

# When tradition becomes trendy: social distinction in Maltese food culture

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## ABSTRACT

This article looks at the revival of traditional Maltese food as a medium with which the Maltese represent, and contest, relationships among social classes. The recent revival of traditional Maltese food represents the quest of a young Maltese nation for originality, especially by the elite of that society. I argue that the Maltese elite, by using traditional, picturesque images of themselves, is succumbing to foreign ideals, and accepting the symbolic domination of Europe. Food habits have always been part of one's everyday passive identity, but the revival of traditional food in Malta is an active and political claim for a desired identity.

**KEYWORDS:** tradition, identity, social distinction, Malta, food culture.

*'Location in Malta was never a matter of geography but of identity'.*

*Paul Sant-Cassia (1999)*

## Introduction

After Malta's independence from British colonial rule in 1964, the islands' rich historical heritage enabled the Maltese economy to turn itself toward yet another colonizer: the tourist. Nowadays an average of one million tourists come to admire the bastions built by the Hospitalier Knights of Saint John or to walk through the megalithic temples which pre-date the Egyptian pyramids. However tourists have little contact with daily Maltese life. To try and bridge this gap, a number of amateur food lovers founded the Fuklar Foundation, a voluntary organization with the principal aim of promoting and defending 'traditional Maltese food'. If this aim seems clear and simple at first sight, it is not so for the anthropologist who must inevitably ask: what is traditional Maltese food?

In an attempt to answer this question I shall first shed some light on the notion of 'tradition' to stress that its only intrinsic value is that it gives some perspective on how a contemporary population uses (and abuses) its past. I shall then define 'traditional Maltese food' as it is regarded by food amateurs (be they members of the Fuklar foundation or not). Using tradition as a way to look at present social organisation I shall introduce the

reader to the political context in which the defence of traditions has occurred. This shall enable me to give meaning to the new movement for the defence of traditional Maltese food in relation to the western interest in Mediterranean diet.

The present article is part of my PhD research and is largely based on multi-sited participant observations. I conducted interviews with a wide range of Maltese housewives and as much as I was welcomed to do so, I observed them cooking and eating with



*Photo no. 1: Menu displayed outside a restaurant in Rabat: a sample of the variety served in restaurants in Malta (photograph by E.Billiard)*

their family. This data was compared to narrative records presented during the seminars of the Fuklar foundation (created in 2004) and interviews with catering professionals. Discourses and practices were collected during the two years I have lived in Malta.

## **Invented tradition**

In an attempt to define the term ‘tradition’ one must consider that, besides the native difficulties of providing a clear scientific meaning, its liberal and often arbitrary use in everyday conversation creates further obstacles to establishing a precise terminology. It is true that some anthropologists are rejecting the term in scientific contexts. Lenclud (1987), for instance, analyses each definition of tradition and shows that none of them can clearly define tradition and only tradition. According to Lenclud, tradition is mainly defined as having one or all of these features:

- Tradition is a vestige from the past.
- Tradition refers to non-written customs.
- Tradition defines only cultural facts considered as important and not just any cultural facts.

I shall take briefly each of these considerations and will explain why they cannot define a scientific concept. Firstly, anthropology has long established that there is no fixed or uniform human practice (Amselle 2005). Typically, a generation adapts the knowledge it receives from its elders. Cooking, as a complex process of technical adaptation, is the perfect example of a constantly evolving practice (Giard 1998). Individuals have to cope with exterior interferences (economic conditions, fashion, well-being campaigns...) and changing internal conditions (one’s own taste, skills and experience, and the taste and needs of the family which transforms as its members grow).

Secondly, if tradition refers mainly to customs transmitted by oral means and the use of examples, culinary knowledge is clearly a tradition. However, Maltese food lovers are transcribing old recipes and this transformation from felt or experienced authenticity to its textual or material representation has eliminated the original gestures of oral transmission. Finally, one may ask why certain old customs are not considered traditional. Although potatoes and corned beef were introduced into Maltese culture around the same time, corned beef has never been considered traditional whereas potatoes now are considered a part of traditional Maltese cuisine. I argue that the distinction between potatoes and corned beef stems from the hidden agenda of those who claim to be rediscovering tradition. It is in this distinction between traditional and non-traditional that the anthropologist can find the logic of interests behind the revival of a particular type of food.

