Exoticizing Discoveries and Extraordinary Experiences: “Traditional” Music, Modernity, and Nostalgia in Malta and Other Mediterranean Societies

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Introduction: Revival of Traditions or Redefinition of “Traditional”/”Modern”?

Anthropologists and historians have recently been examining the resurgence of rituals and popular traditions in Europe (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Manning 1983; Turner 1982, 1983; Boissevain 1992). In discussing these issues, the concepts of “traditional” and “modern” are inevitably evoked. Too often it has been assumed that the two terms have relatively fixed and unambiguous meanings, especially when explored from within the framework of the nation state, and from perspectives which implicitly or explicitly reinforce state-imposed classifications (Favret Saada 1980; Herzfeld 1987). Similar presuppositions were shared by ethnomusicologists. In 1983, Nettl observed: “Ethnomusicology until recently tended in the main to ignore music that seemed to represent instability in favour of often tiny fragments of tradition that they could assume to have gone unchanged” (1983:319). He suggested that far from rejecting musical “pollution,” we should study it as inevitable (ibid:316, 346). This lead has been pursued by scholars in the pages of Ethnomusicology. Nettl (1978) identified eleven different possible non-Western responses to Western music, but was primarily interested in musical content. He further explored these responses in another wideranging publication that considered the centrality of music to particular cultures (1985). Such studies often implicitly assume (at least for heuristic purposes) two clearly defined sets of axes: Western/Non-Western and Traditional/Modern, overlapping at times, diverging at others.

There is a whole area on the periphery of Europe running along major cultural fault lines (such as Malta, Cyprus, Greece, southern Spain), that
threatens such oppositions. In these societies, where identity with respect to the “West” and the “Orient” is much debated, music becomes a domain of contestation, construction, and narration. Following Blacking’s (1995: 167) encouragement to concentrate on the interpretative frameworks people employ when they hear particular musics (paralleling Barthes’ concentration on the reader/listener), I examine how *ghana*, “traditional” singing in Malta, was originally defined as a subaltern indigenous musical culture by folklorists, and how *ghana* held an ambiguous position for the politics of cultural identity. I then explore how the significance of *ghana* in contemporary Malta has become transformed. As a symbol of traditionalism, *ghana* is now increasingly approached through the discursive space of exoticism and world music. I thus suggest that it is not so much traditions that are being revitalised (as Boissevain 1992 argues), but rather that the relationship between “tradition” and “modernity” is being redefined in new ways. In contemporary Malta and other societies on the margins of Europe, modernity is increasingly pursued through the celebration of traditionalism. This celebration of traditions is expressed through experiences of discovery which should be narrated. This has radical implications not just for what “tradition” and “modernity” signify and are signified by, but also how they are constructed and pursued in and through music.

**The Different Genres of Ghana**

I am concerned with traditional folk singing in Malta called *ghana* (pronounced *aana*), although I will also be referring to other forms of “peripheral” music in other parts of the Mediterranean such as rebetika in Greece. The general contours of *ghana* have been dealt with by various authors (Cassar Pullicino 1961; Cassar Pullicino and Galley 1981; Giантar 1994; Fsadni 1993; Herndon 1971, 1987; Herndon and McLeod 1981; McLeod 1975; McLeod and Herndon 1980; Sant Cassia 1989) and only a brief outline is given here. Singers or *ghannejja* (pronounced ‘*anneyia*) are men usually from relatively humble backgrounds, mainly the port conurbation. *Ghana* consists of three types of singing: (i) *spirtu pront*, (ii) *tal-fatt*, and (iii) *ilt-Bormliza*.

*Spirtu pront Ghana* is the most popular live form of *ghana* nowadays and is almost exclusively practiced by men. Spirtu pront (literally quick spirit, or ready wit) is an extemporised song contest between two to six singers, nowadays accompanied by guitarists, usually three in number. Specific subjects evolve during the contest, and improvisation is subject to certain “rules” (see Herndon and McLeod 1980). Singers thrust and parry in extemporized (often but not necessarily) octosyllabic quatrains around a theme chosen and developed by the singers in the course of their con-
test known as *botta u risposta* (risposte and counter-risposte). Each singer tries to outdo his opponent in wit, general knowledge, humor, and lexical choice, bearing in mind the overriding need to rhyme. Failure to do so can sink a singer. Metaphors, double-entendres, and lexical-switching from English to Maltese are often employed. In style, context, content, and contestation, ghana can vary from the informally amiable, egalitarian, and exploratory singing between friends (the *serata*) emphasizing commensality, to almost hostile, barely concealed agonistic challenges (*sfida*) in wine bars which can develop into socially disapproved, but often vicariously enjoyed (by singers’ followers), “vendettas” between singers (McLeod and Herndon 1980). In such a competitively egalitarian society, a bad performance can severely damage a singer’s reputation and prestige. Some singers have a reputation for aggressivity and for personalising their songs, and risk permanently alienating their opponents. Many singers (ghannejja) learn informally (Herndon and McLeod 1981:54; Fsadni 1993) from accompanying their elders. In being exposed to subtle, complex, and exophoric references to the slipperiness of language and metaphors, children are socialised into the flexible and ambiguous world of Maltese adult society.

