Nathalie Grima  
Malta  

“I know where I came from”: a case study of Maltese from Egypt and Tripolitani

This paper is motivated by my interest in the Maltese-Australians of Egypt and Libya. In Malta there is very little documentation of the Maltese communities who lived in the Northern African countries, roughly from the end of the 19th century till the onset of Arab nationalism in the 1950s. My contribution in this matter is taken from a sociological perspective, based on my encounters with seven informants who I met and interviewed during my short stay in Melbourne in July-August 2014.

Keeping in mind the theme of the convention, my conclusions will focus on the need for the recognition of these communities mainly in three aspects. First, that the Maltese authorities acknowledge that all Maltese who migrated to Australia from Libya and Egypt are granted Maltese citizenship, even where it is difficult to locate the Maltese parish where these people were baptised and registered; secondly, that the Maltese authorities acknowledge the period of Maltese migration to North African countries by including the historical and sociological background in the Maltese school history books; thirdly, that the Maltese authorities may sustain further data collection so that these persons’ memories and narratives about their transnational migratory experience is not lost before it’s too late.

There are already important published works such as those of Nick Chircop and Romeo Cini, but I feel that more can be done in conservation of narratives as I find that this is very relevant in preserving the rich and interesting data related to the social changes going on in Malta between the end of the 19th century till the mid-20th. From a more inclusive approach, this may be extended to include the recognition of Maltese migration to Australia in general, and to regenerate the
important transnational links which I have observed are very strong both in the emotional aspect and in the identity issue.

**Introduction and Research Method**

When my family and I decided to spend eight weeks in Australia in July and August 2014, little did I anticipate how important this visit was to be in introducing me to the Maltese who had experienced double migration. The only little amount of research I had in mind doing was to meet Romeo Cini, the Maltese who wrote ‘La Nostra Storia’ which is to my knowledge, the most detailed and documented account of the Maltese community in Libya in the early twentieth century. I got to know about the Maltese from Libya, from another Maltese migrant, Sister Ermelinda who I had coincidentally interviewed just a few months before during a research project in Israel and Palestine. During her childhood Sister Linda like Romeo, had experienced the hunger and deprivation in the Fraschette concentration camp during World War II. On hearing her story, I was immediately intrigued in finding out more about this lacuna in my knowledge of Maltese history.

Unfortunately I did not succeed in meeting Romeo, although I did speak to him briefly over the phone, but then, with the help of Prof. Maurice Cauchi and Emmanuel Cilia, my two gatekeepers, I ended up carrying five in-depth interviews. This is how I got to meet, two married couples, one man, and two other men who were accompanied by their Italian wives. Five of the informants were in their late eighties, and the other two were in their seventies. Since the time I carried out the interviews, one of the informants, Mario Gatt, has sadly passed away last December.

Although I treasure the historical dimension in the five in-depth interviews I recorded, it is on the sociological perspective that I wish to focus on in this paper. With this choice of method, I base my analysis on theories from the field of sociology of emotions which I shall attempt to intersect with the migratory experience. This does not rule out the importance of contextualising their narratives because, as Barbalet (2002) argues, ‘emotions link structure and agency’ (Barbalet, 2002: 3) (his emphasis). He also says that, ‘the emotion is in the social relationship’ (Barbalet, 2002: 4) (his emphasis) where in this case, the social relationship is found between the migrant (as the agency) and the homeland (as the structure).
A not so clearly defined identity

As may be expected when carrying out interviews with migrants, the emotion which immediately hit me as soon as I met the informants was that expressed in their recollection of memories of where they came from; of their childhood; and of the hard decisions they had to take when they decided to migrate as young married couples. The issue of identity surfaced a number of times however, this was not immediately clearly defined as being strictly or solely Maltese. Nick, for example, was very quick to react to my reference to the ‘Maltese Egyptian Club’ by correcting me and saying ‘the Maltese from Egypt’. Another example can be shown in the following quote selected from the interview with Peter, who said:

‘The Tripolitani people, we speak two or three languages; Italian, Maltese, and then some of us with Spanish descendent would speak Spanish and some with Greek descent would speak Greek, and some of the Spanish who lived with us [in the same streets] they could also speak Maltese’.

As in the rest of the interview, Peter never spoke of the Maltese community as the Maltese from Libya, but always referred to them by using the collective term, ‘Tripolitani’ or ‘Tripolini’, which is inclusive of all European descendants and not just the Maltese. His sense of identity is therefore more strongly linked to his birth town, and to his memories of an upbringing in the multicultural environment of the early twentieth century Tripoli. Even if his parents used to speak Maltese at home, once on the street he would speak Italian which was the *lingua franca* at the time. Again, Peter speaks in the collective when he said,

‘We had an Italian culture yeah. As a matter of fact, when we think we think in Italian, when we speak, we speak Italian. I think in Italian, I like Italian music, I don’t like any other kind of music’.