Although ‘tradition’ cannot be used as an analytic tool<sup>1</sup>, it is an object of analysis to the extent that it is a keyhole through which to view the ideals of contemporary society. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), in their study on modern societies, discovered that cultural practices called ‘tradition’ were often used to serve nationalist

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<sup>1</sup>In this article ‘tradition’ will refer only to a particular set of recipes and ingredients promoted by Maltese food lovers including Fuklar’s members.

interests. In modern states, where the idea of a Nation is a notion fundamental to the legitimisation of borders and citizenship, old and forgotten customs are reintroduced and given a new meaning. In his introduction, Eric Hobsbawm defined 'invented traditions' as follows :

'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. [...] However, insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely fictitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition (1983: 1f).

Here Hobsbawm uses the same definition of tradition that I was using after Lenclud: traditions as 'responses to novel situations'. Taking this definition, tradition becomes an object of study for the anthropologist and not only for the historian. Invented traditions are different from other traditions since they are social constructions used to justify a lack of continuity in time (mainly for political reasons). For this reason, invented traditions often appear in contexts of important social changes (Hobsbawm 1983), as is the case in Malta. The economic prosperity of the 1990s had a great impact on the Maltese way of life. Men went out of their villages to work. The literacy rate grew significantly and as a result more and more people began speaking English<sup>2</sup>. With these two skills Maltese people were able to access more information about the outside world. The standard of living has been significantly elevated, allowing for the consumption of more imported products and the possibility of travel. Maltese migrants from Australia, Canada, America or England returned to built ostentatious houses and shared their experience of the 'outside'. Political relations with the outside world have also intensified. Malta's entrance into the European Union was a defining step in this widening process. Malta and its people were no longer subject to foreign rule and Maltese citizens could consider themselves the equals of northern people. In this new context, the Maltese have had to find a place in the global system. The revival of a certain kind of food heritage can be understood in the political perspective of joining the European Union.

Having been for centuries the subjects of foreign rulers, the Maltese people must now rediscover their singularity and common identity. Opposing political parties have made use of historical arguments to defend their views on national identity, whether it be linked to Arabic culture or to European culture. During the years of intense political lobbying by the pro-EU camp, the Nationalists sought help from their Italian neighbours

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<sup>2</sup>In 1995, according to the central Office of Statistics of Malta, 75,88% of the population spoke English. Moreover the illiteracy rate diminished from 73,65% of the population in 1911, to 11,25% in 1995.

and focused on Malta's rich historical and religious links with Europe. To reinforce the 'Europeanism' of Malta two links to European 'aboriginality' (Mitchell 2002) were brought into the debate: Malta's megalithic heritage and the Order of St John. The archaeological proof of a highly developed society living peacefully in the islands in 4000 BC gave Malta a central place in the history of the beginning of European civilisation. Ironically, this civilization is believed to have been more developed than its northern contemporaries. Another element of Maltese pride is the Order of Saint John. This religious order was a combined European effort to fight the Muslims, represented by the Ottoman Empire. In the culinary field, the historian Bonello (2000; 2001) has commented that coffee and chocolate were traded and consumed in Malta earlier than they were elsewhere in Europe.

