

# Is There No Honour among the Maltese?

## Paradigms of Honour in a Mediterranean Moral Economy

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### ABSTRACT

The ‘honour-shame syndrome’ is an anthropological model originally developed in the sixties to describe Mediterranean cultural unity. The model came under heavy criticism, producing a veritable ‘anti-Mediterraneanist’ backlash. There is, however, a renewed interest in the regional paradigm. This article attempts an analysis of concepts of ‘honour’ in Malta, contextualising it within the broader ethnographic and linguistic evidence from the region. The author argues that ‘honour’ is a salient moral concept, and in fact, Maltese has a rich and highly nuanced discourse of honour, which includes both sexualised and nonsexualised aspects. While the author criticises the simplistic ‘honour-shame syndrome’ paradigm, he argues that honour needs to be considered in its own right as an important key to analysing the contemporary Maltese moral economy as it engages with ‘modernity’.

### KEYWORDS

gender, honour, Malta, masculinity, Mediterranean, morality, shame

The anthropological interest in the ‘honour-shame syndrome’ was coterminous with the birth of the Mediterranean as a ‘region’ of focus in sociocultural anthropology (Gilmore 1987: 2). In turn, it was Mediterraneanists who brought ‘honour’ to the attention of their colleagues working in other regions and in other disciplines (Stewart 1994: 3). The original model developed in the sixties (Peristiany 1966) came under heavy criticism by the 1980s (Herzfeld 1980, 1999; Pina-Cabral 1989; SERG 1981), producing a veritable ‘anti-Mediterraneanist’ stance. Following ‘a partial eclipse’, however, there is a renewed interest in the regional paradigm (Albera 2006: 124). In turn, the ‘honour-shame complex’ has re-emerged in discussions of Mediterranean anthropology and regional identity. Horden and Purcell (2000: 507) specifically discuss honour and shame, arguing that

right across the Mediterranean, on whatever axis we choose to make the comparisons, and despite other profound contrasts of faith or political



structure, the differences which resemble are continually striking. Most of the individual local vocabularies and dramas of evaluation recognizably belong to one single family.

To this day, therefore, the honour and shame binary are at the heart of the stereotype of 'the Mediterranean' (Herzfeld 2005: 52). Michael Herzfeld admits to feeling astonished that 'we are still talking about the utility, or otherwise, of the concept of the Mediterranean' (2005: 45).

In the eighties Herzfeld (1980) warned that a discussion of honour and shame in the Mediterranean is only possible if one adopts the terms as a linguistic 'gloss' over a complex and culturally nuanced semantic field. Before undertaking any cross-cultural comparisons, one must 'elucidate the relationships between such systems within each linguistic area' (Herzfeld 1980: 339).

In this article my aim is to discuss the role that concepts of honour have played and continue to play in determining local moral and political structures in the island of Malta, adopting a primarily 'lexical approach' to the study of honour (Stewart 1994: 5). My article is derived from a combination of ethnographic research, analysis of laws, literary texts, historical research and ethnography. The variety of sources partly reflects the different social domains that invoke the categories of honour. While certain forms of honour were considered to be antimodern and primitive among modernising political reformers, among the male working-class circles of my own fieldwork, this very sense of honour is invoked as a cardinal attribute of masculinity. Other forms of honour are also deployed in politics and in everyday life to denote a masculinity that is more conducive to the preservation of law, order and economic order. In some instances these different notions of honour are in direct contradiction, while in other cases they share certain attributes. The semantic range allows for situational and performative flexibility according to the context-specific domain and tactical imperatives of the agents that wield its discourse.

An analysis of honour in Malta against the backdrop of the discussions of honour and shame in the Mediterranean will reveal 'differences within a framework of undeniable contiguity' (Herzfeld 2005: 49). There are sound ethnographic reasons for discussing notions of honour and shame in the Mediterranean, not least of which because they often feature as stereotypes produced by our informants themselves (Sciama 2013: 233). However, they are also challenged and recognised precisely as stereotypes that are politically deployed in order to reproduce structures of domination. As such, notions of

Mediterranean honour and shame exist not least as ‘rhetorical facts’ (Herzfeld 2005: 49). As we shall see in this article, it was precisely one such form of honour (*irġulija*) that was at the centre of class-based discussions of what it means to be modern in the nascent nation-state of Malta.

Honour in contemporary Malta is only peripherally connected related to shame. It is nevertheless an important part of moral codes in Malta, and there are in fact multiple and often competing senses of honour.

