rabat as to the popularity of their carnival. This is particularly pertinent to Nadur, which historically, has generally kept a very independent attitude vis-a-vis the capital and the rest of Gozo, and significantly, owing to the structure and magnitude of its carnival, attracts the greatest amount of people from outside the village, as well as from outside the island.

The way our research group was received in the different carnivals is in itself very

revealing. The first year two students were sent to Gozo to find out what kind of celebration was taking place. They went to Nadur where they were coldly treated until they showed an interest in the Carnival. The next year quite a large group set off armed with cameras, video and tape recorders. We were warmly received; there was on the one hand an element of surprise at the fact that the two students had come back with more people, as they had promised, and on the other a sense of pride in the fact that 'the University' (as they thought of us), could actually take an interest in what they were doing. Our return the following year made them feel that their Carnival was indeed exceptional. However, our presence had also attracted a certain kind of audience from Malta, belonging to the privileged classes, who found in the 'paidian' structure of Nadur, an 'exotic' possibility to participate directly as performers, and not simply as watchers.¹² These people did not try to understand the underlying codes of this Carnival and ended up by ruining the feast for the local inhabitants, who were initially furious, but in the following years modified their carnival to integrate somehow the presence of these outsiders, which during the weekend, particularly Saturday, is quite massive. Thus outside presence has not prevented the celebration of the insider community for its own benefit.

In Xaghra, our presence was probably one of the factors that determined radical change, for after the first year we went there women, who traditionally are watchers of the dances, fought to become performers themselves. It would appear that the structure was too rigid to withstand such drastic transformation, because the innovation marked the last time the Carnival was held in the village.

In Rabat, during our formal meetings with Carnival officials, we tried to understand the nature of the rivalry with the other communities, but it was difficult to elicit response. Yet, by our presence, it was somehow felt that this cultural diversity was being officially encouraged by the highest powers (i.e. The Minister for Culture, who sponsored our project) and therefore, initiatives were taken to organize talks about the subject.

Carnival Codes

Today, Carnival is celebrated chiefly in the two most populated areas, Rabat and Nadur. Up to 1991, another important centre was Xaghra. Small-scale celebrations are held in Xewkija and San Lawrenz. Villages like Gharb, Zebbug, Kercem, Munxar, Sannat and Qala, where Carnival was formerly celebrated, organize practically nothing. In the case of Munxar two youths organize a party at the church centre, and in some of the other villages some children wear a disguise.

It is important to note that for reasons of defense, most villages in Gozo are built on the tops of plateaux, surrounded by agricultural land. In the past, carts and a handful of *karozzini* (horse-drawn carriages) were the only means of transport, so it was difficult for people to get from one village to another. There was also little interest for exchange, since communities were predominantly made up of farmers, who produced more or less the same kind of crops, and who had more interest in developing and maintaining relations with urban communities such as Rabat, the religious and civic centre of the island, or Malta. Thus communities remained isolated and relations between them did not develop much. In fact, in San Lawrenz I was told that up to the sixties, any girl who married a man who was not of her village was looked down upon by the inhabitants of both villages and scorned for not being 'good enough' for the men in her own village.¹³ This segregation was also present during Carnival.

Another important reason for segregation was poverty, which was rampant in the Maltese islands till the 1950s. People 'were very scared of each other. Poverty brought much theft [. . .] People were always afraid that somebody would attack them, rob them and leave them lying on the ground, wounded to death' (Bonnici 1984: 34; my translation).

It is significant that Carnivals of the 'paidia' type generally took place during the night. This probably meant that each community would tend to celebrate Carnival among its members alone, as the social isolation I have described would not have encouraged members of different communities to affront the danger involved in climbing the steep slopes separating the villages in the cold and dark. However, the time factor placed this kind of celebratory play directly into the domain of transgression as it was against the law to wear a mask after sunset. The dark, therefore, provided a further cover for identity, and the right atmosphere to indulge in transgressive behaviour. Thus Carnival was celebrated by each community for its own sake, in its own individual way, by developing its particular festive codes. As Martine Boiteux states:

'A fabric of reciprocally active connections is woven between the spheres of the festivity ("festa" in original text) and that of everyday life. Social dynamics produce the feast, which in turn influences the environment it emerges from. It presents the occasion and place of a privileged sociality. The festivity gives rise to a festive community, an organic institution having its own particular logic and its own code' (1981:12; my translation).

The different revelling communities of Gozo codify their expressions through play and performance. By means of these forms they bring out the 'social structures and processes of the time' (Turner in: Manning 1983: 105). As in Sardinia and elsewhere 'through unusual, raucous, unlicensed activity' the Gozitans 'challenge beliefs about matters of great significance in their lives: class relations, contemporary politics, sexual relations, life and death, time and seasonality, and proper social behaviour' (Counihan 1985: 13).

Play in Carnival, therefore, is only apparently gratuitous. It is characterized by inversion: 'behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms' (Babcock 1978:14). Bakhtin shows how this inverted, topsy turvy world provides a release from official culture and authority (1970). Play becomes the pervading norm, to the extent that 'once transgressive activities become dignified, sanctioned, and even legally protected practices' (Roach 1993: 45).

The play frame in the different Carnivals in Gozo can be defined according to the theory of play presented by Roger Caillois, which I have already mentioned. Besides establishing the two poles of 'paidia' (free improvisation) and 'ludus', 'a game' which binds paidia 'with arbitrary, imperative and purposely tedious conventions' (see Turner in Manning 1983: 106), Caillois defines four categories of play which move from the pole of 'paidia' to that of 'ludus'.

The first of these is 'agon', meaning 'competition' 'in which an equality of chances is artificially created in order that the adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner's triumph'. This would correspond to prize competitions for costumes or dance in various carnivals in Gozo, particularly the one at Rabat which is based on this structure.

The second is 'alea' or 'chance' in which game is 'based on a decision independent of the player, an outcome over which he has no control, and in which winning is the result of fate or destiny rather than triumphing over an adversary'. In Gozo, this

category characterizes the kind of game played in Nadur, where the person in disguise runs the gauntlet of recognition by teasing spectators he knows well.

The third category is 'mimos' or 'mimicry/simulation', which 'involves the acceptance of a [...] Closed conventional and in certain respects, imaginary universe'. In carnival this is characteristic of both closed and open structures, as it is through the temporary acceptance of a make-believe world that performers and spectators alike can penetrate its codes.

The fourth category is that of 'Ilinx' or 'vertigo', 'which tries to create disequilibrium or imbalance, or otherwise to alter perception or consciousness by inducing giddiness or dizziness, often by a whirling or gyrating motion'. This is characteristic of dance, which on the level of 'ludus' has a rigidly determined pattern in Xaghra, but on the level of 'paidia' describes the motions of the masked figures of Nadur, dancing to popular or improvised strains of music.

It is within this general framework of play that Gozitans elaborate codes of expression which reveal their primary and social concerns.

The different codes used in the village revels converge into two main organizational patterns underlying festivities past and present. The one which is still prevalent in Nadur, where improvisation and spontaneity seem to be the rule, is found on the fringes of Carnivals organized in other villages. The other, characteristic of Xaghra, bearing a highly organized form, was formerly predominant in many areas. A third structure, relatively recent, is that of Rabat. It too is highly organized, but its form is hybrid in relation to the rest of Gozitan carnival realities. Since each of these three types bears a structure, they can be defined as 'open' or 'closed'. Italo Sordi explains this distinction as follows:

'... there are carnivals (as for example the one in Sampeyre) in which it is possible to assume only certain roles, which are sharply defined, where the separation among the participants (carnevalanti) and the public is very rigid; and there are others (as that of Schignano) containing categories of masked persons, within which an unlimited number of figurative solutions are possible, and it is possible for a person to change from one role to a completely different one' (1980:22; my translation).