### **Traditional Maltese food: a Mediterranean food?**

Traditional Maltese food is clearly marked with Mediterranean references. Italy, especially Sicily (called 'the elder sister'), has left significant traces on Maltese food. Soups like *Minestra* (vegetable soup), *kawlata* (pork soup), and pasta dishes like *ravjul* (ravioli), lasagna, *imqarrun* (baked macaroni), with their hundreds of sauces, are all dishes of Italian influence. Sicily has also greatly influenced the sweets and desserts of Malta with its *kannoli* (crisp ricotta-filled pastries), *prijnolata* (a cake and butter-cream concoction decorated with icing, chocolate and pine nuts) and *kwarezimal* (a small honey cake). The Arab influence is present in the word *imqaret* (from the Arab word for lozenge, a date-filled pastry diamond) sold as a street snack. The other typical and delicious Maltese snack, *pastizz* (filo pastry croissant filled with ricotta or mashed peas), typically eaten with a strong English tea with milk in the middle of the morning, may also be found in Lebanon. Some condiments become representative of the new Mediterranean fashion because they bring a specific flavour. These include capers (found on every rock on the islands), fennel seeds (which give a special aroma to the Maltese pork sausages), celery (available for free in the Maltese Islands together with parsley), and the citrus fruits (the famous Maltese blood oranges were a treasure of the Knights of Saint John) lemons, tangerines and grapefruits, and marjoram, cumin, thyme and rosemary. This prominence of Mediterranean influences is then linked to a world-wide phenomenon of celebrating Mediterranean food.

Ever since the Mediterranean diet was widely recognised in Western countries for its healthy virtues it has driven significant economic activity. The healthy qualities of Mediterranean food were first discovered in 1952 by the American Ancel Keys (1980) in his comparative study of northern and southern diets. Keys noted that Crete had a very low rate of diabetes, cardio-vascular illnesses and obesity, therefore the Cretan diet became a model for well-being. The Cretan diet is a simple one, based on cereals, vegetables, and small amounts of milk products and meat, together with the daily glass of red wine. It has since become the basis upon which Western scientists built the 'Mediterranean diet pyramid'.

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<sup>3</sup> Olive oil is rich in monounsaturated fatty acids, which are thought to be beneficial in protecting against coronary heart disease.

In Malta, the growth in the production of olive oil is a typical example of the new trend toward 'Mediterranean' food. Olive oil has always been valued for its flavour, but in recent years it has also been highlighted for its role in a healthy eating regime<sup>3</sup>. Olive oil has become an important weapon in the crusade against butter and margarine and fats 'coming from the North'. For instance Matty Cremona, one of the founders of Fuklar, is the author of numerous articles in a food magazine called 'Taste', and together with her husband is also the leading olive oil producer in Malta. Her olive oil, which resembles Corsican oil in flavour, is sold as an expensive delicacy at the airport and tourist shops. But, strictly speaking, olive oil is not an historical element of Maltese tradition. Indeed, until now, olive oil has been neither produced nor consumed in Malta since the Middle Ages (when the Arabs left the islands) (Cremona 2003). The historical nature of olive oil is therefore not very accurate. In this case, historical inaccuracy is overlooked in favour of dietetics. One could argue that according to its defenders, traditional Maltese food has to be healthy, but not necessarily historically correct.

Another contradiction in defining what is traditional arises when considering the production of wine in Malta. For centuries a kind of sweet house-wine has been produced in Malta. In spite of its questionable quality, it remained a domestic product and source of pride for the family, but was never bottled at an industrial level. Commercial wine-making in Malta was, until recently, the domain of two main producers, Marsovin and Delicata, both of which aspired to produce wines resembling those of their European neighbours. Both of these producers refer to their Mediterranean heritage, for example, in the following excerpt from the website of Delicata wines:

In ancient times the grapevine was grown for the production of wine in almost all the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea and on many of its islands, including Malta. Historically, the Mediterranean was the focus of viticulture (the art of grape growing) and the majority of the then most famous wines of the world were produced under the Mediterranean's ideal climatic conditions.

Delicata Wines organizes its own wine festival in Valletta (the capital) with an inaugural speech by his Excellency the President of Malta. This event draws hundreds of tourists who are denied a taste of true home-made Maltese wine in favour of an industrially produced bottle. Similarly, a more modern and much younger Meridiana Wine Estate hosts the closure dinner of the Fuklar foundation with a free tasting of its wine. These wine-makers are claiming to sell Maltese products but they have also introduced foreign vines like Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot<sup>4</sup> or they import fresh grapes from Italy<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, Meridiana has expanded the relatively small fields of local farmers into a

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<sup>4</sup>Maltese indigenous grapes have been certified. They are the Ghirgentina and Gellewza.