The ideal voice type is that of a high tenor. Lomax’s description of Southern Italian singing could apply to ghana: “a voice as pinched and strangulated and high-pitched as any in Europe. The singing expression is one of true agony, the throat is distended and flushed with strain, the brow knotted with a painful expression. Many tunes are long and highly ornamented in Oriental style” (1959:942). The latter would be more suitable for *il-Bormliza*. Yet as a nineteenth century Arab visitor noted, singing in Malta was distinctive in terms of style, and subject matter and influence:

In music as in other things, the Maltese waver; they are neither like the Franks nor like the Arabs. Their villagers have but a few songs, and when they sing they strain their voices excessively, so that they shock the ear. They resemble the Franks in that they confine themselves to the *rasd*, and the Arabs in that when a number of them assemble to sing they use sounds which belong to one mode only, also in that one of them stands up to recite and the others respond. Their notables learn Italian melodies. (Cachia 1973:47)

Some observations (bi-musicality, the mixture of styles) will be dealt with below. As Nettl noted, “bi-musicality accompanies and symbolizes bi-cultural society” (1983:50). Indeed, many themes in ghana deal precisely with the tensions of bi-culturalism: the “language question,” i.e. English versus Maltese, where English words can be inserted ironically to denote high status, social pretence, and “softness” or frivolity (*tal-pepe*), and Maltese words are used to denote egalitarianism, manliness, and “naturalness”; social stratification as reflected in residence and housing; insiders versus outsiders; official folklore versus ghana proper; and the high status of liter-
acy (ta’ l-iskola) versus the low status of illiteracy. Such oppositions are rarely presented rhetorically, nor are overt ideological positions taken. A singer may ironically refer to himself as of low status and yet display his virtuosity. Spiritu pront ghana in its most highly developed form can expose the contradictions and tensions in Maltese cultural identity or identities, and whilst it appears to be referring to small and banal facts it can revolve around values at the core of Maltese society: literacy, folklore, status, language, social pretence. Most spiritu pront singers are not so much interested in singing overt political songs as in demonstrating their virtuosity.

Ghana tal fatt is less popular than spiritu pront as a performance genre, and has less of a high profile. Fatt means “fact.” According to Ciantar, “this style is more westernized. The lack of a melismatic nature allows for the words to be clearly expressed and understood” (1994:4). Fatt songs can deal with well known stories or events, taken either from life or from literature, such as ballads. Singers also compose their own songs, or are commissioned. Tapes circulate widely. Traditional contexts for fatt singing were the xa-lati (community or neighbourhood-based outings) some of which have disappeared but replaced by other occasions such as festivals organized by the Malta Labour Party (Iljieli Mediterranji). In the prewar period cheap chapbooks on popular themes were printed and used for extemporization. There are examples dating from before the standardization of Maltese orthography in the early twentieth century. Fatt has thus been more heavily influenced by literary concerns than spiritu pront. Although some songs dealt with epics explored by western literature, others also provided social commentaries on moral crises or local issues (tas-suggett).

Due to the wide availability and knowledge of such texts, it is likely that the genre was not only vibrant at this time, but also could have been extemporized more than nowadays, as many people then knew the plots structures. Nor was it an indigenous “spontaneous” tradition divorced from literacy and literature, a fact now well established in ethnomusicological understanding (Seeger 1950; Nettl 1983). Fatt singing was heavily influenced by Maltese popular poetry and translations of, and elaborations on, well known Italian songs or poetry, such as Tasso. The favorite form was the octosyllabic verse3—the ottava rima also favoured by the poeti contadini in central Italy (Kezich 1996). This suggests that fatt singing was then primarily a folk version of high (Italianate) culture, and was even more closely harnessed by it, rather than a grassroots critical elaboration on Maltese official culture, as spiritu pront is nowadays. Literacy (even of a restricted type) was useful for a singer as this gave independent access to the literary sources. Fatt was mainly but not exclusively sung by men. Although women also sang handed-down songs, their lesser access to litera-
cy and formal education may have placed them at a disadvantage in terms of access to ballads. As formal education became increasingly identified with high status (more available to men), it is possible that this elevated the status of men who sung fatt, whilst women’s singing, embedded as it was in the local community and dealing with intimate embarrassing details concerning reputations, etc., became devalued. Today the fatt genre is perhaps less vibrant as a live performance, but songs are still sung concerning current local events such as the 1995 Dockyard tragedy. Traditional fatt singing to a much greater extent than spirtu pront was dependent upon two molding facts: restricted literacy and underdeveloped means of communication on the one hand, and a classical fixed hegemonic educational system based on recitation on the other. It was linked to a classical (Italianate) education that has little relevance nowadays and was adversely affected by the removal of Italian as an official language by the British in the pre-WWII period. Spirtu pront by contrast can appear in many more contexts.

A similar form of singing existed in Cyprus, known as tchiattista (Yiangoullides 1982). In Malta and Cyprus this type of factual poetry/singing has largely survived through the radio and the cassette and live performances. Phone-in poetry is popular in Cyprus on the private radio stations and fatt survives in Malta through the radio, the cassette, and live performance.

In both Cyprus and Malta popular poetry in sung/recited form has been associated with the Left and somewhat ambiguously with indigenous culture. Tchiattista is seen as “Cypriot” rather than “Greek,” and Communist Party MPs attend performances to demonstrate that Cypriot popular culture is distinct. Both forms of singing are traditionally looked down upon by the elites. Tchiattista is considered suitable for the aplos kosmos, the ordinary folk, but not for “educated” (morphomenos) people. In Malta left-wing political ballads are also common in fact such as the L’istorja ta’ Mintoff (The Mintoff Story). This epic song commemorates the achievements of the socialist party leader Dom Mintoff who dominated Maltese politics from the early 1950s until the mid 1980s and radically transformed the island. Partly because of its populist ideology, the Labour Party has been more well disposed towards ghanan than the more centrist and pro-church Nationalist Party.