Incidentally, I noticed that the informants who spoke Italian as their second language, had the habit of using the phrase, ‘as a matter of fact’. Probably this comes from their common use of ‘Infatti’ when speaking Italian.

On the other hand, Peter referred to the Maltese as being ‘very pro-British’, when, ‘during the war [World War II], we were asked if we wanted to become Italian but in the majority of us, I say 99% [refused] because in those days it would be considered as a ‘carne venduta’. You would say in those days oh no, we would say we defected.'
It was resented that we had to change the nationality and so we know we didn’t want to change in fact that’s why they took us to the camp.

This was the reason why on the 15th January 1942, two thousand five hundred Maltese were arrested in forty-eight hours by the Italian Military who had occupied Tripoli, and eventually sent to the camp for civil prisoners at the ‘campo di concentramento Fraschetti’, (Cini, 198?).

Peter’s narrative, shows that he identified with an ethnic identity rather than a nationalistic identity. Ethnic identity tends to depend on social organization rather than on other symbols which are normally related to nationalism, such as language. Culturally, he felt Italian, politically, his family had chosen the pro-British identity, but this final quote from his interview, reveals a more emotional identity when he said,  

‘We spoke of Malta, we all knew our parents came from Malta and we were looking forward to see Malta too. As a matter of fact, when I left Tripoli to come here, I remember when we got on the ship to leave Tripoli, I remember the captain, I saw the captain and I said when are we going to arrive in Malta? He said at five o’clock you will start seeing the island and I got up at four o’clock in the morning just to see the island. So you know, there is something there that you are interested in. You’ll never forget your roots you know?’

The tendency towards an ethnic, rather than a nationalistic identity was also shown in the nice descriptions of the typical recipes which were and still are, used by the two female informants in this study, namely Claire and Jane. When I asked Claire whether her cooking habits had been affected when she arrived in Melbourne in 1955, she replied, ‘oh yeah, you couldn’t find any cheeses, any mozzarella’. Talking about her life as a young mother in Australia, Jane spoke about how she, ‘jiena rabbejthom bħala familja Maltija, nsajjar Malti imbaghad jien anke ikel Tripolini nagħmel, aħna nieklu ħafna spices’ (I brought them up [the children] as a Maltese family, I cook Maltese and then I also cook Tripolini food, we use a lot of spices). Incidentally, when I visited Claire, she served us home-made pastizzi (Maltese), while Jane prepared a delicious parmiggiana and fagiolini (Italian).

The act of ‘remembering’

On giving the informants ample time to narrate their individual stories, it soon became clear that ‘remembering’ their past in Tripoli or Alexandria, (which were the
two main towns they came from), seemed to make up for the experience of distancing oneself from their homeland, not only in spatial terms, but also in terms of time. They had gone through a double migration, (triple migration in the case of Edwin), being second or third generation migrants in Tripoli or Alexandria, followed by a migration to Australia. The spatial aspect of distancing, needs to be understood in the context of Maltese and Gozitan migration to the North African countries going back to the middle to late nineteenth century. This particular story of Maltese migration is therefore spread over the span of about a hundred years or more when, among many others, the grandfathers, grandparents, or parents of the informants had decided to migrate in search of a better life.

The only exception was John, who was born and lived in Malta until one day in 1943, when he was only seventeen years and one day, he was chosen to go to Tripoli by the Malta Auxiliary Core. The most emotional moment recalled by John was not from the twelve years that he had spent in Tripoli, but from wartime Malta when he said, ‘Nobody ever hears of Paola. I remember the people who actually died [...] we were all out in the square waiting for the bus to come. That is when they opened a bit of a well in the centre of the piazza and when I looked around I saw the many people who were dead. I was one of the people who survived. That was one event. Nineteen forty-two. What I distinctly remember, I was on the side of the piazza to be on our way to Valletta but across the road there was a woman sitting outside knitting and she was covered by the debris and it took her two days to die because if they had removed the debris, the facade would have fallen down. I never recovered.’

Later on during the interview, John showed me the first part of the rest of this story which he had started to write. In his writing, I noticed that he was finding some solace in coming to terms with his emotions which time and space did not seem to have erased.

Nick’s jovial manner of narrating his story, showed the strong passion he had for establishing his identity as a Maltese from Egypt. He took time in recollecting very fond memories of everyday life of the Maltese community in Alexandria; his first visit to Malta as a scout member; and his contribution in setting up the Melita Club in Melbourne, among others. He was also very entertaining, especially when he added some spice to particular events such as the following, ‘They were permitted to walk the bands, the Maltese, the Italians, the Greeks, which were starting at that point coming to the square and certainly, each crowd followed
its band. My father always told me to follow the band and I used to be so excited and I always remember when there was someone next to me shouting Wenzu doqq, Wenzu doqq’.

Like John, Nick has also resorted to writing as a form of expression for the passion he feels in establishing an identity. He compliments this by his endless research work and documentation, and has so far published one book. At the time of writing this paper, he who was in the final stages before going to publish his second one.