### **The Controversial Legacy of Honour and Shame in the Mediterranean**

The idea of the honour-shame syndrome in the Mediterranean was used to define the ‘continuity and persistence of Mediterranean modes of thought’ (Peristiany 1966: 9). Honour and shame feature as two ‘poles of evaluation’ found not only in the Homeric world but also in that of the contemporary Greek (Peristiany 1966: 13). In most of the classical discussions honour and shame feature as specifically *gendered* poles of social evaluation. A woman’s lineage constitutes the repository of a man’s ‘honour’ in the form of her sexual behaviour and procreative powers (Schneider 1971: 18). In this system honour only acquires its meaning in relation to shame. Honour is defined as the readiness and capacity to ‘guarantee the immunity of life and property, including women as the most precious and vulnerable part of the patrimony of men’ (Blok 1981: 434). There is, therefore, a symbolic correspondence between men/honour and women/shame. Shame, in the classical model, is premised on ideals of sexual purity. Women are born with a dangerous sexuality and need to struggle not to dishonour the family, while men need to achieve honour in large part by guarding woman’s sexuality, asserting their own virility and through their readiness for physical violence in the defence of their property.

The honour-shame ‘syndrome’ has been linked to the economic and political structures among predominantly pastoral communities in the absence of the state (Schneider 1971: 3). Women function as ‘symbol’ to unite men in a situation of fierce competition over scarce resources. The symbolic key to understanding the honour code is in turn derived from the pastoral oppositions between rams and billy goats, the ‘Mediterranean code of honour’ was an originally ‘pastoral code of honour’ (Blok 1981: 436).

The anthropological notion of ‘Mediterranean female chastity codes’ does not hold up to scrutiny however. As Pina-Cabral notes, the situation in Southern Europe seems to resemble far more that of Western Europe than that of Islamic regions (1989: 402). Female anthropologists working since the 1980s have criticised the overly passive depiction of women. In the classical ethnographic discussions, women feature solely as intermediaries in male social relations (Ortner 1978), and as such, anthropologists have overlooked women as political subjects (SERG 1981: 65). Female anthropologists working in the region since then found a very different notion of femininity at play. Dubisch ‘failed to find’ (1995: 199) honour and shame. She then moves on to deconstruct the concept of honour and shame in order to examine the reasons why this concept exerted such a powerful hold on anthropologists.

The notion of a pan-Mediterranean honour-shame syndrome fell into disrepute mainly because of its ‘strong whiff of allochronism’ (Stewart 2015: 181). Drawing upon Said’s ‘Orientalism’, Herzfeld (1999) specifically discusses the way in which the honour-shame antinomy has discursively relegated the peoples of the Mediterranean to a ‘pre-modern age’ in a form of ‘Mediterraneanism’ (70). This intense interest in finding a pan-Mediterranean code of honour in fact reflects more the biases of those studying these societies than the people being studied (Pina-Cabral 1989: 402).

There is something about the persistence of anthropological discussions about such codes that cannot be simply dismissed as ethnocentrism. At the very least, they exist as rhetorical facts often deployed by our own informants. As Sciama (2003) observed, among her informants in the Venetian island of Burano, there was an ‘interest in and often searching conversations on the subject’ (152).

### **The Curious Absence of Honour in Maltese Ethnography**

Malta is an island in the central Mediterranean with a population of circa 437,000, with a long history of colonisation prior to securing independence from the United Kingdom in 1964. Following a hotly contested referendum, Malta joined the European Union in 2004. The main languages spoken on the islands are Maltese and English. All education is in English, which has largely replaced Italian as the language of ‘culture’. Largely as a result of Jeremy Boissevain’s (1965) pioneering work, Malta started to feature on the horizon of Mediterraneanist anthropology. It is interesting to note, however,

that Boissevain did not discuss the question of honour and shame in Malta, even though he was well aware of the literature on the matter. In fact, his work on Sicily in the 1960s reproduces the classical presentation of honour (2013). In his more recent study, Jon Mitchell (2002) argues that in Malta honour ‘is seldom used to describe social standing’ (96). He points out that there is no real Maltese equivalent to the word ‘shame’, and indeed, ‘honour-shame’ is an inappropriate metaphor for understanding social codes in Malta (96).

Mitchell observed that ‘respectability’ (*rispett*) centred on the kin group is much more significant. Respect, Mitchell (2002) argues, is not a property of the person (unlike honour) but is, rather, a property of relationships, something that people give on the basis of one’s ‘performance of good standing and avoidance of disgrace – from being a good person in the public eye, and belong[ing] to a good household’ (97). Respectability, I argue, is perhaps a more pressing concern with middle-class segments of society. There is, however, a complex language of honour in Malta that exercises an important effect on local moral codes even though it is quite different from the classical notion of honour as present in the Mediterraneanist literature.

### **Unur and Ġieħ: Honour as Right and Personal Property**

There is definitely clear historical evidence of honour and shame, confirming the classical model. Godfrey Wettinger (1980) discusses in detail an honour killing in 1473. Cola Caxaru, a high-ranking nobleman from the capital Mdina, together with two companions, went to call upon a certain Catherina in the neighbouring rural town of Siggiewi. Cola was turned away and told that Catherina had already taken a husband. As the three men left the house they were beset by an enraged mob of peasants and relatives. The situation escalated when the mother appealed to the men’s sense of honour and demanded blood because they were shamed (*hannoni factu vergogna*) (Wettinger 1980: 72). Cola was stabbed and stoned to death following the mother’s appeal. Shame, as used in this context – *vergogna* – is very similar to the sort of shame discussed by Boissevain in the context of Sicily, where ‘if a man pursues his virility with a woman not his wife, he offends the honour of her family. This violation in turn, ideally, must be cleansed with blood’ (Boissevain 2013: 47). The Italian term for shame, *vergogna*, was used in this historical case. It is nevertheless also to this day part of the Maltese lexicon (*vergonja*).