<sup>5</sup>Since 1987 some of the major wineries have been importing fresh grapes from Italy to supplement a shortfall. Currently the wine industry in Malta spends over Lm 1.5m annually on the importation of grapes from Italy. These grapes are handpicked and packed into individual disposable wooden crates and transported to Malta in refrigerated containers.

large estate, and trained its oenologist in France and Italy. This new knowledge coming from Europe is far from the house wine culture that was 'traditionally' followed on Maltese farms. This divergence in the interpretation of traditional Maltese food may be considered as endemic to most aspects of Maltese culture.

Besides the insistence of Maltese traditional food lovers on stressing their Mediterranean heritage and healthy diets, there is the difficulty of finding original Maltese dishes. The Maltese Islands were for many centuries dependent on outsiders to nourish their population<sup>6</sup> and therefore the recipes were created through a sort of borrowing. The originality of Maltese food culture may possibly be found more in the way it blends all these influences. In fact some foods have been so deeply absorbed into the Maltese cultivating and eating habits that they have become part of Maltese identity. Maltese potatoes are well known and exported to Holland because they are the first crops of the year. Yet Maltese potatoes are not produced in big farms but rather in the small fields of part time farmers for whom potato export represents an extra wage that supplements the typically small family salary. To the list of borrowed food products, which became part of the Maltese culture and identity abroad, one can also add Maltese ham<sup>7</sup> and blood oranges (which have given their name to a famous sauce in France 'sauce à la Maltaise').

Trapped in their desire to convert a fat cuisine into a dietetic one, the defenders of traditional Maltese food have ignored parts of their culinary heritage which are still very much alive, such as the *pastizz* (which are made with animal fat 'xaham') or fried food. Inversely, products that were not part of Maltese cuisine are sold as exotic traditional food. Maltese food is an eccentric mixture of different cultures from the ham of England to the *pastizz*<sup>8</sup>. Therefore one cannot reduce the ingredients that make up Maltese food to an exclusively Mediterranean influence. Indeed, part of the population doesn't refer to Mediterranean influence to define itself. The lower-class and the upper class disagree on this point. In Malta food could be one of the distinctions between social classes.

## **Traditional Maltese food: a food for the elite**

Identity is always a matter of opposition. Lévi-Strauss (1983) declared (following the structuralist linguistic school analysis) that opposition is the main principle of reality's categorisation. Concerning identity, which is a way of categorising mankind between the 'self' and the 'other', Barth (1969) analyses the identity process as a building of semantic oppositions. Food can be used to express a social boundary. For instance, the consumption of pork was encouraged in Christian societies to spite the Muslims (pork is indeed the Maltese Christmas dish). To quote Bourdieu, (1979) 'taste classifies and it classifies the classifier'. In his analysis of the process of social reproduction Bourdieu (1973) explains

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<sup>6</sup>For example, during the knights' period, all the wheat was imported from Sicily.

<sup>7</sup>'Then fry a bacon – good English bacon from Malta, a god-send indeed' D.H Lawrence, quoted in Caruana Galizia (2001: 5).

<sup>8</sup>Nowadays the *pastizz*, with its Roman name and its Arabic pastry, is made with margarine from Great Britain for health reasons. In my view it is excellent and delicious.

that all individuals act and think according to their system of belief and dispositions, called *habitus*. The *habitus* is not a conscious thought but rather an unconscious one, and therefore although it seems obvious, it is highly relative to one's social position. This cultural structure is an individual's response to the situation encountered in his own location in the social 'camp'. Thus the *habitus* helps perpetuate social distinctions because it helps define social differences. Since each individual reacts to food according to their *habitus*, food preferences can establish strong social borders. Consequently food references are often used to distinguish 'us' from 'them'.