The self-aggrandizing claim by singers that they are “poets” in their bawdy, combative, quickwitted, often insulting botta u risposta, are often advanced half in self-mocking irony, and half as a self-assertive daring gesture against an official hegemonic (political) culture which grants them little official recognition. The next section examines how Maltese scholarship has approached ghanan, and why it has tended until very recently to have an ambiguous status.
Approaches to Ghana

In this section I concentrate on spiritu pront Ghana. A striking feature of Ghana is its ambiguous status within Maltese society and, relatedly, in Maltese scholarship. In Maltese scholarship, the "multivocality" of Ghana, the fact that it is simultaneously music, performance, and poetry, has both dissolved interest in the phenomenon, and prevented its comprehensive tackling. As an example of "traditional folklore," Ghana has been the preserve of folklorists (Cassar Pullicino 1989a, 1989b; Cassar Pullicino and Galley 1981); as music and performance it has received attention by ethnomusicologists (Hendon 1971; McLeod and Hendon 1980) and composers (Camilleri 1966, 1973); as poetry by literary scholars (Friggieri 1979), and as music in culture and society by anthropologists (Sant Cassia 1989; Fsadni 1993). Each discipline inevitably brought its own scripted and unscripted agendas to bear on the study of the subject. Folklorists saw in Ghana a retention and repository of "tradition," composers discovered vibrant musical roots for a culture that was rather poor in popular musical culture which enabled them to pursue a synthesis of "Mediterranean music," anthropologists viewed Ghana as a bubbling antihegemonic counter-culture, and literary historians discovered the connection with the Italian ottava rima among other concerns. This marginalised the study of Ghana, although the marginalisation of Ghana in Maltese society is due to a complex series of factors which I have alluded to elsewhere (Sant Cassia 1989).

I argue that the nature of marginalisation of Ghana has changed over time, and that scholars are far from innocent of complicity in this process. Ghana has moved from having a concealed marginalisation (in relation to official high culture), to possessing a proclaimed marginalisation which both exoticises it and renders it "acceptable." The "discovery" of Ghana thus becomes part of the way it is performed, talked about, and legitimated. In so doing, I will be referring to other studies of music in the Mediterranean such as rebetika in Greece (Cowan 1993), arabesk in Turkey (Stokes 1992, 1994), flamenco in Spain (Manuel 1989; Mitchell 1994; Washabaugh 1996), and the folk revival in England (Boyes 1993).

Like many aspects of Maltese culture such as language, which for local scholars forms a Herderian model of and for culture, Ghana has been viewed as a good example of local syncreticism (Ciantar 1994; Camilleri and Serracino Inglott 1988), though with some ambiguity. It has also been seen as a type of "aboriginal" music (when juxtaposed with traditional instruments which have largely disappeared from use) predating romance culture. For others, it has been interpreted as a quintessential example of "Mediterranean music" or of possessing a "Mediterranean dimension." Maltese scholars and musicians, as well as politicians, have long harped on
the “Mediterranean” dimension of local identity and culture. As far back as the seventeenth century Maltese historian Commendatore Giacomo Abela, there has been a concern with “where” Malta is, and it may well be significant that apart from Ghana there are no examples of extant musical popular culture, except for the band club tradition traceable to the mid-nineteenth century (Boissevain 1994a) and contemporary rave culture. Ghana would thus come to represent both a timeless past of aboriginality and a living demonstration of the island as an exemplar of a contemporary pan-Mediterranean culture. Concern with Ghana’s Mediterranean dimension is a perspective that reappears continually. It is related to Maltese concerns with their island as a synthesis of various Mediterranean cultures.

There is an additional problem with Ghana as musical tradition. The few transcriptions of the music date from the mid-nineteenth century, with the bulk from the post-WWII period. Traces of Ghana as texts are more common, in fact booklets. This same dearth of documentation applies to more instrumental pieces (Partridge and Jeal 1977). There are very few recordings or transcriptions of “traditional instruments,” such as those that Bartók, for example, undertook for traditional Hungarian folk music or Turkish music (Bartók 1976). It also differs, for example, from England, where folksong, according to Harker (1985), has long been manufactured into “fakesong.” Why no Maltese literati or intellectuals attempted to record or transcribe such examples is partly related to their response to “Western” music. As in the Middle East, “Western” music was adopted outright (Nettl 1985:158). Malta lies on a major cultural “fault line” between “Europe” and the “Arab world” with which it shares Maltese as a Semitic language. Western music was not only an importation but also indigenously produced since the Renaissance, either as an accoutrement of high culture/high religion in Catholicism, or filtered down (and elaborated) in the form of band-club marches and operetta at village grassroots since the late nineteenth century.

The upshot is that Ghana was never considered worthy of recording or salvaging, and was peripheral to the nationalist enterprise. Certainly it has long had “popular” associations. In the process, Ghana has acquired a history of a lack of history, or more precisely it has acquired a history of being perceived as “traditional” but without many historical examples. Indeed, in a literate society that minutely records monumental time, that measures change in terms of building and incising marks on the landscape, that very lack of a history, and therefore of change, may have encouraged the notion of Ghana as “timeless” and as “sounds/voices from the past.” Ghana becomes metaphorically like the Maltese language which was not a widely used written language until the mid-nineteenth century: it acquires a long history of no history.
The contrast to classical instrumental and vocal music is striking. Over the past few years many musical scores of music performed in Malta for the Church and the Knights of St John in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have been published. Thus, traditional music and music making which is believed to have a long history has in fact got a shorter documented history than "European" art music composed and performed in Malta. Many middle class Maltese tended to see Culture in terms of a European heritage and considered Ghana as a cultural embarrassment that they could not place in cultural evolutionist terms (Sant Cassia 1989). To the middle classes and literati accustomed to the Western musical tradition, Ghana sounds dissonant, incompatible with their musical tastes. Yet the compatibility between Western music and Ghana as two equally valid musical traditions in Maltese culture lies less in their formal qualities than in the "quality of the relationship between cultures and between musics" (Nettl 1985:6). The division between Western ("Frankish") and non-Western ("Arab") music noted by the nineteenth century Arab visitor above is more than a cantometric one. It is part of a wider symbolic contestation encompassing identities running through the society that has recently been "resolved" through the construction of Ghana as a "Mediterranean" music. The next sections of this paper examine the evolution of the status of Ghana within folklore as an index of popular culture.