In contemporary usage *vergonja* is hardly used, whereas *unur* (honour) is more widespread. *Unur*, however, is generally not connected to *vergonja*. It tends to be used more in terms of 'pride'. It can be used, for example, to indicate that it is a great honour to host a person or an event or to indicate accomplishments that are themselves described as 'honours' (*unuri*). Some people are honourable by virtue of the offices they hold; judges and ministers, for example are referred to as *Onorevoli* (as they are in Italy and Great Britain, for that matter).

There are, however, vestiges of the earlier connection to the sexual integrity of the family. The Criminal Code of Malta refers to crimes of a sexual nature as crimes against 'the peace and honour of families, and against morals' (*Delitti kontra l-Paci u l-Unur tal-Familji, u kontra l-Morali*) (Laws of Malta, Chapter 9, Part II Title VII Sub-title II).

*Unur* isn't the only term for honour in Malta. The term *għieħ*, still widely used today, appears in one of the earliest Maltese dictionaries to date. In his Maltese-Italian-Latin dictionary, Agius de Soldanis (c. 1760) defines the term as synonymous with '*onore, onestà, reputazione*' (honour, honesty, reputation). In this sense there is still a connection between honour and the sexual shame of the family's womenfolk; indeed, de Soldanis quotes the extant expression 'The face protects one's honour', referring to the fact that women with an ugly face protect the honour of the kin group because they are not gazed upon. The verb form *wegġaħ* is the transitive verb used to honour something or someone and is used, for example, in the Maltese translation of the fourth commandment (Honour your father and mother). Everyone is due a base measure of *għieħ*, and indeed, it is (to date) a crime to reduce or damage someone's *għieħ* (*jtellef jew inaqqas il-għieħ ta' xi ħadd*), punishable by up to three months imprisonment or a fine (Chapter 9 Part II, Title VIII, Sub-Title X Article 252–257). It is interesting to note that with regards to the law, it matters little whether the facts that lead to the loss of *għieħ* are true; acting so as to intentionally diminish the *għieħ* of a person is in and of itself criminal.

In contemporary usage this sense of 'honour' is not connected to sexual morality or social position. This sense of honour I believe is a 'claim-right' – that is, a right that something be done by the other (Stewart 1994: 21). *Għieħ* can be lost, diminished and augmented. The Maltese often note '*Gbart għieħi*' (literally, 'I collected my honour') to note that honour has been regained when, for example, a debt is repaid or a loss is recouped. As a rhetorical device it can be invoked to compel action, as in *f'għieħ Alla* ('For God's sake'). There are some 'persons' who have an intrinsically higher order claim to *għieħ* (e.g., kin

Table 1: Summary of Features of Unur and Ġieħ

	Ġieħ	Unur
Sexualised violence	No	Yes
Origin	'Claim right'	Quality of object
Presence	Quantitative (increased) or decreased	Total (present or lost)
Primary object	Individual (but also corporate groups and sacred figures).	Family (but also individuals by virtue of their role)

group, divine figures, etc.), and therefore, an appeal to their honour carries more rhetorical weight. *Ġieħ*, therefore, is amenable to quantitative considerations, but as a claim-right, everyone is due a base measure of *ġieħ*.

*Unur* and *ġieħ* are claimed, invoked or conferred to a broad class of objects that are not necessarily gendered (e.g., kin group). *Ġieħ* can be given to the living, the dead, the divine and, indeed, the entirety of one's kin, both living and dead. As such, it is neither connected to violence nor to sexual integrity. Considered together, *unur* and *ġieħ* outline the basis for a discourse of moral evaluation that provides the rhetorical means for the interpellation of the moral subject or the illocutionary force of moral disapprobation. We could summarise their likeness and differences along a number of dimensions as follows in Table 1.

Both of these terms belong to the same class in that they are either due to a person or are a quality of a person (corporate or individual) that can be lost through an act of violence of another. Neither of the terms are intrinsically gendered, and both are recognised in Malta's laws. These cognate terms can be contrasted to a categorically different sense of honour. *Irgulija* (literally, manliness), like *ġieħ* and *unur*, is a form of honour in the nominal form. It is not an intrinsic property of an individual nor is it a claim-right; rather, it is the result of social performance. Manliness in this sense is synonymous to a sense of honour that is not simply a biological fact but fundamentally a social act. Unlike the other notions of honour discussed previously, it is gendered and libidinised in Gilmore's sense (1987).