In Malta the defenders of food traditions belong to the upper class. They are educated and speak English fluently. The members of the Fuklar foundation, which is leading the promotion of traditional Maltese food, are professionals with connections to the tourism industry or ministry, or else are academics, lawyers, artists or even non-Maltese. Due to their social position, these Maltese amateurs of 'bonne chaire' have all acquired a distant view of Maltese food culture. The seminars organised by the foundation cannot welcome lower class people as they are expensive and are conducted in English (a language barrier which even today distinguishes the educated class from the working class<sup>9</sup>). However if anyone from the lower class were to attend, they probably would be dumbfounded. References to North African, Arabic or even Muslim cuisine are inconceivable for these lower class Maltese who have defined their identity as expressly non-Muslim and non-Arabic (in spite of the fact that their language closely resembles Arabic). As we have seen, traditional Maltese food is an identity marker between social classes for the food model it refers to differs according to social position. Whereas lower class individuals would like to reach an ideal whose origin is located in the colonial British time, the elite individual strives to identify himself as quite the opposite by his new culinary habits.

The critique made by the elite to their co-citizens is that the latter are forgetting their roots and denying the North African influence on their cuisine. By eating hamburgers and chips they are betraying their heritage. But thanks to anthropologists like Warnier (2004) and Miller, we know that the acculturation process is not necessarily a total denial of the previous cultural substrate. A good example is revealed by Miller (2005) in his study of the consumption of Coca-Cola in Trinidad. A society integrating new elements commodifies them for its own interest. In Trinidad for instance, Coca-Cola became an symbol of national identity. Far from deconstructing a 'genuine' culture, often seen as a victim of new colonization, acculturation processes create new ways to define local identity. Therefore one may look at Maltese preferences for eating imported food as a way of adapting their *habitus* to new social conditions. Thus, the need to define whether the elite or the popular class is the closest to the 'Maltese-ness' is a false problem. As Amselle (2005) has written, every society has encountered in its history a period of cultural acculturation and the anthropologist must avoid any essentialist consideration.

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<sup>9</sup> In 1995, 97,82% of the population could speak Maltese, 75,88% could speak English, and 36,44% could speak current Italian (Central office of statistics, 1998).

## Tradition, authenticity and modernity

The Fuklar foundation is not the only one to fear the loss of its roots. As Bendix observes: the quest for authenticity is a peculiar longing, at once modern and anti-modern. It is oriented toward the recovery of an essence whose loss has been realized only through modernity, and whose recovery is feasible only through methods and sentiment created by modernity (1997: 8).

In Malta the search for authenticity is visible in the images portraying the rediscovery of traditional Maltese food. Matty Cremona's recipe books provide an insightful introduction to the image one may get of traditional Maltese food. Leafing through the pages we find beautiful watercolours representing old women gossiping on a wooden bench or a herdsman walking along a cart track. Those images of an 'authentic' Maltese culture are also found at Malta's International Airport. The billboards depict a Malta of yesteryear, under-developed, far from globalization and modernity. One can see a man on his wooden cart, his craggy face and his shirt worn out by fieldwork; a representation of Mediterranean food: tomatoes placed next to a clay pot and a big loaf of bread; or a fisherman sitting down on the floor, repairing his nets. The ministry of tourism is also promoting a romantic image of Malta. It organizes food festivals like 'The Mediterranean Food Festival', the 'wine festival' or the *fešta tat-tonn* (tuna feast). Even stamps have food images (the *fenkata* rabbit stew, which is known as the national dish, and the *bzar mimli* or stuffed peppers, a common dish in Malta). Moreover, the street billboards promote false traditional products, like the industrially manufactured *gelat tan-nanna* (grandma's ice cream) or 'La Valette Wine' which is advertised on a poster that shows village feast fireworks next to the bottle<sup>10</sup>. Tourist shops are stocking up on 'traditional' products such as prickly pear liquor. Once again, the label evokes the feeling of an old Maltese recipe, yet this drink is a recent innovation. It seems that a real *tradition mania* has invaded Malta.