According to this definition, the Carnival in Nadur has an open structure, and the organized Carnivals a closed one. I shall now examine the different carnival realities separately to show how their structure is related to the life of the community.

The Carnival in Xaghra: A Carnival of the Past?

In the case of Xaghra, it is the rigidity of the structure which lies behind its progressive disappearance. Xaghra is the third largest community in Gozo. Up to 1991, celebrations in this village were held in a very isolated area, in the square in front of the Church of the Nazarene, which is tucked away at the bottom of the village, far from the centre where the Parish church lies, and is not very easy to reach. It services the community living around it, which is somewhat segregated from the rest of the parish community. In fact, this was once the poorest area of the village and its community is predominantly rural. Many people who lived there emigrated principally to Australia, where there is no parallel form of celebration, enabling a cultural exchange between local inhabitants and their families abroad.

Not all the villagers living in the centre around the parish church were aware of these festivities, and most of the ones who knew about them had a very vague idea of what went on 'down there'.

Carnival in this square revolved around one main event, the *kummittiva*, consisting of a highly structured series of folk dances, and a farce.¹⁴ Structured carnivals are usually characterized by 'great spectacular qualities' which are largely expressed in 'the most perfect realisation possible of a figurative and behavioural archetype offered by tradition' (Sordi 1982:21). The dances in Xaghra occupied a large area in the centre of the square with watchers on the fringes, either standing or sitting on chairs brought from home. This detail reveals the intimate nature of the occasion—the performance was held by villagers of the area for spectators who lived in the same perimeter. Contrary to the 'festa' celebrations, where no means are spared to display lavishness and ostentation and thus affirm the importance of the community vis-a-vis the rest of the island, Carnival in this village is a celebration of the community within itself. It is an affirmation of the community's intimate identity.¹⁵

To my knowledge, the dances making up the *kummittiva* are the only form of folk-dancing which was still practised in the Maltese islands up to 1991. The only folk dance in the islands, 'Il-Maltija', belongs to a now-extinct tradition which is dished out as entertainment to tourists.¹⁶ It is important to note, however, that although the *kummittiva* tradition goes back a long way (in fact, it is remembered by many old people in their childhood days, and documented not only in Xaghra), there is a sharp difference between the steps and the music. The steps seem to have remained unchanged over the years. On the contrary, although the music is played by traditional instruments, none of it is traditional, but is made up of tunes from the fifties and sixties, generally imported.¹⁷

The interpretations given to this kind of dance are characteristic of the liminal phase described by Turner, as they focus on the shared life of the community by portraying it in a completely different perspective, unfamiliar to the community itself: 'liminality and the phenomena of liminality dissolve all factual and commonsense systems into their components and "play" with them in ways never found in nature or in custom, at least at the level of direct perception' (1992: 25). They can be said to pertain to the category of 'periodic rites' whereby 'circumstances and rites that refer to [this category] must necessarily refer to a natural, astronomical or biological order' and 'independently of the meanings that can be attributed to their contents [. . .] they help establish and regulate a play of harmonious relations between nature and society' (Smith 1981: 215, 216).

The ritualistic dances of the *kummittiva* can be defined as 'social manifestations which were produced in a cultural context of a community, where they had a particular meaning and social function' (Mesnil 1981: 25). Thus to analyse them means 'to penetrate the collective conscious (or unconscious) of centuries' (Baroja 1979: 20), as in fact ritualistic carnival celebrations are closely linked to 'more ancient ones, where masked figures had [. . .] a more obscure and enigmatic role, linked not to Christian symbolism, medieval "morality", but to pagan rite' (Baroja 1979: 113 my translation). This would place *kummittiva* dances in the framework of the fertility rites described by Rossi and De Simone (1977) in their interpretation of similar rural Carnival dances in Southern Italy. The authors define these dances as models having two levels of interpretation, one relating to natural cycles, (seasons, agricultural activities . . .) (1977; 1, 178) and the other expressing human anguish stemming from sexual traumas and taboos (*ibid.* 179, 220). The variety in the dances is provided by the different configurations. These are mainly two, a processional one in which the dancers form two straight rows (in certain cases, two pairs of rows) and a circular one, culminating

in the most significant and elaborate dance, a sort of maypole dance where the main purpose is to weave red and white ribbons around a strawberry basket placed at the top of a maypole until this is completely covered, and then to unwind them again. The two basic shapes, and the fact that the different patterns never vary from one year to the next, bring the dances into the ritualistic sphere.

When the dancers are in rows, a common feature is to form tunnels by either holding hands or ribbons. Each couple entering the tunnels has to go right across them before re-emerging. During this time they are hidden from the spectators' sight, and it would seem that they are buried under the outstretched hands or ribbons. On a superficial level this could refer to the nature cycle, in which life hidden underground slowly emerges and then returns underground. On a deeper level, this action would refer to the life cycles of birth and death. The circle represents first and foremost, the seasonal cycles in that every dancer comes back to the point of departure. Its shape is also invested with magic powers—a sort of barrier against evil, and perhaps death.

In most dances, the dancers form two concentric circles. Different dancing patterns are created within these circles and the couples dancing together change from man-woman, to woman-woman, to man-man. In the maypole dance the interweaving of the dancers is always man-woman, with one or the other passing on the inside or outside, giving symbolic appearance to the sexual connotations of the dance.¹⁸

One important characteristic of the *kummittiva* is that it is danced by men, half of whom are dressed as men, and the other half as women. This shows that in origin, even organized forms of carnival were exclusive to males. In fact, up to the sixties, males dressed as women would hide their faces under a cloth. This can be interpreted on two levels. A man covering his face hid his male identity and was therefore not shamed into being identified with a woman, or as having female tendencies. On another level, the dissimulation of his true identity allowed a man to express his feminine characteristics more easily, all the more so since the dances did not call for exaggeration or grotesqueness, but for agility and gracefulness. It also encouraged the partners to perform actions which with a woman would be strictly taboo—touching breasts, lifting up skirts, pinching bottoms and other such teasing attitudes.¹⁹ When I first watched these dances in 1990, the male dancers dressed up as women were teenage boys, whilst their partners were much older. The young boys' faces were completely undisguised, and they were very conscious of the fact that they were being watched and that everybody knew who they were. Apart from their deep blushes, their embarrassment could be seen by the half-hearted way in which the shyer among them danced, and also by the fact that they did not react when the older men touched them teasingly but simply looked annoyed and ill at ease. In a personal communication, Paul Sant Cassia explains this relationship in terms of a hierarchy: older (often married) men vis-a-vis young, unmarried ones. In these dances, he claims, the young boys are not impersonating women (it is older men who have the authority to act as women in impersonations where identities are concealed), they are representing the female sex. They are in fact in the same situation as women in that they cannot make the social demands that older men can make by virtue of being men, a clear sign of the fact that real claims to manhood are not really biological but social. On one level, the relationship is a means by the older men to assert their control over boys in a socially dangerous period—their teens, as they are responsible for guiding these young men into adulthood. On another level, it can be seen in terms of the implicit connivance that men have to establish among themselves due to the predicament they find themselves in within these type of restricted societies.

This is that while men have to 'prove themselves' to other men by reference to macho actions, they know that to do so in reality would set them on a collision course among themselves, for that would involve them getting illicit access to their friends' sisters, wives, daughters etc. So on the dialectic level, they talk about highly imaginary sex while combining this with talk about masturbation etc. On the symbolic plane, the teasing actions would be another way of establishing a common mutual recognition of the problems unmarried men have to face. (Paul Sant Cassia; personal communication).

It should be noted that although women did not take part in the dancing, they were the ones to sew the costumes and wigs, thus participating directly in the make-up of the event. As spectators, they would be the true receivers of the message encoded in the dance. In fact it is probable that in the past the *Kummittiva* was held in the afternoon, i.e. at a time when women could watch the proceedings, and not in the evening when their presence was not tolerated. In recent years it was performed both in the afternoon and evening and women attended both performances, a sign of change in male attitudes towards women.