### Irgulija – Gender, Violence and Word

*Irgulija* is the mass noun derived from 'man' in Maltese, *raġel* (*r-ġ-l*). The term is of Arabic provenance stemming from راجل (*raġul*). Masculinity,

or *rajuliya*, is associated with virility in Arabic (see Geertz 1979: 363). In this regard it covers similar semantic ground as de Soldanis' (c. 1760) definition of *Rgulia* (*irġulija*) as *virilità* (virility) (de Soldanis 2016: 699). There is a semantic broadening in the current usage of this term: it means both (1) manhood, virility and manliness as well as (2) honesty of character (Aquilina 1987: 1175). The two senses of the term are, however, quite distinct, and indeed, even socially the two senses of the term are rarely associated.

The first sense of the term, *Irġulija 1*, is a much more contested notion operating within a restricted lower-class moral code with clear connotations of violence. When invoked it is used less as an abstract noun denoting manliness but more as a concrete noun for man tied with the verb 'to be' (*tkun raġel*). This older sense of the term is in marked contrast to *Irġulija 2*, which is used as an abstract noun to denote a set of personal attributes evidenced by the relationship between a man's word and his actions.

When asking people about *irġulija* specifically you are more likely to encounter understandings of *Irġulija 2*. During fieldwork I was told of a car mechanic, known as Ġanni ta' l-irġulija (Ġanni of the manhood):

Ġanni's grandfather, Nikola, used to work in the warehouse of a car parts importer. Nikola's friend wanted to construct some furniture and asked Nikola to 'procure' some wood for him since car parts were shipped in wooden boxes. While Nikola acquiesced to smuggling out the wood, the owner instructed all the workers to save the crates since he had other plans for the wood. Nikola found it too risky then and never procured the wood for his friend. Eventually his friend ran into him at the local bar and told him 'What pieces of wood you got me! Really manly pieces!' (*Erbġha injamiet ta' l-irġulija*) The narrator hastened to add his own interpretation, 'Of course Nikola was the one with *irġulija*, because he didn't steal the wood.'

With his sarcasm Nikola's friend drew public attention to Nikola's failure to keep his word. The nickname endured so that now Nikola's family are simply referred to by the nickname *ta' l-irġulija*, even though the original reason for the nickname is forgotten by most. *Irġulija 2*, as manhood, becomes a means of evaluating moral probity, measured by the congruence between word and action. One is not born with *irġulija*, nor is it a claim-right; rather, one obtains *irġulija* through one's social conduct. In this regard masculinity is not a biological property but rather a function of gendered performativity (Butler 1990). This performativity of the concept, however, is not something that is unknown to its speakers. A certain dimension of masculinity is openly recognised to be the result of one's acts in both *Irġulija 1* and *2*, even though both concepts fall outside the scope of juridical language.

*Irgulija 2* is often invoked in politics and informal economic exchange. Without *Irgulija 2*, one is a child (*tifel*). For example, when coming to a verbal agreement, it is quite common for a person to note ‘*U mela aħna tfal?*’ (‘Are we children?’) in a rhetorical gesture designed to reassure the other party that they will honour their word and no further assurances are needed. A man who is coming up with excuses or equivocates to renege on an agreement is a man who is ‘*Ġej bil-logħob*’ (playing games) and behaving like a child. To be man in this sense is to have honour, which means to be a man of one’s word.

*Irgulija 2* is often invoked in politics. Politicians often claim that they possess it and opponents lack it. In the context of bitter electoral campaigns, winning voters’ trust requires one to convince the electorate that their party will honour their electoral promises and, indeed, look after their own clients. There is still a strong personal patronage network at the heart of Maltese politics. Writing in 2002, Mitchell observed that clientelism wherein ‘state resources are distributed along personal networks rather than according to disinterested or indifferent bureaucratic logic’ (168) was considered to be ‘indigenous to Maltese political culture’ (173).

In an interview shortly before he died, Boissevain observed that his own predictions of the decline of patronage in Malta were somewhat premature: ‘Ministers have become the new saints. Over time they have accumulated enormous power, and an almost cult-like status’ (Vassallo 2007). Being able to convince supporters that, once in power, one will look after one’s clients is important. During the 2017 campaign former opposition leader Simon Busuttil backed up his electoral promises by noting that ‘*Dan mhux kliem, imma wegħda li jien determinat li nżomm. Il-kelma tiegħi hi l-kelma ta’ rġulija*’ (Attard 2017) (‘These are not just words but a promise I am determined to keep. My word is a word of *irġulija*,’). Such declarations of *irġulija* are common across both sides of the Maltese political divide. The Malta Labour Party prime minister defended the honour of his staff amidst corruption scandals, noting how the honour of his staff ‘*tordom l-irġulija ta’ kull Gvern Nazzjonalista f’25 sena*’ (Vassallo 2016) (‘buries the honour of all the Nationalist governments of the past twenty-five years’). Although *irġulija* is not a legal principle, it still exercises an illocutionary moral force both in politics and in the informal economy.