### 1-Rediscovering invisible popular culture

The term 'tradition' appeared during the colonial period in order to distinguish the 'modern' colony from the 'traditional' colonised indigenous population (Argyrou 2002). It is therefore related to the discovery of the exotic, which could have been considered 'romantic'<sup>11</sup> but is nonetheless still inferior to 'civilised' societies.

I shall now explain that the construction of traditional Maltese food has been conducted in three main phases :

- the invisibility of popular culture (denial)
- the rediscovery of it (back-tracking)
- and the appropriation of it (possession).

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<sup>10</sup> Fireworks are one of the tourist symbols of Malta. Every summer, villages and towns organise their own feast and celebrate their patron saint with bands, procession and fireworks.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau might have been the first to promote with passion the good savage. Farrachi (1997) did a brilliant study on this aspect of Rousseau's philosophy.

In contemporary Maltese society, like others of the Mediterranean (Argyrou 2002), modernity is increasingly explored through the celebration of traditionalism. The modern point of view needs to discover exoticism in its own past. In Malta, some customs can still be popular but not known by the elite, who will rediscover them. It is the long invisibility of popular culture that enables this 'rediscovery' by its elite.

The 'invisibility of popular culture', a term borrowed from Gellner (1983), was due to the divided structure of Maltese society. From the time of the Knights of Saint John until the beginning of the 20th century, a language distinction kept popular culture in relative obscurity and its people living in precarious conditions. Maltese labourers spoke Maltese whilst people of higher standing spoke the lingua franca (Cassar 2001). Court proceedings were in Italian and, during the British period, administration was in English. Since most Maltese people were illiterate and could not speak the language of the rulers, they were unable to defend their civil rights. The distinction between 'bedwin' (farmers) and the 'educated' people was reinforced by a series of social prejudices (Boissevain 1965). Civilization, culture, art, history and literature were the domain of the educated Maltese people, nobles or bourgeois who were in contact with the Knights of Saint John, and later with the British Empire. Popular culture was of no interest except to some romantic visitors (De Boissgelin 1805). Uneducated, rude, and often looked down upon as Arabs or African descendants, the 'bedwin' were to be hidden, if not altogether forgotten (Sant-Cassia 1999). Consequently, the national archives has mostly documented the events of the power-holders, not those of the labourers.

Nowadays the contemporary Maltese elite no longer look with a condescending eye on the popular culture of its country. Popular customs are now brought to light and act as a valuable vestige of the national past. In this process of rediscovery of popular elements such as *Ghana* (songs usually sung in bars and now performed for the Mediterranean folk music festival) the customs which have been 'rediscovered' by the elite are transformed. I shall explain how the 'rediscovery' process dispossesses Maltese popular society.

Firstly I observed that not all customs which have been transmitted from the past are necessarily labelled 'tradition'. The elite makes a strict selection in its collection of traditions. Then, once a food product or a way of cooking is labelled 'traditional', it will enter into the reference system of the modern elite and therefore will inevitably be transformed. Slow cooking, for example, was chosen out of necessity by women without a gas cooker. In Malta before the Second World War, many women cooked on a little stone hob called '*kenur*', a primitive stove that used wood (a scarce product in the Islands) as fuel. Nowadays the *kenur* is one of the symbols of traditional Maltese food. Nobody uses a *kenur* anymore as it takes ages to cook with it, yet the slow-cooking technique is hailed as the only way to preserve the aromas of the food. The owner of a recently-opened restaurant called *Ir-Razzet L-Antik* (the old farmhouse), established in an 18<sup>th</sup>-century windmill and entirely dedicated to traditional Maltese food, made it his priority to serve only slow-cooked dishes. Nevertheless the owner had to adapt the cooking process and decided to freeze all the products in order to be able to serve them quickly to his customers. In this example a traditional process, slow-cooking, was re-introduced in a restaurant's kitchen,

but it had to be adapted to new restrictions—no longer the stove or lack of fuel, but the restriction of time.