In 1991 the teenage boys were replaced by young girls, who had insisted upon participating in the dances. Was this participation to be taken as a sign of the times where even in these societies women are approaching equality in status? This time, however, the older men, many of whom had participated the previous year, changed their attitude completely. Touching and pinching young girls was simply out of the question, and the men concentrated on their dancing. As from the following year, the event no longer took place. Is this to be taken to mean that the presence of young women which prevented the significant playfulness of the event from taking place, had rendered the performance useless? Or was it the performance itself that was perceived as obsolete?

In the past another characteristic of the *Kummittiva* was that on Mardi Gras, the dancers would wear black as a sign of mourning for Carnival. This was eventually discontinued and today both in Malta and Gozo there is no trace of past ceremonies marking the end of carnival, both in the organized festivities as well as in the more spontaneous ones.

***Kummittiva* – Comparisons with San Lawrenz**

The two dance elements characterizing the *kummittiva* were not only peculiar to the one in Xaghra. Indeed, we have found that the *kummittiva* was also danced in other villages (Kercem, Zebbug, Gharb and San Lawrenz). This shows that in spite of the isolated position of Xaghra, and the secluded spot it was held in, this form of organized celebration was not exclusive to this village but was common to quite an extended area of rural Gozo. It is important to keep in mind that all these villages were difficult to get to in the past. In fact, our research and fieldwork at San Lawrenz have enabled us to establish that although *Kummittiva* in the two villages shared common characteristics, there were also some fundamental differences.²⁰ Unfortunately it is difficult to determine the reason for this. *Kummittiva* in San Lawrenz was last danced in 1972. In Xaghra, in spite of a few breaks, it featured for another twenty years. Could this mean that certain traits were discarded over the years or was it that they never existed in one or the other of the two forms? This question is even more difficult to answer as we have found no documentation in any of the other villages.

In San Lawrenz we discovered that the last instructor to teach the *Kummittiva*—Wenzu Apap il-Budi—and probably his predecessor, Il-Parent, gave a description of

some of the dance patterns which are not always very clear. What has made them easier to understand is the existence of a film of the last *kummittiva* which, though very short and very fragmentary, gives us a fair idea of some of the steps and enables us to match them with the descriptions. Another important find was that of long thin strips of paper with the names of the steps. This shows that there is a change in steps from time to time because new names appear, but the bulk of the names are common to every slip of paper. Again we have the two basic configurations discussed previously which are given the names of 'collura' meaning a circle, and 'passaggiata' or 'ingliza' which are probably two dance patterns of dancers standing in a row. One marked difference, however, is the absence of any explicit reference to the maypole dance, which is further confirmed by the fact that it does not appear in the film. On the other hand a certain configuration with ribbons (perhaps the 'kannizzata') was not used in Xaghra.

Another important difference is the beginning and end of the *kummittiva*. In Xaghra the dancers are led by the instructor and his partner. In fact, the instructor has a whistle which he blows every time he wants the dancers to change partner or configuration. In the past, he would shout out the names of the different configurations. Like Pulcinella in the carnivals in Campania, he is the one to create order (Rossi, De Simone 1977:72). During the maypole dance he supervises the part where the dancers have to unravel the ribbons around the basket, and if anybody has made a mistake, he directs them so that the unravelling process can go on without mishap. The long series of dances ends by creating two groups and lifting a man from one group and a woman from the other.

The beneficial meaning of this coupling is further enhanced by the final gesture of the instructor, throwing sweets, which he fishes out of a bag, to the public. His gesture is very reminiscent of the sowing of seed in the fields, placing the *kummittiva* as a propitiary ritual for a fertile land and life cycle.

In San Lawrenz the dancers entering the arena were headed by a little boy and a little girl. De Simone argues that children are associated to the supernatural world, they appear as symbols of death and guides to the underworld (1977:67). This association is confirmed by the fact that in San Lawrenz the end of the dances was marked by the fact that the two children were lifted up and one of the dancers would pretend to cut the boy's head off.

Unlike the case of Xaghra, symbolizing fertility and the coming of Spring, this action symbolizes an expulsion of evil forces. The action is propitiatory rather than harmonious, and manifests a very different attitude both to natural and supernatural elements, which are seen as menacing rather than conciliatory.

The present state of our research has not enabled us to work further upon these contrasts, or to bring out fully the hidden codes within the *kummittiva*. The main reason for this is that it is no longer held, and in the case of Xaghra as that of San Lawrenz, our material, mostly photos, is too fragmentary to enable us to study the differences between the dances of the two communities. The *kummittiva* in San Lawrenz ceased to be performed after the demise of Wenzu Apap in 1972. In 1992, election year, political rivalry disrupted carnival preparations in Xaghra and after that the *kummittiva* was no longer held, for the reason that none of the younger people were interested in taking part. This lack of interest underlines the change in the type of community which organized this type of celebration.

I have already drawn attention to the fact that the *kummittiva* is a ritualistic type of celebration which though fundamentally part of play, depicts the specific concerns of a rural community. Its forms depict the community's material worries. Mimesis is

situated on a metaphorical plane, and through this level, ordinary reality is transformed into 'symbolic discourse' (Manning 1983:27). Thus the rich texture of symbolism is extended to include more sophisticated preoccupations of man with himself. Yet the metaphorical and symbolic meaning can only be apprehended if the basic meaning is taken. At present there is a sharp drop in people gainfully employed in farm labour. This means that former rural communities are now employed in the manufacturing and service industries. Their concerns are very different and therefore ritualistic play such as the *kummittiva* is not properly related to or interpreted. What was formerly considered vital, because it was a means for the community to express and renew itself, appears today meaningless. A past tradition, previously popular, where vital issues the community had to deal with were expressed, is now seen as boring or at best problematic, because young people do not know how to relate to it any longer. Its structure cannot be plied to a new meaning, or validated by its reference to a 'lost world, a "Golden Age"' (Filippucci 1992:56), so it is discarded. This is the fate of the *kummittiva*, a highly organized but archaic structure.

Carnival in Rabat – The 'Official' Carnival

The other organized carnival in Gozo is to be found in Rabat. It is also of the 'rigid' type. Its structure, modelled on the Maltese Carnival, dates back to 1952. Until then, the prevailing structure seems to have been of the 'paidia' type typical of Nadur. People would wander around the streets, covered in sheets. This disguise was known as 'tal-lizar', and a more sophisticated version was known as 'tal-lizar doppju', where the person would wear two sheets, one to cover his head and body and the other to cover a broom or a stick he would carry to seem taller and more grotesque. As in Nadur, this type of performance took place in the night. One of my interviewees, Gorg Meilaq told me that it was very frightening because people in disguise would beat up and rob others. It certainly continued for quite some time after the official carnival was established. In a personal communication, Jeremy Boissevain told me that the practice was still current in 1961, when he witnessed several characters dressed in sheets, silently going around the main square of It-Tokk, creating a very eerie atmosphere. In 1952 a group of persons noted a waning interest for Carnival in Rabat, which according to Meilaq, was due to the fear of violence. They tried to revive it by adopting a new form, successful in Malta, of planned entries and organized competition.²¹ This form of celebration corresponds to Roger Caillois' vision of play as 'ludus' (a game). In Rabat, this takes the form of 'agon' or contest, and all villages are called upon to provide activities and contestants. Their participation is ensured by a certain number of conditions which all revolve around the idea of financial help or gain. Rabat provides money to the villages in order to enable them to take part in the organized carnival. This in turn, spurs the villages to try to outdo each other, and in so doing give vent to their creativity and organizational capabilities. In order to achieve this, the villages go beyond not only the initial sum allotted to them but the one they may eventually win. Since the Rabat contest involves most of the Gozitan villages, winning an event means proving one's village to be the best on the island. The fact that the show of capabilities extends into various fields means that more people can be stimulated into competing. Competition is situated at various levels. In Rabat itself, it provides an excuse for the two main factions to outdo each other. These are represented by the two clubs—Aurora and Astra—which both participate in the carnival and usually enter for

the same events. It also presents the possibility for the villages to vie against one another and against the Rabat competitors. Besides it provides those villages who have no form of Carnival of their own with the opportunity to participate directly in one, and create their own sub-activity. The participation in the Rabat carnival calls for community effort—people have to make costumes, others have to create and teach the dances, others have to play the music or organize, help or supervise the building of the floats. It is interesting to note that in many cases dances are organized or patronized by the village schools, thus fostering a continued interest for carnival in young children who are keen to participate.