Sometimes, however, *irġulija* often finds its supposed bearer at odds with other value systems. In the case of *Ġanni ta’ l-irġulija* discussed above, the narrator pointed out that, in his opinion, Nikola did in fact behave honourably by not stealing from his employer. What is in fact

honourable often reflects the different values of the class position of the speaker. It is not an accident that the narrator was himself a small businessman. Similarly Campbell (1966) made the point that the code of honour of the Greek Sarakatsani shepherds he studied often brings them in conflict with the ideals expected of them as members of the Orthodox Catholic Church. The ideals of honour often contradicted and subverted the virtues of sanctity, with honour and sanctity existing as 'two hierarchical levels of Greek ideology' (Stewart 1994: 224). The two levels are nevertheless not seen to be contradictory; rather, they are context specific and interdependent (Stewart 1994: 224). In Malta there is a similar tension in the two notions of honour (*Irgulija 1* and *Irgulija 2*) that are embodied, however, in the same term.

*Irgulija 1* could be said to be closer to the earlier sense of the term described by de Soldanis simply as virility. It is a sense of honour that, when one is challenged or provoked, demands the use of force. It is both performative and only truly emerges when it is defended. One is 'being a man' (*tkun raġel*) when one is defending one's *irġulija*. Honour in this sense bears comparison to *murajul* in Lebanon. Gilsenan (1996) writes of *murajul* (manly display) among his mainly lower-class informants in terms of 'the essence of a man of honour [. . .] revealed through the telling of his acts of extraordinary violence' (201). In front of Gilsenan's middle-class informants, however, such stories of *murajul* were seen as 'inherently parodic', with the men in these stories appearing as 'the embodiment of primitive backwardness' (201). The connection between *Irgulija 1* and a sense of premodern backwardness was also quite pronounced in Malta.

In the early decades of the twentieth century one finds references to the backwardness of *irġulija* penned by socialist reformers. Ġuże Ellul Mercer (1897–1961) was a writer and prominent Labour politician. Through his writing he depicts 'the suffering of an oppressed class. His portraits are full of the anxiety of an angry reformer anxious to witness a radical reform' (Friggieri 1995: 49). Ellul Mercer frequently entitled his short stories with the nicknames of the central characters, forcing the readers to reflect on such names. He uses nicknames ironically because the protagonist inevitably encapsulates the exact opposite of the qualities they are meant to embody by means of their name (Psaila 2012). In *Pawlu Irġulija* [1932] (1985) Ellul Mercer tells us that Pawlu got his nickname (*Irġulija*) because he would never speak ill or gossip. However, he only exhibited this restraint when it came to speaking ill about the landed gentry. Pawlu was otherwise one of the greatest gossipers in town and was always surrounded by friends at

the local bar. *Irgulija* is invoked parodically by Ellul Mercer because Pawlu's behaviour is far from honourable. Pawlu is a coward, a malicious gossip, jealous and generally dishonest. The climax of the story is reached when Pawlu wins a card game at the local bar. After words were exchanged between himself and Toni, his adversary, the latter storms off. Making fun of Toni's loss of equanimity, Pawlu then steers the conversation to Toni's sister, who was the centre of some untold social (sexual?) scandal. Ellul Mercer then takes the reader to Toni's sister, who is depicted as sitting at home in the dark at the foot of the bed crying with a broken heart, lamenting her fate (1985: 88). The story ends when Pawlu and his gang of curious friends rush out in the muddy street to assist a carriage that had broken down, curious to see who was inside. As the passengers emerge, lo and behold one sees Pawlu's own sister running off in the company of a well-to-do man in a karmic twist. Ellul Mercer viewed literature as a means of educating the Maltese people for social improvement. Ellul Mercer shared this view with his younger contemporary Juann Mamo.

Unlike Ellul Mercer, Juann Mamo (1886–1941) was the son of poor parents. He adopts the vernacular dialect of the peasants he knew so well. Through his socialist realism, Mamo presents himself as an enlightened thinker witnessing a societal crisis (Friggieri 1995: 111). Lampooning the common man as much as the high classes, Mamo decries the ignorant fanaticism and superstition of the peasant, clearly reflecting, according to Grima, the cultural colonisation of the British and Europeans (2013: xxi). He sought, through humour and parody, to educate and enlighten the masses. In his 1933 (Mamo 2010) short story entitled '*Qorti fuq xejn*' ('At Court over Nothing') he specifically targets *irgulija*.