To summarize, the process of rediscovery leads to the selection and transformation of the original elements (Bendix 1997). Sutton (2001) reminds us that in the modern world writing is linked with death for it is the last resort for salvaging disappearing knowledge. But by writing and publishing a recipe, one is moving it from the world of authenticity to the world of multiple copying. At the end of this process the original recipes, ingredients and tools have been relocated, renamed and introduced to a new system of representations. The recipes and ingredients no longer belong to popular culture but to the dominant culture of the elite. Slowly the elite become the ones who know about traditions and lower class people are the ones who lose their roots. In a country where there is an ever decreasing number of farmers (heroes of the traditionalist movement), popular culture is losing its ‘authenticity’ in the eyes of the elite who have succeeded in imposing their idealization of a rural past in the Mediterranean.

## 2- The Mediterranean as the localization for ‘authenticity’

This idealization of Malta as a rural country finds strange resonances with the western romantic image of the whole Mediterranean. Indeed, the Mediterranean seems to suffer from being stereotyped by the West. According to Argyrou (2002), Mediterranean societies became the periphery of a dominant (industrialised) northern Europe. These southern neighbours of the industrial West were not barbarians (like Africans which were complete ‘others’ for Europeans), but were like far cousins, living their simple life along the sunny Mediterranean shores.

Despite modernization, Mediterranean societies have remained under-developed in the eyes of Western people. Greece, for instance, is represented in the French collective imagination as a deserted archipelago where the houses are all painted in white and meals certainly do not contain fries, but are plates full of vine leaves, feta cheese and fish. Mediterranean societies become the ‘others within’ the Western world. The Mediterranean became the perfect place for the search for authenticity and consequently tourism has grown tremendously. Bromberger and Durand have clearly expressed this idea of an ‘authentic Mediterranean’:

Other simplistic stereotypes coming from the idealization of the poor and ‘authentic’ land, have been attached to the Mediterranean. Today the most flagrant example of this attraction for ‘Mediterranean poverty’, ‘the only one’, comments Georges Duby (1959: 8-11), ‘which entices the envy of the rich’, is to be found in the almost global popularity of the diet of Cretan farmers amongst the (Western) Middle classes<sup>12</sup> (Bromberger and Durand 2001: 734).

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<sup>12</sup>My brackets.

This ideal of an authentic Mediterranean is now also used by the elite of these same Mediterranean societies. Argyrou (2002) showed that by rejecting modern life and by emphasizing their authenticity, the Greek elite is reproducing a western romantic ideal of the Mediterranean.

## **Conclusion**

As I have shown in this article, Malta's young republic is also reproducing the Western romantic notion of the Mediterranean in its search for its own roots. By locating its roots in rural life (which hasn't prevailed since the Middle Ages) and by selecting recipes for their 'Mediterranean' aspects, the Maltese elite is reinforcing a symbolic domination by their previous rulers. Therefore, far from creating a national identity based on the defence of their food heritage, they have created a new way to distinguish themselves from their 'other within', the lower class, whilst failing to distinguish themselves from the 'other without', their past colonial rulers.

The Maltese Islands, not long independent and only recently acceded to the the European Union, are searching for some kind of distinguishing originality. A traditionalist food culture movement has been used to make a claim for the specificity of Maltese culture: a bridge between Europe and the Mediterranean. The defenders of traditional Maltese food, who more often than not belong to the higher society and educated elite, are using eating habits as a social marker. Their food references are not accepted by a significantly large part of the population still resistant to Arab culture. In this process of rediscovering popular culture, the Maltese elite, influenced by the western idealization of the Mediterranean, have not succeeded in creating a common identity. On the contrary they have imposed their own interpretation of popular culture, a representation that is far from accurate. By itself, the movement for the defence of the traditional Maltese food is the undeniable proof that Maltese society is a modern and dynamic society.

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## POVZETEK

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**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** tradicija, identiteta, socialno razlikovanje, Malta, prehranska kultura