The benefit of this effort will be shared by the community. It can go to watch its activity in Rabat, and thus situate the work it has furnished within the framework of Gozitan potential. Otherwise it can enjoy the spectacle within the village itself where, after appearing in Rabat, the floats or dances are shown to the villagers who participate in the glorification of the community's achievement, which in this context is the only one to be featured, and derive pleasure in witnessing it.

The carnival in Rabat takes a processional form. The floats, dancing companies and bands parade towards the main square where the competition and judging take place. The cortege can thus be seen as a sort of build-up towards the final effort of putting one's capabilities against those of others. Therefore 'alea' (chance and hazard) and its risks in the outcome of the competition are also part of the interest around the Rabat carnival.

The interesting feature about the carnival both in Rabat and in Xaghra is that while the bulk of the space is occupied by the 'ludus' form of play, on the fringes we have manifestations of 'paidea'. This is represented by those people who are not directly involved in the 'ludus' and 'agon' activities, who share a marginal space with the pure watchers, diverting the attention of the latter by their play. These figures, generally masked and wearing a boiler suit—the same costume that one finds in the more spontaneous carnivals—create their own activity which is not contest but fun-orientated. Their 'alea' or chance is whether they are going to manage to attract attention and make people look at them instead of the organized activities. In Xaghra, the figures invaded the centre of the square before and after the dancing took place and remained on the fringes during the dance itself, not only watching but in some cases creating turbulence. In Rabat, they occupy the middle of the streets when the floats have gone by.

Even though these groups attract attention to themselves, they are not really seen as a menace by the people controlling the organisational structures of the two carnivals. This is probably because they are mostly children and as such can be easily dominated. In spite of their young age and marginal role, these elements create a sense of continuity with the other main underlying structure of carnival—that of 'paidia' which is today associated with the Carnival in Nadur and Xewkija and to a lesser extent, in San Lawrenz.

Carnival in Nadur – Against Established Order

Jean Duvignaud states that:

'The feast [. . .] is a strong denial of the established code and establishes another code' (1976:19; my translation).

This is very true of carnivals where 'paidia' is dominant, that is, bearing no apparent hierarchically organized structure as is the case in Nadur. This setting up of a new framework is already manifested by the time the event takes place. The time of the Rabat

carnival is in the afternoon, that of Xaghra is in the afternoon and is then repeated in the evening. Although we have no proof of this we can suppose that this kind of Carnival did not really take place at night until electric light came along. In Nadur, carnival has always taken place in the night. It is in fact called 'Il-festa tax-Xitan' (the Devil's Feast). Its subversive nature is already manifested by this choice of time—which goes against Maltese law stating that during carnival masked activities are to end before dusk. In Nadur, people wait until after dusk to put on their masks and come out into the street. In the shops and on billboards there is hardly any publicity concerning carnival, no indication of what is to come. In fact, until 1990, the feasting took place in almost total darkness as it was only lit up by the weak light coming from the streetlamps. This, coupled with the dark costumes and masks, gave it a very eerie atmosphere, as it was more difficult to make out people in the dark and what one perceived was principally their silhouettes. In 1991, Government arbitrarily decided to contribute towards the carnival by sending floodlights and flags and this has contributed greatly in modifying the prevailing mood and atmosphere.

Even space in this carnival is used subversively. The area of play is defined and limited by two clubs placed at either end of 13th December street. At the top of the street is the Nadur football club. Its bar is today the symbol of the traditional elements of this carnival which have progressively left the outside (the street) but may still be said to be part of the feast, though in a more limited dimension. This applies especially to the music within the bar, which is provided by the old traditional instruments: the accordeon (which probably replaced the instrument known as *iz-zaqq*, a sort of bagpipe), *it-trepied* (triangle), *it-tamburlin* (tambourine) and *iz-zafzafa* or *ir-rumbaba* (an instrument made by stretching the stomach of a cat or goat over a tin, pierced in the middle to introduce a long bamboo reed which is rubbed with a wet sponge or cloth in an upward/downward movement). These homemade instruments produce a rhythm, not a melody, and in the case of the *rumbaba*, permit a sort of licentious gestuality.

This latter instrument appears in an eighteenth century painting by Antoine de Favray (1706–1798) where it is played by a Pulcinella. Apart from establishing a connection between the Italian and Maltese carnivals, it may provide the source of the instrument and date of its importation—from Naples, when Malta was part of the Kingdom of the two Sicilies. Pulcinella, himself a licentious figure, matches the 'paidia' framework of this type of Carnival.

The people who enter the bar do not simply drink. Many of them jump or flap to the constant rhythm produced by these instruments, marked heavily by the deep note of the *rumbaba* which contrasts with the high pitch of the *tamburlin*. The accordeon creates a sort of vague, underlying tune. There is no singing but every so often the musicians or dancers will utter a cry.

Up to 1990 this type of music was also found in the streets. It was played on trucks placed at different points in the street and communicated a certain uniformity of mood and motion to the participants. This primitive type of music has now been replaced by electric guitars and synthesisers and the kind of music produced, swing or rock, is interspersed with more traditional tunes, primarily that of 'Viva il-Karnival' (a well-known tune from the sixties). Thus the movement of the people dancing in the streets is totally in contrast with that of those inside the bar, thereby creating two performance spaces with two different movements and attitudes with the more modern one predominating. In 1991 the musicians playing on the trucks would stop from time to time to give musicians in the bar a chance to play unhampered but this practice was quickly

abandoned during the same carnival. In 1994 the bar musicians moved to another bar situated in the middle of the street, previously known as The Blue Haven Hall, which formerly used to be almost deserted and has now been completely refurbished. This has encouraged another bar across the street to set up its own traditional band. It will be interesting to see what will emerge from this latest development, especially since both bars are situated closer to the band club.

At the bottom of the road lies the other precinct of the Carnival space—the band club. This establishment is responsible for the change in the type of music in the streets, as it was the first to introduce a disco during the Carnival festivities and set a ‘rock’ band on the stage it had erected in the square it gives on to. When this happened the older members of the community opposed the change bitterly stating that this was ‘against the laws of Carnival’. The use of the term ‘law’ is very significant. As Paul Sant Cassia has pointed out in a personal communication, it reflects the older men’s view of Carnival as something having rules which they define and embody. The men appeal to this notional idea of carnival in order to control it by establishing what goes and what doesn’t. Their authority is, however, being questioned and subverted by the young who use a rock band in order to insert their own view of culture. The young are therefore marking their opposition, affirming their own identity and point of view by using a ‘modern’ idiom against a ‘traditional’ one. By their refusal to uphold the notion of ‘anything goes’ during Carnival the older men are in a way setting the scene for the accepted areas of contestation, leaving out new areas of play which replicate what happens in the wider society.