The story tells of a poor peasant, Frengisk, who wants to sell a rabbit in a time of widespread poverty. He approached the men gathered in a popular corner of town, declaring his intention to sell the rabbit. Wiżu showed interest, and the others got involved in the haggling, hoping to secure a commission as a go-between (*ħuttab*). In the process Wiżu challenges Frengisk, claiming the rabbit is overpriced. Frengisk, considering this to be an affront to his manhood, tells him, 'If you don't have enough money leave it; I'm telling you this as a man [*roġol*]. Shall we go and drink the money away at the coffee shop? See how much of a man I am!' Wiżu retorts that Frengisk is 'too tight fisted' (*Idu niexfe wosq*'). After another bout of haggling, Frengisk begins to lose his patience. At this point he curses and dares Wiżu to repeat the insult. A fight ensues, and Wiżu stabs Frengisk, shouting, 'You're the last thing I need after unemployment and hunger!' The

story ends with Frengisk in hospital being visited by his wife, who chastises her husband: '*Iwa, għax aħna dawn tagħne: Frankuni, tax-Xjuħ, u l-Isptor*' ('Because these are our places – the asylum, the old people's home and the hospital'). Frengisk retorts, 'And so? Wiżu is in hospital!' Mamo ends the story by sarcastically addressing the reader, '*O bnedmin! Hijiex ta' għaxqa hajja bħal din!'*' ('Oh, fellow human beings! Isn't this a wonderful life?').

Mamo connects honour with hunger and poverty. He was a modernist motivated by the necessity for the worker to 'see the light that leads to the emancipation of the mind and of life' (Friggieri 1995: 121), and this includes *irġulija*.<sup>1</sup> Mamo knew the dangers of *irġulija* and its dispositional violence firsthand. Gio Batta (Juann) Mamo was sentenced to twenty years hard labour for attempted murder when he was still nineteen years old. Mamo was out of work, and his father was already in prison for murder when he fell in love with his first cousin Carmelina, who refused his hand in marriage because they were first cousins. As the date of Carmelina's wedding approached, Mamo caught her fiancé striking Carmelina. According to Carmelina, Juann threatened her fiancé by telling him, 'Leave her be, she is not yours!', subsequently telling Carmelina not to worry because he will free her by shooting him.<sup>2</sup>

This Mediterranean honour code has featured as a contested and ambivalent value. In the words of the mayor in Gilsestan's village, 'We were prodigal, did not think, would do anything for honour and *muraġul*' (1996: 116). Studying lacemaking in Burano, Sciamia similarly highlights the ways in which her informants were aware that the dominant classes used 'shame' to subjugate them (2003: 182). This seems to tally with Mercer's and Mamo's concerns with *irġulija*, whereby a performative masculinity becomes a means for ideological subjugation.

In contemporary Malta *Irġulija 1* is still important in certain sectors of Maltese. It can be used in opposition to *tifel* to mark the sexual maturity of a man, where the relationship to the female body is still that of dependency (*Għadu ħalib ommhu fi snienu* – literally, He is still with his mother's milk in his teeth). The proper antonym to this sense of *irġulija* is constructed along a metaphoric sexual axis. The opposite of a man is a sexually passive subject. Not being a man makes one a *pufta* (derogatory term for homosexual) or *bla bajd* (without testicles). In both cases the insult highlights cowardice and passivity. Similarly, calling a man a *kornut* or *muqran* (cuckold) is also meant to highlight the lack of manliness. *Kornut* is commonly used to denote inaction and passivity rather than actually being a cuckold. For example, if someone asks you

to meet and you arrive horribly late, the other person can in anger say, ‘Did you think I was your *kornut*?’ *Irgulija 1* is fundamentally performative and manifests through the willingness to defend it. The failure to defend it is, in turn, proof of its nonexistence. As Mitchell notes, the failure to live up to notions of masculinity is expressed in accusations of passive sexual identity, which ‘is not necessarily associated with femininity, but with homosexuality’ (2002: 80). Calling someone a *pufta* is intended to injure one’s *Irgulija 1* and is a provocation for violence. That said, much like *kornut*, what is implied here is not a literal sexual reality but rather the failure in virility that is the hallmark of honour. Similar to the accusation of being *bla bajd*, the insult is intended to injure the other’s virility, not reflect his sexual identity.

*Irgulja 1*, though not condoned by the law, is widely recognised as part of a controversial moral code. In 2012 there was quite a stir over a criminal case (Police vs. Alan Gauci 2012). The case basically involved a bar fight. After Alan Gauci was called a homosexual, he proceeded to run over the victim with his car, causing serious injury. The defence argued, among other things, that there was a provocation to the crime. In the judgement the magistrate noted that one must also take into consideration the mentality of the people in that locality (Mellieha), and ‘therefore in his mind he [the defendant] has a reputation to defend’ (Police vs. Alan Gauci 2012). While finding Gauci guilty, the judge released him on probation for three years to widespread public outcry, leading to an appeal (Police vs. Alan Gauci 2013). On appeal the honourable judge Michael Mallia amended the sentence to twelve months in prison. For the purposes of this article, the reference to honour in the verdict of the appellate judge is particularly revealing:

*Illi hija difiza ferm eżagerata ta’ l-appellat li ġgib liskuża li hass li l-unur tiegħu kien imcappas meta hu tebba l-unur tiegħu stess bil-ġlied li qabbad. Illi le-żagerazzjoni ta’ din id-difiza hija tali mod li tiġġustifika tip ta’ ‘honour killing’ li qatt f’kwalunkwe soċjeta’ demokratika m’hi aċċettabli.*

The defence proposed by the accused is far too exaggerated, that is, that he felt that his honour was stained when he himself stained his own honour with the fight that he initiated. Such a defence is so exaggerated that it can be used to justify a kind of ‘honour killing’, which is never, in any democratic society, acceptable.