**Ghana As "Tradition"**

As with arabesk in Turkey, flamenco in Spain, and rebetika in Greece, Ghana has come to represent "the savage within," a symbol of aboriginality that threatens official presentations of national culture and identity. Paradoxically, because it has no formal written history, its potency as index of the possibility of tradition is further enhanced. Ghana has come to represent tradition as tradition, rather than a residue or survival of traditional singing in the present, because we know little of what that tradition actually was. Furthermore its "history of non-history" is shunned by Maltese historians who have long been involved in documenting High Culture for the process of nation building, and because tradition as tradition is refractive to analysis. Ghana thus became the preserve of folklorists, as explored below.

Here a brief comparison with what seems to have occurred in other parts of Europe in the late nineteenth century is instructive. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) have suggested that the invention of tradition in Europe was intimately linked to the development of the modern nation state. Yet despite the indubitable attractiveness of this thesis, it suffers from two major
defects. First, it views "tradition" rather narrowly in "historicist" terms, as practices, pomp and ceremony, rituals, symbols, etc., readily identifiable within society as "Tradition" with a capital "T." Nowhere is the concept of "tradition" scrutinised. Second, "tradition" may well be located in, and embodied by, discursive practices—a way of talking about (and listening to) the past by reference to cultural practices (such as Ghana) deemed to represent "tradition." Ghana, like arabesk and flamenco, rather than being a "tradition," can well represent tradition. "Tradition" thus becomes not just something invented in an identifiable (recent) past (as Hobsbawm's contributors suggest), but a way of talking about the past (and the present) through the identification of certain practices that require preservation. In "tradition" the politics of preservation is as important as the politics of invention. I suggest that in societies on the semi-periphery of Europe (such as Malta, Greece, Cyprus, etc.), the process of national culture formation involves two processes that have ethnomusicological implications: a) Music as a-tradition-that-requires-preservation (Folklore Mark I). In the context of globalization this has been replaced by b) Music as "heritage," approached through a detour of an exoticising discourse that oscillates between the rhetorical opposition of "concealment" and "discovery." Heritage can be seen as a mode of cultural production of communities of discourse that has recourse to the past (see also Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995). It is "invented" by constantly being "rediscovered." This involves not just a change in musical style and content (as outlined, for example, by Nettl 1978), but an accompanying rearticulation of the relationship between a music and its culture.

**Tradition As Preservation—Ghana and Folklore Mark I**

Folklore has had a double investment in Ghana: as subject of investigation and as a means to construct itself. Ghana has long been the domain of folklore studies in Malta. Indeed, the performance of Ghana, especially in certain festas, has provided an opportunity for Ghana and folklore to reciprocally define each other, the first as a performance of folklore," the second as the documentation of "tradition." Although Ghana had previously been associated with certain festas, in the 1950s folklorists began organizing a singing competition to accompany a national festa (the Imnarja). The Imnarja had become institutionalised as an agricultural show, under the patronage of a benevolent elite of professionals and folklorists, with the support of the colonial Department of Agriculture. It was shunned by the urban, Anglophone, mercantile elites who viewed it as archaic, popular, and uncontrolled, represented through all-night revelry. As an agricultural
festival it encapsulated an imagined past, for the economy had lost its agricultural base by the late nineteenth century.

By situating Ghana in the Imnarja festa, folklorists associated it with rurality (whereas it was equally found in urban contexts), archaized it, and turned it into a spectacle divorced from its social context. Folklorists (undoubtedly genuinely) believed that Ghana had “degenerated” into offensive trading of insults, and were keen to “salvage” its dignity as a subaltern and “disappearing” cultural form. This corresponded to their image of traditional society as harmonious and their role as benevolent conservationists. But by determining the themes of the songs, which they wrote down on slips of paper which the singers had to draw, they depersonalized the songs, and turned singers into potential comedians of themselves. The subjects of the songs were influenced by images the elite themselves had of the poplu (e.g., spendthrifts, henpecked husbands) according to an agenda unconsciously influenced by their perception of what would amuse the poplu as public spectacle. As Herndon and McLeod scathingly pointed out, these judges “know nothing about the musical style and . . . the intricacies of folk music” (1981:159). This is correct but bypasses the fact that folklore and Ghana have consequently become engaged in a complex exchange. While many good singers have shunned the competition, leaving it open to mediocre ones, the dominant public image of Ghana among the middle classes is formed through such contexts, further contributing to its marginalization. This leaves a gap in the construction of Ghana for it to be “rediscovered” outside such contexts as “authentic performance.” On the other hand, social recognition by the wider society is controlled by the middle classes and folklorists who confer legitimation, approval, and success. Two effects follow. From the perspective of Ghana, some singers appear to conform to the expectations of folklorists. Similar effects emerged with flamenco singers in Spain, who adjusted to the demands of visiting flamencologists suppressing their own views of what they considered good singing (Washabaugh 1996: xiv; see also Nettl 1985:116 on the similar role of ethnomusicologists in the “preservation” of “traditional” music). Conversely, some singers under the influence of Western models have progressively presented themselves as artists or poets, with consequent transformations of the self and the contents of their songs.