The use of space in the Nadur carnival is antiprocessionary—not up, but up and down. People walk from one precinct to the other and then turn round. In comparison to the other carnivals, except Rabat, space in Nadur is quite vast as the street is quite a long one. Formerly this was not the case as previous spaces were limited to very tiny squares. We can perhaps conclude that space in Nadur was synonymous to importance. The more the carnival became popular the more space was needed, and the larger this was, the more it allowed the individual participants to elaborate not only upon costumes but also upon floats. Simple pushchairs or bicycles were now hidden under bigger cardboard structures and covered in branches or cloth or paint. This is because the people pushing them had more space to walk in and manoeuvre their creations. An idea of what Carnival must have previously been like is provided by the other similar type of Carnival, the one in Xewkija. Here space is limited to a small bar rigged inside a garage for 15 days a year, and to the small square around it. Due to these limitations we do not have the ‘floats’ existent in Nadur. It is rare to see somebody pushing anything because it would take up too much space. The only other element one sometimes comes across are farm animals, which are taken ‘to share the fun’.

In both these carnivals space near the church is considered taboo. When the villagers of Nadur were asked why they did not hold their carnival in the large square in front of the church, they seemed to shun the idea. It therefore appears that the inhabitants dissociate Carnival from the church. Some villagers even privately complained about the clergy’s negative attitude toward the festivity, which seems to reflect general clerical opposition to popular celebrations (Boissevain 1993: 159). The young priest in the village, however, enjoys carnival and has even participated wearing a disguise. This rejection of authority could mean that the seemingly uncontrolled structure of the Carnival in Nadur cannot be shackled in any way by hierarchy. In Xewkija the only link with the church is provided by chance: the barman’s brother, who helps out with

the clients, happens to be a priest but does not interfere with the proceedings in any way. A certain measure of anti-clericalism can be seen in the choice of costumes depicting the holy orders, even though it is against Maltese law to wear disguises representing the clergy or politicians. Usually nuns are made to look very sexy, and Jeremy Boissevain has seen men disguised as priests wearing huge penises.

Although the appearance of this type of Carnival is that of total freedom and even anarchy, there are strict rules underlying it. The participants, both active and passive, are doubly protagonists because they can easily switch roles. The watchers participate in the carnival by observing the performance, being the butt of teasing from the persons in disguise and trying to guess at the latter's identity. Yet, at the turn of a hair, they can suddenly become more active by simply disappearing round a corner, only to appear again this time disguised beyond recognition.

It is interesting to observe the onlookers' occupation of space. When the carnival was limited to the villagers there was a reduced number of participants. Onlookers took up places on the kerb and rarely left them, leaving the road itself clear for the people wearing disguises and pushing 'floats'. These participants would sometimes go to the kerb to tease the onlookers by including them in their 'acts'. For example, I watched a person in disguise sweeping the street who walked up to the kerb and started pretending to sweep the onlookers off it, and went as far as trying to do the same to the policemen who were also standing on the side of the road. When 'outsiders' (i.e., people not belonging to the village) started coming in large numbers to the Carnival, onlookers encroached more and more on the middle of the street and tended to walk up and down more often, cramping somewhat the movements of the persons in disguise. When the 'tourists' left, the old positions were resumed. In Xewkija space in the square was shared by onlookers and disguised persons alike. In the bar, however, the first year we went there, in 1991, the central area was occupied by people, generally in disguise, dancing to the rhythm of homemade instruments. Women sat on the side near the entrance to the bar and watched the proceedings. The second year, however, a few non-disguised persons were dancing in the central area and they included a few women. Contrary to the other two carnivals, festivities in San Lawrenz take place in the square in front of the church. Activities are organized by the Drama group, backed by the Parish priest. On the perimeter people in disguise participate in a limited measure in the organized proceedings, but walk around the rest of the square with ease creating their own little 'act'.

The costumed figures typical of these three carnival settings are totally under the sign of 'paidia', yet here again we have a series of underlying codes. First of all costumed figures cover their heads completely with masks, cloths or even large paper sacks used for cement. This on the one hand distances the wearer from the observer provoking in him a sense of wariness and even fear. On the other it brings the two together, because concealment allows for licentiousness (Sanga 1982:6).

The verb used to describe the figures who hide their identity behind a cloth or mask is '*mghammdin*' which in Gozo means 'to cover', but in Maltese also means 'to baptise'. Paul Sant Cassia has told me that the word can also mean 'initiated', which would place disguise within a more magico-religious framework. The masks are usually of rubber, and up to very recently were sent from abroad, particularly from America where most people from Nadur emigrated to. Nowadays they can also be purchased on the island. These elaborate and grotesque masks represented the sole means at the disposal of emigrants abroad to 'share' in the carnival fun by sending

halloween masks to their relatives specifically for carnival. In fact certain emigrants choose this period to holiday in Gozo in order to participate in the carnival and film it for their friends and relatives in the US. One returned emigrant told me 'I look more forward to Carnival because when you've been to the festa year after year it's always the same, but Carnival, there's always something new. You're going to see people, try to recognize them'.

Marianne Mesnil, when discussing the use of the mask, states the following:

'The mask is the prime instrument to create a rupture between the order of being and the social order of everyday life of a given society, and the order of appearance, of representation. In other words, it is not so much the instrument for dissimulation, but rather that of affirmation.' (1976:12 – my translation).

The assimilation of a new identity is not only limited to the head. The mask is extended to two other parts of the body by which a person can be easily recognized: the hands, which are encased in rubber or woollen gloves, socks or even plastic bags, and the feet, in plastic bags or wellingtons. The true identity of the person disguised must be hidden at all costs and under no condition is it to be revealed publicly.²² Revelation would only mean shame. In fact no make-up is ever used because it does not conceal enough. It is only when one is totally unrecognizable that one can indulge in actions which are either funny or have sexual connotations; identification, therefore, stops the flow of this catharsis. The decision to reveal his/her true identity is left totally to the person in disguise who can, but rarely does, inform friends who he/she is. In fact unmasking either does not take place at all, or if it does, it only happens in a small restricted circle of friends after the feasting is over for the day when there are very few people about in the street. Under no circumstance would anyone conceive of removing somebody's mask. Another code for preservation of identity concerns speech. A masked person will not utter a single word; if he/she wants to communicate, he will only do so by signs. In fact a masked person is rarely spoken to, rather, he is spoken about. This code is so powerful that members of the same family will not tell each other what they intend to wear, and once disguised will not reveal their identity to each other. In fact they do not leave the house together, and many put on their disguises in the fields surrounding the village. The moment when to appear in disguise is left totally up to the person (Gilmore 1975: 336). Some people interviewed told us that they would go up to watch the revelry in ordinary clothes in order to judge the moment when they felt that the atmosphere was just right for them to appear in their costume.

The concealment of one's identity provides the risk, the 'alea', in this type of carnival: to remain unrecognized. The 'agon' or contest consists of the person in disguise going up to people he knows and teasing them, thus daring them to recognize him. The success of the venture is savoured the next morning when friends are teased because the person managed to remain incognito.

Recognition of somebody means that he is eliminated from the game. The person has to retreat, either to reappear in his true identity wearing normal clothing, or to try his luck again in another disguise.