**The stir of emotions through images**

During the interviews, all the informants were eager to show me photographs which depicted life in Tripoli or Alexandria, as well as in Melbourne. Some of the pictures were also old family portraits in black and white. In sociology, one tends to emphasise the power that images may have in stirring emotions. In the case of this study, the way with which the informants eagerly showed me the photos, clearly show a strong connection to ‘place’, that is, to their childhood and early adulthood hometowns. Again, the temporal context has to be taken in consideration here, because most pictures depicted not themselves, but rather their grandparents or parents at a young age. Some of them explained how these pictures had passed from one hand to another in order to safeguard them, while others were lost along the way for some reason or other.

The later pictures of 1950s onwards, tended to depicts their involvement in the establishment of the social clubs in Melbourne. This showed the shift to a more collective and shared identity when they settled in Australia. Another observation was that, at least four out of seven informants expressed a strong emotional link with the paternalistic figure of either their father or their grandfather. This is how, for example Jane, described her father when she said, ‘He was a big man my grandfather, he was a big boss of four sons, and when I say boss, boss!’

This deep admiration reflects the strong paternalism felt at the time. A very moving moment was when Mario actually started to cry when he spoke of his father as the one who was,

‘my master, sorry I get a bit emotional [...] he was always behind me, we were very good mates. He was always going always to the same place in Alexandria because he was well known [...] I learnt a lot from my father, a lot’.
One may say that this was all sentimental, especially bearing in mind that my informants had reached a certain age when they tended to reflect a lot on their past. As Burkitt (2002) states, ‘humans never act as a blank slate, even when we act impulsively, as our actions are always connected in some way to the past. The present moment, too, soon becomes the past, and we make sense of it by connecting it to what we already know’ (Burkitt, 2002: 154). What I would like to point out is that, even if this was sentimentality, the importance of the strong links to ‘place’, identity, and for some, the paternal figure, cannot be ignored.

**Recognition, where emotions intersect with migration**

Towards the end of my stay in Australia, Emmanuel and I finally found the time to visit the Melita Social Club in Coburg. There we found Eddie waiting for us, all set for narrating his story of triple migration: as a Maltese from Egypt who went to Liverpool England in the 1950s and later on to Melbourne in the 1980s. Eddie has long been involved in what now has become, an exhaustive struggle for achieving a formal recognition for the aging first generation migrants who have not yet been granted a Maltese citizenship. Here again, it is the emotional aspect which I’d like to emphasize. As Berezin says, ‘some emotions are more relevant to politics than others are [and] to borrow from Weber, emotions govern non-rational but not irrational action’ (Berezin, 2002: 37). Using the theory of rationalization by Max Weber, it is seen that the bureaucratization which one comes across when dealing with government policies and departamental structures, there remains little room for emotion or sentimentality in decisions taken. Similarly, Robert Merton speaks about the fracturing that can be found in the system of governance, where what was originally decided by the policy makers, may end up not being actually executed at the government departmental level. Even when decisions by policy makers are taken out of a humane sentiment, ultimately there is normally no place for emotions when it comes to the actual execution. In the case of this group of Maltese from Egypt, Tripolitani, and others who left other North African countries such as Tunisia, the stumbling block is that they cannot provide a copy of the original birth certificate of their closest relative who left Malta first. As Weber so rightly says, rational bureaucracy ‘develops the more perfectly, the more it is ‘dehumanized,” the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all ... irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation’ (1968 cited in Shilling, 2002: 22).
Analysing Emmanuel’s words when he put forward the question, ‘why not? why not making these people happy in their last years?’, may reflect the non-rationality with which politicians may have to come to terms with. As Eddie so passionately described, this group is not concerned with attaining a passport into the EU countries, which was the first rational thought that came to my mind when he was telling me all about this. In the following quote, his words tend to reflect nationalistic emotions related to the roots, to the Maltese and Gozitan origins and not to the post-modern EU identity,

‘forget about the dual citizenship, it’s about the recognition [...] you will find that the biggest tragedy is, that there is a big number of Maltese who are still not recognized till today, from Tunisia, from Egypt. There is some depth in the question, why would you declare to be a Maltese? If you were trying to hide something, it’s like I used to tell Nick, now, you’re not Maltese you’re Russian (jokingly). Why would anyone, say I’m a Maltese?’

**Conclusion**

I would like to conclude with three recommendations to the Maltese authorities concerned. First, that all the Maltese who migrated to Australia from the North African countries are recognized as Maltese, that is, they are granted the dual citizenship, even where it is difficult to locate the Maltese parish where their ancestors people were baptised and registered; secondly, that the period of Maltese migration to North African countries may be acknowledged and including in the Maltese curriculum; last but not least, that further data collection and research is sustained so that the transnational migratory experience is not lost before it’s too late.

**Nathalie Grima**

**Malta**
References


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