Because of the complex interrelationship between singers/Ghana and folklore/ists, singers are dependent upon the official approval of the classes setting the taste-agendas of the wider society. Both Ghannejja and folklorists are aware that Ghana/folklore are considered unimportant for national identity and culture. This very subalternity is nowadays constantly being invented and “rediscovered.” Folklorists concentrate on Ghana (among other things) to “capture” “tradition” from the past through a study of the present,
and thus claim some relevance for national identity construction. Reciprocally, singers claim to embody "il-folklor Malti" (Fsadni 1993), to inscribe for themselves some national recognition.

Folklore's concentration on Ghana merits scrutiny. Maltese folklore has long concentrated on tales, proverbs, children's games, religious festivities, items of clothing, food, etc. Many are no longer in active use. Indeed the very process of recording what was about to disappear has been integral to Maltese folklore since its inception in the mid-eighteenth century (Cassar Pullicino 1989a:6). Folklore appears close to antiquarianism. Some customs may always seem "about to disappear" (see also Stewart 1991). Rather than pointing to customs as distinct, "out there," disembedded from the field of cultural production, such an approach would enable us to view customs as symptomatic of the changing articulation of social groups. "Declining customs" may well be an expression/attribution of (social) marginality, which elevates the status of those involved in recording them and preserving them from "oblivion."

Folklore in Malta can be seen as the scholarly practice of what Gramsci called "organic intellectuals" (school teachers, rural petty bourgeoisie) within a power-knowledge field of "decline/disappearance" and "preservation." Ghana provided folklorists and others with an opportunity to study a practice which is "traditional" and which its practitioners consciously and sometimes ironically present as "traditional." Moreover, it is found at the grassroots, is "spontaneous" (although this is a calculated spontaneity), and appears resistant to touristic commercialization. It occupies a privileged position in folklore and is emblematic of a "living tradition." Indeed, Ghana has acquired a special role in migrant communities as a means to manufacture an imagined utopian community through "the retention of tradition as identity."

But "Tradition" is neither self-evident nor transparent. It needs to be identified, packaged, and made the subject of discretion and taste. In the contemporary world, according to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, folklore as the scholarly recording of traditions has been replaced by "Heritage" as a "new mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past" (1995:369), although she does not examine the power implications. The role of social groups and of the various academic disciplines that explore tradition is significant, as are the mass media and the means of representation. Here it is worthwhile distinguishing between traditional folklore, the "preservation" of customs or traditions by scholars, from its more recent postmodern variant, Folklore Mark II: the popular folklorising approach that exoticises the familiar, and is always "(re)discovering" popular customs that are "hidden."
Tradition As “Discovery” of “Marginality”:
Ghana and Folklore Mark II

Recently, a new phenomenon has been occurring with respect to the “traditional”—its “rediscovery.” The rehabilitation of traditional rural architecture, festa, carnival, etc., has been addressed in literature for some two decades. But it has also belatedly affected Ghana. Indeed the elite appears keen to discover Ghana as a symbol of marginality. The following is a recent example of the discourses of “discovery”:

I first heard *ghanja* many years ago, in a field. . . . when, *as if from the stone of an old dry wall*, a strangely repetitive yet subtly alternating sound floated toward me. Almost, but never quite shrill, a man’s voice, no longer young, came *from what sounded like a long, long ago*. A sad song it was and the guitar between the laments gave contrast, punctuating each delivery of what seemed to me to be the sound of a heart in torment. . . . It was, at the same time, *familiar*, *remembered*, *but not quite recognised*. Had I heard it somewhere, in another place? *Africa perhaps*. . . . It would appear, though nothing is certain, that the Moors in their eight-century spread, took their Berber roots, song included, with them and somewhere along the years *in places like Malta*, *semi-isolated*, *slow to alter*, *the primitive origins held fast* and maintained their strong grip. . . . Maltese *ghanja*—chanted poetry—is unique in its present form. *Unpopularised*, it represents perhaps *the last defiant shout of a proud individuality and the commonplace*. . . . *Ghannejja*, the singers with their improvised rhythms, call and respond to the other. Epic melodrama. Lost loves. Tragedy. Satire. Humour. All the stuff of life and of theatre, *resistant to time and the magnets of commerce*. (Markland 1996:39; my emphases)

This article appeared in the influential *Sunday Times* (of Malta) supplement. The very process of an outsider writing on an intimate aspect of normally shunned local culture both exoticates and legitimates it.

There is little on the contemporary nature of Ghana, or its history. It does not tackle the problem when discussing the phenomenology of listening to Ghana, that while it is popular among afficionados, for someone not accustomed to it, a first hearing can be an unsettling experience. In this account the emotion is transparent and emerges in spite of the lack of comprehension. In short, the music of the voice as emotion rather than the content emerges as significant, whereas the text, the extemporization, the play on words, the metaphors and tropes are what is particularly interesting in Ghana. The article errs in suggesting that Ghana deals with “all the stuff of life and of theatre.” In fact the themes treated are usually banal and pedestrian, especially spiritu pront. Nor is Ghana unpopularised. And it has long been affected by “the magnets of commerce”: recordings were made since the early 1930s, tapes are produced and circulate, including overseas, and most singers would wish for more rather than less recognition through the marketplace. Some can command high fees. Nor is it “the last defiant
shout of a proud individuality." Indeed the individuality is controlled and overt virtuosic individuality is usually condemned (Herndon 1987). Yet the traditional commensality and competition has changed. Some singers now view themselves as poets, as innovators rather than carriers of tradition.5