There are three main types of costume and they are all characterized by their lack of elaborateness. These are female garb, sheets and boiler suits which may be worn simply or adorned with branches, plastic bottles, paper or any other decoration that may take the wearer's fancy. The fundamental idea behind any costume is its spontaneity. Costumes are rarely planned, they are generally assembled on the spur of the moment and consist of old clothes people have rummaged up at home, with

no sense of harmony or colour. In fact they are defined as *'imbarazz'* (rubbish). Men pinch old clothes from their wives, mothers or sisters, women wear their fathers' trousers or husbands' pyjamas. Sheets are one of the oldest disguises and were used all over the island, including in the Rabat Carnival before 1952.²³ Boiler suits are generally dark, either blue, green or grey, and sometimes people wearing them carry placards pinned to their backs or fronts explaining who they are or bearing some humorous comment. Often these identities are inspired by fictitious or real characters seen on television. More rarely, as I have already pointed out, one comes across people disguised as priests, nuns or policemen, which is against the law, and other disguises include hooded penitents, reminiscent of Good Friday processions. The idea is not to look nice but to produce mirth, and more important to hide one's identity. Under the clothing 'props' are added to hide the person's shape: cushions or bundles form breasts, protruding bellies— particularly in the case of men disguised as pregnant women— buttocks, hunchbacks, etc. To these are added things that the wearers carry which can range from anything like branches, sticks, dolls to doors or even wardrobes.²⁴ Improvisation and concealment are extended to the way persons in disguise walk up and down the street: they hide their normal gait by stooping, shuffling, striding and adopting all sorts of physical postures aimed at making themselves unrecognizable. The 'agon' thus includes a combination of costume and act which can be limited to walking up and down the street, or take on more elaborate theatrical qualities, with mime and improvisation, where the 'props' carried can assume a new importance.²⁵

Elaborate, fancy dress costumes are worn only by very young children, and by the Maltese who go to the carnival and stick out like a sore thumb. There is a certain hostility with regard to Maltese presence, which is to an extent justified. It has become the fashion among a certain type of Maltese bourgeois to go to the Nadur carnival. These visitors are seen as invaders because they do not penetrate into the spontaneous 'communitas' (Turner 1969:96–97)²⁶ created by the prevailing structure, which tends to eliminate any sort of hierarchy, mainly through the non-identification process and the general use of poor means for disguise. At first they were made welcome by the people of Nadur because they were small in number and simply went to watch. They could therefore be integrated into the spontaneous community as they did not hamper the *raison d'être* of this type of carnival, the 'alea' of recognition, which can only be carried out by people who know and can identify each other. As carnival in Nadur became a fad, the number of Maltese was too big to be integrated. Moreover, these did not limit themselves to watching but invaded and took over the space reserved for the 'agon', the middle of the road, where disguised people would parade and act. Their conspicuous disguises and dominance of space did not allow the Gozitans to follow their purpose; consequently Maltese presence generated a feeling of frustration.²⁷ Maltese presence broke the harmony of the Nadur carnival as it created a hierarchy in space, costume and behaviour: people had to struggle hard to attract attention, and there were too many people and too many distractions for the watchers to enter into the identification process. The scope of the carnival was thus betrayed. This led to new importance being given to the Carnival on Tuesday (Carnival goes from Friday to Tuesday, and the bulk of the Maltese attend on Saturday), when the community is again alone to celebrate itself as nobody from outside the village would bother to come.

In the past only men participated in the carnival. Self-respecting women stayed at

home, or were supposed to. Old women have confessed to having gone to join the fun without their husbands' knowing, disguised from head to foot, running the gauntlet of being recognized which at best would end up in admonishment, but more often in a beating.²⁸ Nowadays women of all ages participate in Carnival both as watchers and in disguise, and it is very difficult to distinguish them from the men. They do not, however, dress up as women, leaving that prerogative to the male sex who tend to hyperbolize feminine distinctive traits or clothing: very short mini-skirts, very big busts, huge tummies. This choice reveals the singularity of Carnival when normal order is turned upside down, thus permitting transgression of every day behaviour and overturning of sexual taboos, as well as the possibility for males to take up for a limited period purely female anatomic characteristics which in normal times are a source of attraction and wonder. Older children tend to emulate the adults' behaviour and disguises. Generally boys do not tend to dress as women, but their sexual appetites can be seen by the amount of sausages and sticks they carry representing penises. This is also a predominant theme among the male adult participants, with the addition of inflated condoms. It appears clearly, therefore, that spontaneous carnival in Gozo is very masculine and phallic, contrary to the more feminine and graceful manifestations in carnivals such as that of Venice.

The masked figures push 'floats' up and down the street which are also charged with sexual and social meaning. These are generally carts, pushchairs, prams, bicycles or ploughs. Often they are decorated simply with placards, sometimes more elaborate decoration is provided by branches and carton. The messages on the floats, or the floats themselves are generally related either to sex or to hunting, which is a passion in Gozo. In fact messages are always pro-hunting and anti-conservationist, and are usually rude.²⁹ Generally these floats are pushed by boys or young men, but I have interviewed women who have admitted to pushing pushchairs, and members of my group watched one woman take part in a big float with about thirteen participants (all males) carrying a huge bed decorated with condoms, sausages and bloody sheets.

Although as I have pointed out most floats are of the simple kind, some floats are far bigger and more elaborate and their themes are either inspired from fantasy or from real-life episodes watched on television. In 1992, the year of the Gulf war, there were all sorts of missiles and aircraft, and even aircraft carriers. One of these was the fuselage of a real plane which had been found in a field. Other themes have included Viking ships, Angels and Devils, playing cards etc. These more elaborate floats are usually the work of a group of people (about thirty) headed by a farmer called Pietru l-Laqxa, who always dress up together. Their efforts, in turn, have inspired other little groups to come together and create more collective floats. The floats are prepared in great secrecy behind closed doors, and nobody is supposed to disclose the theme in order to surprise everybody when the time comes to take it out and parade up and down the street. They are assembled very quickly, the more elaborate taking two to three days, whilst the simpler ones taking literally a few minutes (such as a pushchair decorated with a few branches, for example).

When I first witnessed this carnival in 1990, extensive use was made of animals, mainly farm animals. I was told by the farmers that they wanted their animals to enjoy carnival too. Birds in cages usually decorated floats; wildfowl in particular were used for pro-hunting floats, and when they were taken out of their cages, they were usually tied to some prop in the float, sometimes cruelly so. In the people's mentality, however, these animals are destined to be hunted, so they do not associate cruelty with

them. Farm animals are much better taken care of because they are part of the participants' livelihood. Barnyard fowl were either put in cages and pushed around in pushchairs or prams or carried underarm, and were rarely molested. As a matter of fact their symbolic function within the carnival was recognized. One man, carrying a cock who was asked why he was doing so replied very plainly : 'Because the cock can eat when it likes and fuck when it likes'! Bigger animals such as sheep were either carried in cots or on a leash, and I saw one lamb being carried around like a baby. Often they were painted in stark colours to produce a laugh. I have also seen mice, which are carried purposely to send chills down people's spines. The ones I saw were carried dead at the end of a stick, but I have also heard stories of live ones being tied to a stick or let loose. In 1992, because of protests in the paper by Maltese, animals were forbidden. As a result, the inhabitants took up toy animals or stuffed birds (many of which belonged to protected species!). The use of animals shows the particular ties the farming population of the area has with its livestock, which cannot be understood by a town observer. Apart from animals, I have watched animal bones, particularly skulls, being carried to the Carnival, but this practice seems to have disappeared in the last three years. In San Lawrenz a bull skull was used as the central decoration of a float.

Carnival in Nadur is a loose, spontaneous structure, providing the opportunity to the community to deviate from normal patterns of behaviour (Lanternari, 1981:136), especially by means of disguise which conceals the identity of the wearer, thus leaving him/her free to 'misbehave'. Protected from recognition, the revellers transgress social taboos: they poke fun at others, touch them, taunt friends or enemies, and get up to all sorts of mischief. In the past this has even degenerated into violence, as a man would take advantage of his disguise to pay back his enemy for any wrong done to him by hitting or even knifing him, an aspect of the carnival which was often repeated to my group, particularly by older men (Poppi 1992:121).

The apparent spontaneity, the freedom from regulations specifying the shape and appearance that carnival is to take, is what renders the carnival in Nadur more attractive both to other Gozitans and Maltese, and accounts for its increasing popularity. The underlying rules are not normative, they determine the game of non-recognition the villagers play among themselves. They are sufficiently elastic to allow outsiders who are not aware of them to establish a parallel type of revelry at the same time, where in a society which is very conscious of outward appearances, the 'alea' or risk is simply to dare to put on a disguise in the road and behave differently.