In using *unur*, I believe that the judge was invoking *Irgulija 1*. Although on the one hand condemning ‘honour killings’, the judge proceeded to point out that it was actually the accused who was behaving in a manner that was dishonourable in the first place: ‘It was in fact the

accused that provoked the victim by accusations of being gay' (*'Kien infatti l-appellat li pprovoka lil vittma bid-diskors dwar mien kien gay'*). While unequivocally condemning honour-based violence, he was at pains to identify whose honour was *really* stained in this encounter. The judge argued that the very act of initiating violence stains one's own honour. I believe that this is not too dissimilar from the sort of argument brought forward by my businessman informant with regard to Nikola's *irġulija* – the *truly* honourable man abides by the law.

Within the moral code of *Irġulija 1*, failing to act when one's manhood is challenged is to confirm the veracity of the provocation. However, behaving according to the requirements of the law and showing restraint in front of provocation is to show a form of honour that is consonant with modern codes of civility and respectability. In either case, honour is not being dismissed as such but rather contested.

### **Performance, Equanimity and the Anthropologist**

*Irġulija I* is not, however, a *carte blanche* for violence. Although violence is demanded when challenged, one cannot be seen to anger easily, to be child-like and petulant. This is exactly what happened in Ellul Mercer's story when Toni, after losing at cards, grabbed his hat in anger and stormed off. This led *Pawlu Irġulija* to the general agreement of the men present to note, *'Kemm hu ħelu dan Toni hux tassew? Kemm jehodhom bi kbar?'* ('Isn't this Toni sweet? How badly he takes it!') The patronising reference to 'sweet' highlights Toni's child-like character.

Discussing anger and taunting in the Faeroe Islands, Gaffin (1995: 15) similarly notes how, in a society where male personality 'is very much conceptualised as the degree of one's equanimity', the performance of masculinity requires knowing when virility needs to be displayed and when the threat of violence needs to be invoked and responded to. Within working-class male homosocial environments in Malta, – such as neighbourhood bars and clubs, processes similar to the intentional taunting described by Gaffin take place. Within such contexts one must not succumb to the provocation, lose one's temper and become someone who *jieħu għalih mix-xejn* (gets offended easily).

While researching this article I often spent time at *Ta' Salvu*. The bar is mostly frequented by working men during the day with a core of regulars. I became quite friendly with the owner, Salvu, a burly man in his late twenties. Once on a quiet day I walked in, and Salvu, taking me by surprise, asked me, with a grin on his face, *'Jean, u int għadek pufta?'*

(‘Jean, and you, are you still a pufta?’). The challenge in this instance is to maintain one’s equanimity and not become angered by the taunt, but one cannot simply let such provocations slide either. I answered, ‘*U kieku taf! Hallini ara daqs kemm ilhom jinqalghu żbub!*’ (‘Oh if only you knew! Let me be, so many dicks have been cropping up lately!’). The idiomatic expression ‘a dick cropped up’ means an unexpected problem has arisen. Salvu, appreciating the pun, continued with the joke, asking, ‘*Imma ‘giver’ jew ‘receiver’ int?*’ (‘But are you a giver or receiver?’). Noting my hesitation and not sure how I, an educated anthropologist, would take Salvu, I turned to self-deprecating humour. Slapping his ass and bending over slightly, he added, ‘*Naħseb “receiver” jien għax ilni naqla kazzijiet, ħlief kontijiet u spejjeż m’iniex qed naqla*’ (‘But are you a giver or a receiver? I think I’m a receiver because lately I’ve been getting so many dicks, I’ve only been getting bills and expenses’).

In this instance Salvu was using ‘dicks’ as a metaphor for undesirable expenses that he likens to being sodomised. The local code of masculinity is connected to a wider cultural stereotype – the general diffidence in formal institutions. There was a feeling at *Ta’ Salvu* that no matter which political party is in power, it is always the little guy who ‘gets screwed’. This was often expressed with a certain fatalism, in this case as an inevitable assault on the honour of working-class men. Salvu was quite perceptive in connecting the incompatibility of *Irgulija* with Malta’s ‘modern’ political economy – a system, however, that is widely acknowledged to be dominated by clientelistic networks.