Mediterranean musics such as ghana (Malta), rebetika (Greece), tchiattista (Cyprus), arabesk (Turkey), and flamenco (Spain) must be located within disciplines that discourse on "tradition," from folklore to the contemporary mass media. These disciplines have long been influenced by the relationship to elites in their project of national culture construction. In these societies, popular culture (including music) often fitted ambiguously within the model of official culture (Herzfeld 1987). In Malta, ghana was sited "between folklore and concealment" (Sant Cassia 1989), i.e. while it clearly was "folkloric," the middle classes never held it up as an example of their official export-model culture. This also appears to be the contemporary status of tchiattista in Cyprus, and arabesk in Turkey "considered to be the music of . . . a backward and exotic orient existing as a revealing anomaly in a Westernized and secular state" (Stokes 1992:8). By contrast ghana, as popular culture, appears to be achieving a different profile in contemporary cultural politics.6 Intellectuals now visit popular bars and restaurants, attend festas, Good Friday processions, rural carnevals, etc. "Popular culture" is now de rigeur (Cremona 1995:92), though not without resistance by the "popular" classes (Boissevain 1992:14).

We can now more fully appreciate the background and implications of the depiction of ghana. What seems to be occurring is the mutual confabulation of the category of "the marginal," and the experience and recounting of its "discovery." This is the discursive space around which its significance is elaborated. The process involves the following steps: (i) the mental representation/category of "the marginal" as "exotic" (i.e. the assumed posture of exoticism frames the-what-is-gazed-at as "marginal"), (ii) the experience of participation (sometimes in a virtual form), always with its possibility of representation and display to an "audience" (in whatever form), (iii) the presentation of this "experience" as "unique," and as a "discovery" of the "marginal," where (iv) the experience of the narrating subject confers authenticity on the narrated object, and enhances the status of the narrator, and (v) which is actually reproducible on a mass scale.

Ghana becomes a symbol of marginality paradoxically invested with a residual power—not so much power from the past, but power that has survived in spite of the past, and which is likely to "disappear" because of the onslaught of the "modern world." The ultimate sign (and trick) of modernity is to resist its implications, by salvaging that which proclaims itself salvageable. Ghana is thus "discovered" through the construction of the category of "marginality," which at the same time it is held up to em-
body or represent. As an “otherness,” it is no longer an intimate otherness, but a part of an exotic otherness from the wider category of world music, and exoticised by its association with other examples of “traditional” music, dance, or even performance.

Nettl characterized this response as exaggeration: “a phenomenon resulting from Western listeners’ expectation of great exoticism in the sound of non-Western music. In some non-Western cultures music appears to have changed in order to conform to the European and the Westernized natives’ conception of what the tradition should be, stressing the difference and emphasizing what is, from the European viewpoint, an exotic musical sound” (1978:132-33). In Malta listeners/consumers and producers are not distinct but belong to the same national (semi-peripheral European) society. The threatening otherness of ghana as representative of the private doubts of official national hegemonic models of “European” identity is neutralised through a detour of Western sensibilities’ expectations of exoticism, and rendered more acceptable through recounting as “extraordinary” experiences of discovery. Through such recounts listeners weave their identities.

**Deritualizing Rituals**

It is worthwhile placing such exoticization within the wider discussion of the revitalization of rituals. Manning (1983) and Boissevain (1992) have suggested that in Europe ludic elements have increasingly taken over and replaced the more august rituals of, and from, the past. Boissevain has posited an oscillation between play and ritual. Rather than perceiving play as emerging in opposition to ritual, and revitalising it, we ought to modify our views of ritual and play. It is not so much that play is replacing ritual, but rather we now approach ritual ludically, to use Victor Turner’s terminology (1983). Our perception of ritual has changed. We anticipate ritual through a long tradition of secularization, through a history of perception via various means of representation (including the telling of stories), and as spettacolo. Ritual ceases to be a repository of secret knowledge, of something hidden, but becomes an elaboration of surfaces. It becomes exotic, something to be discovered, talked about, and experienced with an eye (both literally and metaphorically) to its reenactment elsewhere. Increasingly such experiences aim to be inscribed in recitation. "Power" therefore shifts from the control over the organization of (and participation in) rituals, to one where the ludic ritualization of tradition through its discovery, performance, and narration helps maintain social groups’ hegemonies of taste.

The otherness of ghana is not an exotic otherness but the otherness of an ultimately ordinary exoticism. Previously the otherness that ghana
represented for the dominant cultural elites was not outside society, but within it. It was a familiar but threatening otherness, associated as it was both with mixed origins ("Arab" roots), and with the popular classes. It metonymically represented a culture from which the elite was concerned to internally distance itself, and externally presenting itself as a bulwark against. Nowadays ghana has become an other (rather than the other) like all other othernesses, and therefore acceptable. It becomes an ordinary otherness rather than an extraordinary otherness, and merely another vehicle to generate metaphors of difference. To a great extent contemporary ghana has been disinvested of the sharpness of (coded) class commentary, as have many other traditional markers of social distinction. Class has become "only one difference among the many that are embraced or subsumed by postmodernity" (MacCannell 1992:193).