Conclusion

In the minds of most Maltese and Gozitans Carnival is identified with a very rigidly organized structure, where the majority of the people are limited to passively watching proceedings. This is true of the 'official' carnivals held in Rabat and Valletta, which are planned by a national organizing committee, financed by the state. The structure of these carnivals has become so repetitive that interest is waning and less and less people go to watch them. Under their present form, these carnivals will continue to exist as long as money is pumped into them. They are seen by many participants as a source of income rather than fun. The main reason people interviewed give for attending is 'to take the children to watch Carnival', but when asked if they enjoy them, they are generally, at best, hesitant.

Other forms of Carnival, where 'ludus' is the prevailing structure, are now becoming a thing of the past. In the case of Xaghra, 'Carnival representations' have not managed to 'collapse the boundaries of time' (Venman 1993:79). The *kummittiva* is no longer danced because the community is no longer predominantly agrarian. Today's youth do not identify the underlying meaning of the ritual so that the cathartic effect of the dances is lost. Their aesthetic value is no longer appreciated because it does not conform to the tastes of the younger generation, who are the ones to learn the steps. This form of revelry has fallen into disuse because its structure cannot ply itself to changing concerns.

The most successful type of Carnival is that which has no fixed structure. Its element of spontaneity allows it to bend with the times and integrate new trends. 'Paidia' allows for imagination, creativity and resourcefulness. It does not limit its participants to a definite role; spectators are not obliged simply to watch, they can choose to take an active part in the revelry if they so wish (Turner 1982:43). Moreover, it is very easy to join the active participants, no elaborate costume is required. It is important, however, to respect the underlying codes of the Carnival which call for total anonymity.

The popularity of the Nadur carnival can be attributed to the fact that it conforms better to the patterns of a constantly fast-changing world, and provides catharsis through the pliability of its structures which can be made to express anything. It is thus better suited to formulate a 'critique [. . .] of the social life it grows out of' (Turner 1987:22). This explains why so many people flock to this Carnival, and abandon carnivals which are certainly much 'prettier' but which can only be watched. The fact that this more spontaneous form of revelry is being adopted on the fringes of organized carnivals could indicate the beginnings of a progressive transformation, but only time will tell if and how this will take place.

Notes

1. The first document referring to Carnival is a hospital expense account dating back to 1519 stating that the sick at the Hospital of the Santo Spirito are to have: 'due peczi di formagy, carny di vitella e vino per lu carnivalj' (Fiorini 1987:312) Fiorini states that the word 'Carnivali' was also used as a Christian name, and that such names are to be found in the militia list of 1419-20, which 'would place Carnival in the early 1400s' (1987:313).
2. This article is the result of four years fieldwork (1989-1992) during Carnival with students following the Theatre Studies Programme at the Mediterranean Institute of the University of Malta. A preliminary study was carried out in 1988, and in 1994 I returned to Nadur to see how the celebrations had evolved.
My analysis of Carnival celebrations is based mainly on tape-recorded interviews and photographic material. There is hardly any documented material – nothing exists in Nadur or Xaghra. In San Lawrenz we came across some vague descriptions of dances and a one minute film shot in the 60s by an amateur watching the proceedings. In Rabat, the official Carnival dates back to 1952, which is the first time Carnival in Gozo is mentioned in the local newspapers (Cf. *Times of Malta* and *Il-Berqa*, February 1952) Yet old people remember celebrating Carnival when they were young, and recall their grandparents telling them about Carnival in their time. This, therefore, generates the impression that Carnival has a long historical evolution.
3. cf. J. Baroja's opening statement 'Carnival is dead' (1989:19).

4. The statistics of the employment situation in Gozo between 1987 and 1992 are as follows:

	1987	1992		
self-employed	2260 (36%)	2599 (29%)	= +339	(12%)
private	1508 (24%)	2501 (27%)	= +993	(36%)
private sector	3768 (60%)	5100 (56%)	= +1332	(48%)
government/parastatal	2571 (40%)	3994 (44%)	= +1423	(52%)
	6339	9094		

(Source: Magro 1992:37)

5. Mr. Anthony Meli, of the Institute of Agriculture of the University of Malta, has supplied me with the following figures, which were given to him by the Government Office of statistics, but in the case of 1983, are still unpublished:

The figures show the sharp decrease in full-time and the increase in part-time farmers between 1957 and 1983.

1957

Location	Tot. Pop.	FARMERS		Total	% of pop.
		Full time	Part time		
Nadur	4136	357	366	723	17.5
Xaghra	4056	420	378	798	19.7
San Lawrenz	428	100	31	131	30.6
Zebbug	1199	170	127	297	24.8
Xewkija	3281	170	226	396	12.1
Kercem & St. Lucija	1220	187	121	308	25.2
Victoria	6357	189	219	408	6.4
	20677	1593	1468	3061	14.8

1983

Nadur	3087	197	414	611	19.8
Xaghra	3093	154	458	612	19.8
San Lawrenz	480	83	17	100	20.8
Zebbug	1062	61	208	269	25.3
Xewkija	2678	90	342	432	16.1
Kercem	1226	75	181	256	20.9
Victoria	5461	98	261	359	6.6
	17087	758	1881	2639	15.4

6. Barba describes 'extra-ordinary' (or 'extra-quotidian') as follows: 'In a situation of organized performance, the physical and mental presence of the actor is modelled according to principles which differ from those of everyday life. The extra-ordinary use of the bodymind is what is called technique. The actor's techniques can be conscious and codified, or unconscious, although implicit in the doing and repeating of the theatrical act. . . these principles produces pre-expressive physical tensions. This can be termed as an extra-ordinary use of energy which renders the body scenically 'decisive' "alive" "credible". . .' (1993:23).
7. Another significant aspect of Carnival, which I shall not be dealing with here, is the time-

space of Carnival. Baroja states: 'It is revealing that when the Christian year took its first shape, a lapse of time was contemplated having a defined social and religious content, in contrast to the period immediately following it, and that both one and the other were characterized by exactly opposite individual and collective behaviour' (1979:20; my translation).