Closer social ties mean that one can skirt closer to the boundary that divides playful taunting and a threat to *Irgulija 1*. Male working-class sociability frequently inhabits this dangerous ground. Improvised male song duels (*għana spritu pront*) is a form of public male taunting, performed in local bars. It has now moved to a national folkloric stage, in spite of being marginalised for decades for being too base and close to Malta’s ‘premodern’ heritage (Ciantar 2000). One of the cardinal rules in such a duel is that the singers must not become angry at each other (Herndon and McLeod 1980:150). In the context of the local community at *Ta’ Salvu*, it was actually a sign of my ‘honorary membership’ that Salvu felt he could engage in this form of mock libidinalised aggression.

### By Way of a Conclusion

One cannot simply dismiss honour as a ‘Mediterraneanist stereotype’. It is important to distinguish the different senses of honour within

Table 2: Characteristics of Irġulija 1 and 2 compared

	Irġulija 1	Irġulija 2
Sexualised violence	No	Yes
Sexualised violence	Yes	No
Origin	Performative violence/equanimity	Performative word/deed
Presence	Total	Total
Primary object	Individual	Individual

a particular cultural environment. Such an exercise requires a contextualised lexical analysis as well as an analysis of its performance. Honour is an important moral principle that regulates social conduct in Malta. It is, however, quite different from the classical ‘Mediterranean model’. In the case of Malta it is only one very small, largely extant sense of honour that can be connected to female sexual shame. Conversely, one can differentiate between honour applied and understood as a legal claim right applicable to all individuals as opposed to a sense of honour that exists only in its manifestation. This performative sense of honour exists either as evidence of congruence between action and word (*Irġulija 2*) or in a negative sense, in so far as it is made manifest only when its presence is called into question. The latter sense (*Irġulija 1*) exists through displays of virility when challenged.

The congruence between word and deed (*Irġulija 2*) becomes particularly important in an informal economy where verbal agreement is often used in place of written contracts. In turn, it is also a principle brought into play in a form of political clientelism where politicians need to claim the admiration, respect and trust of would-be clients by asserting the value of their word as men. However, this notion of honour does not quite sit comfortably within a modern legal system when it can create a conflict between the rule of law and the value of one’s word and a potentially volatile virility. *Irġulija* tends to be equated with a premodern value system and has often been targeted as part of a backwards lower-class culture both by socialist reformers and an upper-class morality. That said, it is still a widely recognised motivational system. Whereas a popular sense of honour is expressed and mobilised in a highly gendered manner in Malta, it is not really constructed in relationship to female sexual purity.

*Unur* and *ġieħ* are applicable to a much broader class of objects than *irġulija*. *Unur*, for example, is often applied to ‘corporate bodies’, especially the kin group, the vestiges of which are still retained in the way in which we conceive of sexual crimes at law. This sort of *unur* is directly connected to notions of sexual integrity. *Ġieħ*, however, exists

as a form of ‘claim right’: everyone is due a measure of *għieħ*, and to act so as to intentionally diminish the *għieħ* of someone is indeed criminal under current laws. These terms are linked together in complex ways. Although these varying notions of honour overlap to a degree, they are oftentimes in tension with each other.

The Maltese conception of honour seems to incorporate various semantic inflections from the surrounding region. That said, we cannot simply understand Maltese notions of honour as part of the broader regional paradigm. As noted earlier, there are some important differences, not least of which that what is at stake is not an opposition to shame but rather multiple contending honour codes. One must be careful not to jump too quickly to discussions of cultural unity at the expense of important local variations (Herzfeld 1980).

Notions and stereotypes (Herzfeld 2005) of honour are fertile grounds for contesting moral codes in modernity but are in and of themselves inextricably linked to the question of power. Michael Herzfeld (2016) refers to this dynamic through his concept of ‘cultural intimacy’, which is to be found in the self-stereotypes of the nation-state. Cultural intimacy shows ‘just how far the nation-state depends on everything it professes to reject as illegal, informal and indecent’ (Herzfeld 2016: 5). The tensions between an official modernist discourse that relegates *irġulija* to a backwards peasant morality while at the same time invoking it as a political virtue manifests this tension.

However, in so far as it is set against concepts of honour governed by the adherence to law and notions of respectability, *irġulija* becomes the target of a certain ideological hegemony under the guise of ‘democracy’. Aspects of libidinalised violence (*Irġulija I*) are the object of a complex performative masculinity that engenders a male working-class social solidarity generated through displays of wit, equanimity and, ultimately, ‘honour’. The semantic connotations of honour, not least of all its gendered dimensions, allow for its deployment in the articulation of a moral sphere that is oftentimes inimical to the formal values (law, economy) embodied by the representatives of the state who themselves, however, invoke it to insiders in recognition of its cultural valency.

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## Notes

1. In contemporary literature the critique of honour shifts to more psychological terms. See Immanuel Mifsud's autobiographical work *FLIsem tal-Missier (U tal-Iben)* (2010) [In the Name of the Father (and the Son)] (2010).
2. Malta Court Archives, Atti Di Istruzione La Polizia V. Gio Batta Mamo fol.55/13 Testimony of Carmelina Brincat 29 March 1906.

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