Ghana’s potency derives from immediacy and context. The elite was also acutely aware of ghana’s insinuating threat at pricking the conceits of power, paradoxically by exposing the banality of the signs of distinction and discoursing on the "naturalness" of popular culture versus the "frivolity" of the upper classes. Overall, it could be said that "good," effective, ghana discomfits. It has to go below the surfaces of words, and to play with appearances, showing that the surfaces of things are not what they seem. It was this aspect that was (and is) particularly appreciated and sought after. By contrast, modern appreciation of ghana concentrates much more on the voice, even on the "pain" of the singer, rather than on the uneasy laughter that greets the singers' risposte. Contemporary appreciation of ghana is thus very different to that in the past, and it seeks different experiences. This is also applicable to flamenco that has been "revitalised" (Washabaugh 1996:94). MacCannell has suggested that postmodernism "valorises surfaces." It enunciates "a fetishism of the ordinary, a hiding of everyday reality behind an overstated version of the real, an inflation of the value of the signifier, a splitting of the norm into what is and what is ideal, which is allegedly only a technicolour version of what is" (1992: 188). So fetishised as "ordinary" have ghana and other aspects of popular culture become, that young members of the "popular classes" (to whom it "belongs" according to traditional folklorists) disdain it, preferring mainstream pop music, discotheques, etc.

**Exoticizing Discoveries and Extraordinary Experiences**

Exoticization of traditional festivals and of indigenous music through ordinariness has occurred in Latin America (such as Brazil) and in other parts of the Mediterranean (such as Greece and Spain), and it is worthwhile to pursue some comparisons. In Brazil the exoticisation of the Rio carnival and
its harnessing to tourism had already emerged by the 1930s (Taylor 1982:302). The Rio carnival now provides metaphors for decline, regeneration, authenticity, and identity (ibid:310-11).

The revival of rebetika in Greece initiated during the colonels’ rule has been well documented (Beaton 1980; Gauntlett 1982; Vamvakaris 1975). Cowan (1993) has outlined this evolution. Initially the discovery and release of old records, the search expanded to include Turkey and the US. This was followed by a period of scholarship on various forms of rebetika. During this period rebetika became a generic term for various forms of music (Gauntlett 1982). Rebetika as “traditional music” was not just being rediscovered. It was being manufactured. The third stage, in the 1980s, was the opening of new clubs where a new, more artistic, form of rebetika was performed. These clubs were sneered at as kulturiarika which Cowan glosses as “pretentious, artificial, self-consciously cultured” (ibid:12), as they were oriented towards middle class youth rather than workers or peasants which this music is held to represent.

In Greece many intellectuals inevitably tried to distance themselves from the popularization of these musical forms while claiming that their search for authenticity encompassed the music of the lower classes. It appears that for many intellectuals the music of the lower classes should always be perceived as “a weapon of the weak.”

Such new forms of culture represent threats to the old bases of political legitimation. But they signify more the shifting bases of legitimation, rather than a serious challenge to the hegemony of power. The new forms of rebetika and new ways of perceiving ghana (as well as its changes in presentation and content) are still based on cultural and political mediation, and a supporting body of scholarship. The criteria have changed. The old system, like the traditional territorial state, was based on fixity, on a model of culture filtering down from the elite, and on the patrolling of boundaries to maintain integrity. The new form, which corresponds to contemporary political realities in Europe with its free movement of capital, people, and services, emphasises deterritoriality and movement—not just from outside traditional boundaries of politico-cultural units, but within them (cf. Appadurai 1991). Indeed one can become a metaphor for another. The new form of “revitalisation of rituals” expresses its play in the conscious manipulation and transgression of boundaries, as a means to explore new forms of the exotic in the midst of popular culture. Cowan notes that the kulturiarika cafes were “cultural sites,” which “manifested the fascination of both performers and audience for two hitherto repressed aspects of Greek historical experience: the culture of the economic and social margin and that of the Orient” (1993:12-13). There has been a progressive breaking down of boundaries: “the plurality of musical approaches, which range from
authentic reconstructions of forgotten traditions to a post-modern bricolage, is remarkable” (ibid:15).

**Conclusion: Marginality, Centrality, and Nostalgia**

In contemporary Europe, songs like ghana, music like rebetika, and rituals like festas become depoliticized, redefined, disembedded from traditional political concerns, and even reterritorialized. Their siting within “tradition” becomes problematical, partly because the customary relationship between tradition and modernity is redefined. Tradition becomes incorporated within modernity. They become in Harvey’s words “hybrids of modernity” (1996), and we may talk about a process from syncreticism in music to hybridization. Deleuze and Guattari suggest this is an aspect of the modern state and its relationship to culture:

“Civilized modern societies are defined by processes of decoding and deterritorialization. But *what they deterritorialize with one hand, they reterritorialize with the other*. These neoterritorialities are often artificial, residual, archaic; but they are archaisms having a perfectly current function, our modern way of “imbicating,” of sectioning off, of reintroducing code fragments, re-suscitating old codes, inventing pseudo codes or jargons. Neoarchaisms, as Edgar Morin puts it. These modern archaisms are extremely complex and varied. Some are mainly folkloric, but they nevertheless represent social and potentially political forces.” (1984:257; original italics)

Such reterritorializations create new listening communities that transcend local boundaries (Slobin 1993). The ability to discover tradition within modernity is crucial. Or more precisely to claim modernity, and thus authority, one must be able to reterritorialize tradition, to relocate “primitive art in civilised places” (Price 1989) in the name of a transcendent supra-cultural aesthetic, where “even words aren’t necessary.” Understanding becomes subordinated to narrated experience. “Believing is being exhausted. Or at least it takes refuge in the areas of the media and leisure activities” (Certau 1984:180).