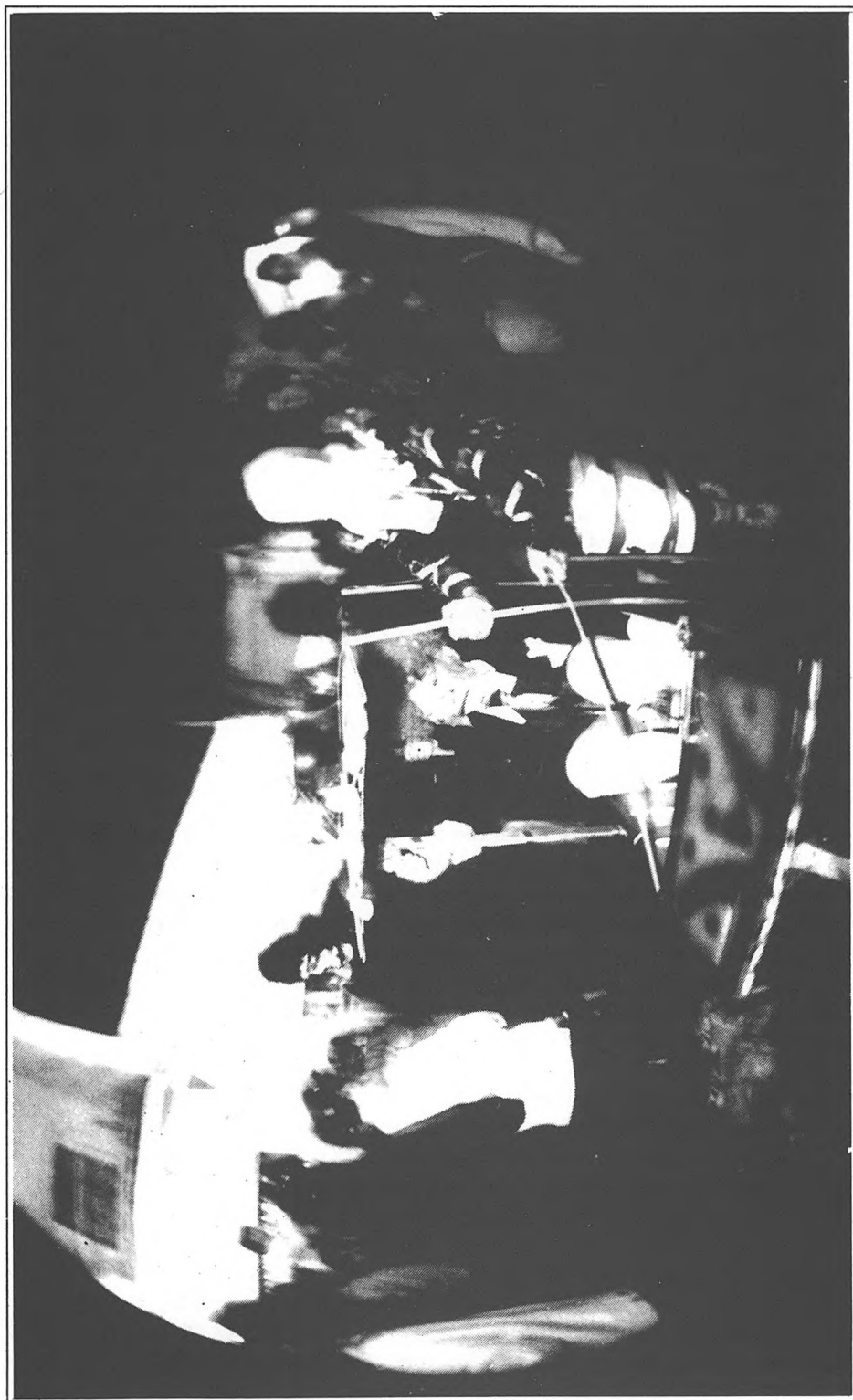
8. 'Signs' is here intended in the Saussurian sense of signifier and signified combining to produce sense.
9. A detailed study of his theory is carried out by Victor Turner in Manning 1981, and it is to this that I refer in my article.
10. Carnival, in fact, carries within it the seeds of revolution. Many uprisings have occurred during this period, such as the one in Romans described by Le Roy Ladurie, 1980.
11. In many villages there are two local patron saints, which is the source of rival clans and conflict within the village that spills over into everyday life (cf. Boissevain:1993)
12. Contrary to the past, this class of people would never dream of participating in the Maltese carnival which they define as 'boring', because they would consider it beneath their station. In the past, the higher middle classes prepared some of the most spectacular floats and companies for the Valletta Carnival, and were perhaps the ones to create the best atmosphere of fun, to the extent that organizers of the official carnival, who have been in the job for over twenty-five years regret their absence and declare that ever since they have pulled out of the Valletta carnival, celebrations have waned. Nadur is seemingly offering a new opportunity for them to take part directly in street revelry.
13. cf. recording of interview held at the Parish Priest's house, San Lawrenz, 1992.
14. The subject matter of the farce is usually either about marriage or cuckoldry, with mock trials or notarial deeds drawn up to the wife's disadvantage. Another common theme is surgical operations, and animal intestines, liver or heart are 'extracted' from the patient. In Italy, these farces usually mark the death of Carnival (cf. Silverman 1975: 159-161)
15. Jeremy Boissevain evokes the same sort of situation when he describes the '*fešta ta' barra*' (external feast) u '*fešta ta' gewwa*' (internal feast) (1991: 90) in Naxxar, the former being 'community celebrations that are in part performed for outsiders' (*ibid.* 96), and the latter 'normally celebrated only by Naxxarin' (*ibid.* 90).
16. There is in fact a small number of folk dance groups on the island which entertain mostly in hotels, but in many cases the dances are practically created by the choreographers themselves. The Anna La Rosa Group has done some research into costumes and steps. The only other dance—*Il-Parata* (the Parade)—which marks the start of official Carnival celebrations in the square in Valletta (Malta), has also been modified both with regard to costume and to steps, at times too arbitrarily at the whim of the choreographers.
17. Some examples of these tunes are: 'Tipperary', 'Congratulations' etc. It is interesting to note that though these instruments are also played in the Carnival at Nadur, they do not produce a melody, but a harsh rhythm. If we were to imagine that this was also the case in the organized dances of the *kummittiva*, we may suppose that with the diffusion of wireless and radio popular music gained ground. Consequently, pleasant catchy tunes would have supplanted the harsher, more primitive, improvised strains. This would also explain why all trace of original music has been lost.
18. The interpretation of these shapes is based on that given by Rossi and De Simone for similar dances. The authors define popular dance as follows:
'Popular gesture is what characterizes, distinguishes and identifies the way a people expresses itself [. . .] in dance, particularly, this style is determined by certain attitudes and a determined way of moving' (1977:47-48, my translation).
19. Many parallels may be drawn between this situation and that in Sardinia presented by Counihan (1985:17).
20. Through the lists and film we can note that some configurations we watched in Xaghra do not figure in San Lawrenz, and there are certain differences in the names of the dances.
21. The first Carnival committee was made up of Pawlu Portelli, Guze Meilaq (the father of Gorg

- Meilaq, who I quote), Guze Aquilina, and Koli Apap. Guze Aquilina was formerly Head of Department of Maltese at the University of Malta. Koli Apap was a well-known comedian.
22. In fact, I was told that in the past Carnival in Nadur had almost come to an end because a police sergeant, who wanted to apply the law, would force the revellers to take off their masks and show their faces. As a result people did not participate in the Carnival, and it was only when he was removed that Carnival picked up again.
 23. Initially this disguise was not worn in Carnival but in Christmas by the poor, who were too shy to show their faces and would beg for alms covered by a sheet.
 24. In fact in 1992 two men disguised themselves as wardrobes by standing each in an old bottomless wardrobe and walking up and down the street carrying them.
 25. The most superb example of this kind of act was offered by a man who owned two masks, both sent from the States. One was that of an old woman, the other of a bald, ugly man which he transformed into a drunkard. His impersonation of these two roles was so realistic that year after year, people would wait for him to appear, and everybody would stop to watch his act.
 26. Turner defines 'spontaneous communitas' as a 'direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities, a deep rather than intense style of personal interaction. It has something magical about it. Subjectively, there is in it a feeling of endless power. . . . Individuals who interact with one another in the mode of spontaneous communitas become totally absorbed into a single, synchronized, fluid event' (1982:47-48).
 27. In 1991 a group of persons from Nadur, who had been very friendly with my team and had helped us enormously in our fieldwork for two consecutive years, came up to me and told me very angrily that it was very ungrateful of me to repay their kindness to my team by ruining their Carnival. When I asked them what they meant, they told me that I had brought too many Maltese people with me, and at first would hardly believe me when I told them that I knew almost none of the Maltese present. The following Tuesday, when my team and I were the only 'foreigners', people in disguise would come up to us and merrily try to integrate us into their act.
 28. One old lady told us how when she was young, a woman who had been caught attending Carnival by her husband had been beaten up. She took the man to court but lost the case because the judge told her that it served her right, women should not go to Carnival.
 29. Men in Nadur, who are generally keen hunters, tend to get very angry at conservationists. In 1994 I happened to be standing next to some known conservationists who were there to ensure that no cruelty was done to animals. People who knew me from previous years suddenly became very aggressive towards me. Luckily, a keen hunter, who is very friendly to me, caught sight of me and persuaded the others that I had nothing to do with the other group!

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'Floats' and 'masks' at the Nadur Carnival. © Darrin Zammit Lupi