If ghana is now perceived as exotic, this exoticism exists as always about to be discovered, as “marginal.” “Discovery” fabulates “marginality.” Similarly, rebetika is salvaged by intellectuals through its reexoticization as *Turkogyftiko*—Turkishgypsy (Cowan 1993:13). Experience is emphasized; it is an experience that desires to be recounted and even shared, though not necessarily directly. Not a secret experience, this experience realizes itself in its recounting rather than its concealment. As Certau has observed, “our society has become a recited society, in three senses: it is defined by stories (*recits*, the fables constituted by our advertising and informational media), by *citations* of stories, and by the interminable *recitation* of sto-
ries” (Certau 1984:186). Authority is claimed by the navigation of the self and the taking of social bearings through these narratives. Power is thus related not so much to the role of rituals as expressing the mutual articulation of groups, but rather to the narration of experiences of exoticizing discoveries of the traditional which in itself legitimizes modernity and hence confers authority. The recounting is an expression of new pleasures, and “at the center of this pleasure is the aficionado-as-expplorer, the self who wanders through diversity” (Washabaugh 1996:67) in the search for what Grossberg calls “affective excess” (1988:45).

It is clear that we are in the presence of a new phenomenon: representation as narration, as recits, becomes the primary locus of production. As Deleuze and Guattari point out, “representation no longer relates to a distinct object, but to productive activity itself” (1984:263). The “revitalization” of rituals, the rediscovery of traditional music as exotic, is not so much a reinvestment of the symbolic, a discovery of play as Victor Turner suggests, but a redefinition of the relationship between the symbolic and representation: “Symbolic’ thus no longer designates the relation of representation to an objectivity as an element; it designates the ultimate elements of subjective representation, pure signifiers, pure nonrepresented representatives whence all the subjects, the objects, and their relationships all derive” (ibid:306).

Is something distinctive happening in small scale societies like Malta and Greece whereby to be modern is to discover tradition, to exoticise it? Just has suggested that a distinctive feature of globalization is that we have moved from the certainty of certainty where “forms of knowledge and claims to truth [were] articulated through a mutually constituting structure of social relations” (1995:6), to the certainty of uncertainty. Malta and Greece are societies on the margins of Europe with two diverging pulls: the certainties of their past (often manufactured by the State and its elites, often in association with the West), and the uncertainties of their modern vulnerability. Both societies play with these tensions. The Greeks made their centrality a marginality; the Maltese their marginality a centrality. “The peculiarity of Greece’s case,” Just reminds us, “is not that she lost the cultural hegemony that once was hers but that everyone appears to have appropriated it” (1995:289). The problem was therefore “how are you to play the role of being exclusively universal” (ibid:290). By contrast, the problem besetting the Maltese was similar but inverted: how are you to play the role of being exclusively marginal? The Maltese made their marginality a centrality. From its earliest historians to its foreign policy since independence in 1964, Maltese society has been constantly preoccupied with its place on the map, with its being a rocky outcrop of Europe. In spite of changes in government, there has been a remarkable continuity in foreign
policy across time. This is a society that makes a positive virtue of its marginality as a means to claim centrality, including in its application to join the EU (Redmond 1993).

It is hardly surprising that the certainties of historical uncertainty are giving way to the seductive veracity of nostalgia through, for example, music. Societies, particularly those that cannot anymore control their interpretations of their past (meaning interpretations by dominant groups), increasingly attempt to recover it through nostalgia. Nettl observed “as other means of identification became less effective, music is increasingly stressed” (1985:165). Except that it is stressed and imagined through listening in new ways. Nostalgia can be seen as a new way of imagining communities, harnessed in and by the post nation-state, an attempt at a connivance of a recovery of a lost childhood, a return to the m(other)land. Nostalgia, often the erosion of memory into (and as) history, helps create frameworks of interpretation (and narration) for sites of memory (Nora 1989)—such as kulturiarika in Greece, or medieval cities in Malta (Sant Cassia 1999). New communities of listening are created “united as members of an imagined world of taste and practice” (Slobin 1994:19). In Greece nostalgia increasingly expresses itself not through the old certainties of links to classicism, but rather through the (continual) exoticization of that which represents the threat of otherness within. In Malta, by contrast, it is inevitably through the familiarization of the marginal (such as ghana), and its celebration as marginal as a means to claim centrality. These dialectics help explain the revitalization of traditions on the margins of Europe.

Notes

1. This article is dedicated to the memory of Marcia Herndon. I thank Ranier Fsadni, Micheline Galley, Martin Stokes, and an anonymous reviewer for Ethnomusicology for comments on earlier drafts on this paper.
2. McLeod and Herndon (1980:156) suggest that double entendre or doppiu sens emerged due to TV and radio censorship. The use of double entendre may have been strengthened by censorship, but it is doubtful whether the use of metaphors derives from this. On the contrary, the clever, crafty, and insinuating use of metaphor is an essential part of the weaponry of ghana.
3. Ciantar (1994), following Friggieri (1979) has pointed out that the octosyllabic verse had been identified as early as 1851 as "the most suitable verse" for Maltese poetry.
4. Mintroff was a charismatic, and divisive, populist leader. This song recites his political achievements, and rationalises his political volte-faces.
5. I owe this observation to Ranier Fsadni.
6. Anthropology cannot be excluded as contributing to this situation, and anthropologists must be reflexive of their role.
7. See Argyrou (1996) for an excellent analysis of taste dynamics on weddings in Cyprus.
8. But the ultimate trick is for the music of such groups to consciously mimic and parody such impositions.
9. For some discussions on nostalgia see Davis 1979; Stewart 1988.
References


Harvey, Penelope. 1996. Hybrids of Modernity. London: Routledge.


